

God's Helping Hands:

4 Things 40 Years Have Changed (and 4 That Have Not)

Where were you in life 40 years ago? Perhaps you were just married and starting your family. Maybe you were in grade school and as an '80s kid you saw the rise of technologies like video games and home movies, while your prized possession and symbol of childhood freedom was still your bicycle (complete with spoke beads and banana seat). Or maybe you weren't even born yet! (I myself did not make my appearance until the late summer, when 1980 was waning.) Whatever the case for you, you certainly can agree with me that much in the world has changed over the last 40 years. I did a little research and found some average prices for that year. These have not been adjusted for inflation, but you'll get the idea anyway (and possibly get a little wistful).

Bread – .50

1 lb. of hamburger – .99

A Gallon of Gasoline – 1.19

A New Car – 7,200.00

Yearly Wages – 19,500

New Home – 68,700

Obviously, things change over time! In the next couple minutes of your time, I'd like to point out 4 things that have changed over the lifespan of this ministry and 4 things that have not.

What's Changed?

1. The Media We Use

In the beginning, Bob and Shirley were already well known for their vibrant and memorable black light "Chalk Talks." Today, after all these decades and Bob now in glory, we still hear from people who vividly remember the illustrated telling of "Titanic," for example. But at the dawn of GHH, Bob and Shirley quickly realized that they needed to supplement in order to fill the time during a whole week of camp or Vacation Bible School. During a several day-long blizzard, Bob tinkered with designing and constructing his first puppets. Shirley developed scripts, and puppetry became a part of their ministry. Over time, other media were added to create variety and tap into the strengths of the various ministry missionaries. Over the years, we've used chalk, drama, music, flannelgraph, ventriloquism, illusion, storytelling, full-stage puppetry, marionettes, shadow puppetry, printed materials, audio podcasts, short films and more. Although some of these mediums have lasted throughout our entire history, we view them all as simply tools to carry the message.

2. The Way We Travel

Since our target audience (children) cannot come to us, we must go to them. We've traveled in everything from our first bus (a converted school bus painted green and named "The Pickle") to a pop-up camper, a motorhome, a minivan, and several more

buses. With current technology, we also travel to children by way of the internet streaming directly into their homes. Travel has meant constant change for the last 40 years.

3. The Way Churches View Children

This one is by no means universal, but it IS one to which we pay VERY close attention. It has been our observation that certain trends have infiltrated the church over the last several decades to varying degrees. One trend is how the souls of children are viewed. Far too often we see children treated as if they cannot comprehend the deep spiritual truths of scripture and the implications of those truths in their lives. As a result, the response often is to hold children to one side so that “big church” can happen for the adults and the children are cared for elsewhere to be entertained by Bible stories about being kind and obeying their parents. The danger here is subtle, because while these are important biblical truths and the children are cared for by loving adults who love the Lord and children, there is the potential for at least two unintentional and detrimental side effects. A) Issues of the Person of Christ, sin and salvation, and spiritual growth can be minimized; B) The integration of children into the church as a viable contributing part of the church body is forgotten with the result of chronically shrinking churches – much to the chagrin and confusion of the local church. Another trend is the idea that children who need to be reached with the gospel are all *out there* – in the world, rather than remembering that no child is born saved from sin and that the “churched” child stands in just as much spiritual need as the “unchurched” child. I, for one, grew up in a home that proclaimed Christ in our house every day. I could quote scripture before I could read it. But I still needed to accept Christ as my Savior. (Incidentally, Christ reached to my heart with saving faith when I attended a VBS.) Again, these changes are not true of every church everywhere, but it certainly is true that churches continue to wrestle with how they reach, teach and integrate their children.

4. The Way the World Views Churches

As we have come alongside churches for the last 40 years, we have experienced first-hand the attitude of the surrounding world about the church. It seems not that long ago that the local church was seen as a friendly, comfortable place to send children for a VBS, Wednesday night club or community activity even if your family was not a part of the church. Sadly, it would seem that this is often no longer how the church is viewed. It seems to be more and more challenging to effectively advertise for a special event at a church and see any tangible result. Couple this with other changes in the American family (such as an increase in single-parent homes and the reality of having both parents in the work force), and we have a recipe for exactly what we have seen: a steady diminishing of availability and interest in things that we used to take for granted, like a 5-day morning VBS. As a result, churches desirous of being pro-active and relationship-building in their local communities are getting creative in finding new and innovative ways to reach out with the message of Christ. We think that’s great, and we work diligently to adapt along with them with “outside of the box” ideas.

What Has Not Changed?

1. The Need

Every missionary would love to work themselves out of a job. But we also know that that will not happen until we are home in glory. For us at GHH, we see a need that has only grown with time. The unchanging need that boys and girls have to hear the good news about Jesus is more obvious than ever. Perhaps 40 years ago there was a more common understanding about who God and Jesus is. Today, we need to remember at all times that in our audiences there very well may be a child who has never heard the name of Christ. This realization forces us to do what we should remember to do anyway: clearly state through the use of God's Word the unchanging remedy for the universal need -- Christ died to save sinners. In some ways, the issues with which children of today are confronted have morphed and intensified in their social implications. But at the root of every problem both social and personal is a spiritual bankruptcy called Sin, and the solution to every problem no matter how complex is found in Jesus. I don't mean to oversimplify or trivialize the issues facing children today. What I mean is that Jesus is more than able to guide every child through *any* problem. Nothing is too great for Him! Because we know this to be true, we at GHH strongly affirm that, through the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, children – even very young children – are capable of comprehending and accepting deep spiritual truths. We believe this both through the empirical evidence of scripture that encourages us to approach truth “as children” with unabashed trusting faith as well as through our own ongoing experience. Most of us at GHH were brought to saving faith at a young age. In addition to that in our ministry experience, we encounter the most thoughtful and spiritually challenging questions as they come out of the mouths of children. Yes, the need children have for Jesus is unchanging.

2. The Model

When this ministry was launched, the question quickly came up, “What do you charge to come speak to our children?” God answered that question in the hearts of Bob and Shirley for this ministry in this way: He laid upon their hearts to not charge a speaking fee, but rather to raise support for their family needs and allow Him to supply for the ministry itself through voluntary honorariums and love offerings. Upon looking back, we can see several blessings we have experienced as a result of following this specific leading: A) The Gospel is not hindered by price. Although we still strive to be good stewards of our resources, being careful to not extend the ministry's reach beyond its ability to cover expenses, we don't have to turn down an opportunity just because they can't pay us a set fee; B) Our faith is strengthened and God's will for where we go is more clearly defined. I don't say that it is an easy model to follow, but because it is how God led us, it has proved to be the best for our spiritual benefit; C) His hand of provision and blessing is much more easily traced, and we give Him all the glory! We could fill a book with the telling of story after story of God's specific provision, each one a confirmation of His will for us and an illustration of His loving care.

3. The Sacrifice

What did it cost to start God's Helping Hands?

A few moments ago I mentioned the median cost of certain things in 1980. I actually don't know in dollars and cents what it cost to incorporate as a ministry in June of 1980. But let me approach the question from a different perspective.

When Bob and Shirley Friedl stepped out in faith following God's call to begin a new ministry to children, it cost them a lot. It cost them job security, retirement investment opportunities, family vacations, employer health insurance, a secure future and even the guarantee of a regular paycheck. As a matter of fact, all of these things have been true for every ministry employee of GHH ever since. But all of these things – albeit very alluring – pale in comparison to the incomparable opportunity of spending our lives fulfilling God's call for us to share His love with little ones. This is why the adopted verse of the ministry is Colossians 4:3, "At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ..."

And we truly need prayer and support in order for this ministry to continue.

Ironically, the ones we seek to reach – children – are incapable of helping to support this ministry financially. From the beginning, we have understood that in order for this ministry to work as God set it up, it must have the partnership of many people. We are a very small and tightly knit group of people. We operate on what the world would call a "shoestring budget." Every dollar is received with gratefulness. But our Father owns the cattle on a thousand hills; and He has designed for us to function not simply as a small group of people with a small army of puppets, but rather as an extension of the ministry of His Church at large! We are a ministry of praying and giving families and church families; retirees and widows; children's Bible clubs and involved believers of every type!

4. The Message

By this time, you will have already thought of this yourself. But I'll say it anyway. We are absolutely dedicated to reaching boys and girls (and by extension, their families) with the unchanging message of God's Word. We have the greatest message that could ever be told: A loving God created a world that chose to reject Him, but, praise to His Name, He became a part of His creation in the person of Jesus Christ in order to redeem mankind from the sin that separates them from Him. Then He gave His indwelling Spirit to every believer to comfort and guide us through life, enabling us to be a witness of His grace to the wondering world around us. Wow! We will never tire of proclaiming God and His love!

Well, now you see a little of what we are focused on as we contemplate the 40 years of ministry God has allowed God's Helping Hands. But while we are conscientious of and grateful for our past, we are very eagerly anticipating our future! We see a horizon filled with opportunities. Some of them we are already realizing in new projects. Our Reach More Campaign is already succeeding in some areas even before it is complete! Our ministry staff are highly dedicated and motivated (and very much in need of your prayer and partnership). If you've been involved in this ministry in any capacity over the last 40 years, we invite you to rejoice with us! If we are new to you, we invite you to glorify the Lord through what you've seen and heard and to join us as He leads!

“Uncle” Chris Knobloch