

# FEED MY LAMBS:

## caring for young children without homes

Two years ago when I made some dramatic changes in my life, I started working at The Path of Citrus County, Florida (USA). The Path is a faith-based homeless shelter that provides a structured living environment and a variety of programs. It also was recently approved as a Nazarene Compassionate Ministry Center.

Its programs address spiritual, physical, and emotional needs of homeless men and women who want to change their lives, become employed, maintain a stable, permanent place to live—and break the cycles of habits that keep them from doing so.

While parents at the shelter wrestle with new choices, a different lifestyle, and the challenges of decision-making and discipline in their own lifestyles and that of their families, the shelter also seeks to provide care and stability for the children. The Path strives for growth and transformation in the lives of parents and children together.

Motivated by Jesus' words to Peter about feeding Christ's "sheep" in John 21:15-17, The Path takes seriously its call to guide and shepherd children who are homeless. The Path provides care, support, and nurture for their physical, emotional, developmental, and spiritual needs.

### Childlike Faith

As I recalled all the Sunday school lessons I've heard or taught over the years, and how important they were to me in my own personal walk with Christ, I recognized that God can touch the hearts of these children and keep them, too. More often than not, their childlike faith and sincere prayers can help to lead their parents to a transformational relationship with Jesus Christ.

To reach and stabilize the children at our shelter takes patience, creativity, and a realistic view of what their world is like. If you grew up in a stable two-



parented home, as I did, working with children at the Path brings new challenges.

Often, I find an "adult" mind in a child's frame. I have found children who have learned to survive day-to-day with surprising maturity and resilience while living in a chaotic, turbulent environment.

I first learned of the reality of these children's lives as a participant in my church's children's ministry, taking care of six girls, ages 7 to 9. Each week, I'd ask them for their prayer requests. One little girl's request was for her daddy and his impending divorce. He was very upset about leaving them and couldn't stop crying.

Another time, recognizing one of the children who had stayed at the shelter with her mom, I asked about her mother. She looked at me a little confused, and

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proceeded to tell me about her mom, her step mom, her step dad, her dad who was in jail at the time, her cousins and a host of other people. I realized that this child spent time with so many adults in various stages of “relationships,” that her understanding of “family” was a complicated and unstable web. At the same time, this child had an amazing understanding of the love of Christ, what faith was all about, and how God could take care of her as well as all the other people coming and going in her life.

### **Time and Attention**

Then, there was a 9-year-old boy I’ll call Jarod. Jarod came to the shelter with his mom this past summer. He was quite the “adult”—demanding, very much in charge, and angry. It didn’t take long to realize that this young boy was extremely mature and very intelligent. His survival instincts were incredibly well tuned for nine years old; he could size you up in a minute and figure out which buttons to push to get what he wanted.

To get perspective, I drew upon my experiences as a Sunday school teacher, and as the older sister of two

brothers, one of whom is extremely gifted and had behavioral problems growing up. (It wasn’t until my brother was older that it was determined his issues were due to a lack of interest and stimulation.) Looking at Jarod, I wasn’t convinced his problems were caused by anything other than lack of stability, structure, a healthy diet, and some old-fashioned discipline. He was also very fidgety and disruptive. As a teacher, I had had my share of fidgety children. After researching and testing out what I learned, I found out that the fidgety kids were in fact paying attention and often had better understanding of the lessons than some of the other more compliant and “better behaved” children.

I began brainstorming ways to engage Jarod. I found colorfully illustrated Bible stories online, printed one story at a time, and put them in a notebook for him. I found puzzles and multiple choice questions to see how that worked with him. (They didn’t). We read together out loud, or acted out the stories, and I wouldn’t let him have his way until the story was finished and he could answer some basic questions. I also let him ask his own questions. This was opening a Pandora’s box sometimes, but we had fun together trying to answer his questions. He was a good reader, and figured out quickly how to navigate through his Bible after I showed him a few times. We often played games, many he made up himself. My favorite was miniature golf, using umbrellas for golf clubs.

The most challenging part was to teach him respect for his surroundings—to realize he was at the shelter temporarily and had to take care of his room, the furniture, and other belongings in the house for the others coming to the shelter after he left. When he behaved inappropriately, I made him “do it over the right way” to show me he knew what was the right or the proper way to treat chairs and cabinet doors. His reaction was interesting: he looked shocked at first, then sorry. He genuinely cared. No one had ever spoken to him like that before or given him the chance to “fix” his mistakes. He seldom made the same mistake twice.

### **Get Involved**

I passed on what I had learned to the other volunteers who helped us with the children at the shelter. It has made a difference in the lives of staff, volunteers and the children. I’ve stressed avoiding videos to occupy time. Get involved! Play! I don’t know who was more blessed by playtime: us or the children!



John 21:15-17 (NIV)

15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."

The situations with each child are slightly different, but we find certain things in common, regardless of age.

- **Get involved with them and interact.**
- **Be yourself.**
- **Don't be too surprised at what you learn from them about their world.**
- **Be strong and loving, encouraging and let them know God is there for them to give them hope.**
- **Keep your word and mean what you say.**
- **Let them know they are safe and can trust you.**
- **Listen, listen, listen.**
- **Don't assume they can't understand the message of salvation. Salvation is what their hearts desire and what they need the most. Hope changes everything.**

With the same patience and persistence Jesus has for Peter, which we're told about in John 21, I am reminded daily that I need the strength and perseverance of Christ to continue to feed and tend the lambs at The Path shelter. ■

*The Path of Citrus County is an established 501-c-3 solely dedicated to addressing the issues of homelessness, assisting Path clients with obtaining full-time employment, and transitioning to permanent housing. Both the men's house and house for women and children have been in operation since 2001. For more information, contact: The Path, PO Box 3024, Inverness, FL 34451. Phone: 352-527-6500 or visit their website at [www.pathofcitrus.org](http://www.pathofcitrus.org).*

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