

Messing with the Pageant

Is Imogene Worth It?



STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

CHRISTMAS 2011

Dear Friend,

I don't think my daughters knew it, but I was shaking. I couldn't stop crying.

We were sitting at their first play, courtesy of their grandparents, a kid's version of "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever."

The story is unforgettable. Grace Bradley, a mother of two, reluctantly takes on the church Christmas pageant after the usual director gets injured. The Herdmans, a family of six fatherless children famous in the neighborhood for many villainous acts, strong-arm their way into the pageant by threatening the other kids. When it comes time to dole out the main roles, they're the only ones who volunteer.

Then the Herdmans bring their cigars, fighting, cussing, and ignorance of the Christmas story to every rehearsal, including the disastrous dress rehearsal.

On the night of the pageant, Grace's daughter Beth reflects on the sight of Imogene and Ralph Herdman entering the church as Mary and Joseph.

I guess we would have gone on bumming till we all turned blue, but we didn't have to. Ralph and Imogene were there all right, only for once they didn't come through the door pushing each other out of the way. They just stood there for a minute as if they weren't sure they were in the right place – because of the candles, I guess, and the church being full of people. They looked like the people you see on the six o'clock news – refugees, sent to wait in some strange ugly place, with all their boxes and sacks around them.

It suddenly occurred to me that this was just the way it must have been for the real Holy Family, stuck away in a barn by people who didn't care much what happened to them. They couldn't have been very neat and tidy either, but more like this Mary and Joseph (Imogene's veil was cockeyed as usual, and Ralph's hair stuck out around his ears). Imogene had the baby doll but she wasn't carrying it the way she was supposed to, cradled in her arms. She had slung it over her shoulder, and before she put it in the manger she thumped it twice on the back. (Barbara Robinson, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, Harper Trophy, 2005, p. 97)

I've been exploring why this moment is so moving to me. I suppose it's this: Christ came for the poor, unrefined, awkward, commonplace people like Ralph and Imogene Herdman. He was so zealous for them that he became one of them. And while we should be extending that same love to the Herdmans, our tendency is to shun them as kids messing up the pageant. We're exposed for what we are: people who care more about our pageants than people. In truth we're unrefined, awkward, and poor just like Imogene and Ralph, standing there "not sure if we're in the right place." But somehow, in our beat-up tennis shoes and funky hair, we are acceptable.

Let's look at this pageant story as a sort of metaphor for our Christian subculture with all of its parties, potlucks, Christmas Eve services, and caroling. Like the many parishioners who criticized Grace for including the Herdmans, it's easy for us to see these events as ends in themselves, cherished experiences we protect at all costs.

Which is more important—the purity of the subculture or the souls of the Herdmans? Even if we get the answer right, how often do we go out purposefully to find the "Herdmans" near us?

In a sense, the Herdmans made it easy for the people at church to find them. They walked in the front door. Sure, it was because they thought heaps of free donuts and ice cream awaited them. And yes, a few *will* come to our churches if we offer them sugar, children's programs, and other items of practical value. *But most will not.* Let me introduce a few of them.

In the course of two days at the University of North Texas (UNT) last month, I spoke with a lesbian named Taylor, a communist named Collin, a post-abortive pregnant mother of an elementary schooler named Jennifer, a jeering progressive named Adam who expressed a longing for community, and a young man



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WEB: WWW.JFAWEB.ORG

STEVE'S UPDATES: WWW.HBMM.NET

CONTACT STEVE: COMMONGROUNDWC@GMAIL.COM

named Jimmy who regularly attends Catholic Mass but doesn't think one can give evidence that God exists.

Sure, some of our church folk will be so bold as to reach out to people like these on their own. You won't be able to stop them. But for most, they don't know how to start.

Enter JFA. Sure, we begin in the safety of a church with groups mostly made up of church people for a five-hour seminar. But then we invite those seminar participants to campus where they come face to face with the Herdmans. And they learn to set aside the Herdmans' cigars, pompous hatred of God, cussing, and skepticism so that some might be saved – so that the Imogenes of the world might draw close to God.

Twenty-six homeschooled students and parents recently joined us to try this out. Their pro-life camp included outreach to UNT. Let me introduce one of them to you through her own words:

I recently attended a Justice For All mission trip, and it changed my life...I am a home-schooled teenager, I am fifteen years old, and I've been blessed with five younger brothers and sisters. Engaging the students on that university campus, for me, was like engaging people from another culture...I talked to students who thought they were no more valuable than cows and squirrels and cockroaches...This trip was one of my first opportunities to discuss deep issues with people who completely disagreed with me...

One of my favorite experiences was my very last conversation for the entire mission trip. This climactic conversation answered my prayers from months before, when I had prayed that the students' hearts would be open to the Truth and that I could share my faith. I joined a conversation between three college students and my friend Kinsie, another JFA volunteer. We talked for an hour, first concerning abortion which led into the value of life and Christianity. Finally, one of the girls said, "You two seem very strong and grounded in everything you believe. None of us agree with each other, and yet here we are having a reasonable conversation. Not one of us has raised her voice once since we started conversing half an hour ago, unlike those protesters over there [the pro-choice people who chanted and yelled at JFA]. We have known Christians who yell at us and get in our face when we say we're not Christians, but you're not like that; you really seem to care about us. I'm Tyler; can I give you a hug?" The love of Christ breaks down all barriers! ... Wow! ...

I had always understood—and been passionate about—missions in third-world countries, but I had never understood how to spread the gospel in America. This experience put a face on missions in the United States, and how to share my faith and my beliefs...The JFA mission trip was an experience of a lifetime...I am highly looking forward to my next mission trip with JFA.
— Jasmin

Jasmin stepped into Tyler's world to find *her* in much the same way that Christ stepped into our world to find *us*. And now Jasmin can't wait to do it again.

Thank you for supporting my work with Justice For All this year. It's such a joy for me to partner with you so that students like Jasmin can turn the "pageant" inside out and take its message to those who need it most. Let's look for opportunities to do the same this Christmas!



Warmly,

Stephen

Support Update: Where in the World Are We?

In our last letter, I mentioned that we were putting ourselves on the road in Texas to raise support. We've now been on the road about eight weeks. Even though the support-raising process is going more slowly than I had hoped, I'm very encouraged. I've been able to meet with individuals, churches, and small groups. I'm finally able to take the time to discuss my work with potential supporters and cultivate the relationships that are the foundation of long-term support. Rebecca and I and the kids will return to Kansas in mid December. We'll continue working on our support until it's finished...just not from Texas. [Thanks for standing with us and praying for us.](#) I'm posting regular "Reveal the Mystery Picture" support updates at www.hbmm.net, so take a look and see how God is providing.

Thank you for partnering with me to change minds, heal hearts, and save lives! Merry Christmas!