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Presentation Transcript
Underground Railroad
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The title of this presentation is *The Underground Railroad*. It was given in Lexington, Kentucky, at the Winter Family Tournament on December 24, 2007.

There is a theme that runs through literature, runs through art, and runs throughout all of history. It's a theme that's woven into the very fabric of human life. It's an endlessly repeating theme that's expressed in many different ways. But it's always the same thing at its core. We could put a number of names on it, but, for our purposes today, I'm going to call it the *underground railroad*.

In the 1800s slave people in the United States would follow an informal network of secret routes and safe houses up out of the south to the free states and to Canada. Interestingly enough for us here, most of this underground traffic eventually went through the free state of Ohio. Most of it came through Kentucky. It's estimated that as many as a hundred thousand people rode this metaphorical freedom train prior to the Civil War.

There was a song that these people would sing in the safe houses at night. And it teaches us why this underground railroad existed. The name of the song is *Bound for Canaan Land*. Some of the words are:

Although you see me going so, I'm bound for Canaan land.
I have trials here below. I'm bound for Canaan land.

These slave people likened their departure from slavery to the deliverance from slavery of Israel in the Bible. They felt a connection – a kinship – between those ancient Israelites. They also were a people who were denied one of the fundamental needs of humans beings – freedom. Freedom to worship as they saw fit. Freedom to be themselves. Freedom to choose their own course. They hoped they were headed for a place of freedom where they would be free to worship God in peace and as they saw fit – a place where their spiritual longings would be fulfilled.

It's kind of ironic that our nation – the nation that oppressed *them* – was founded on that very principle of freedom! People should be free. So this need is fundamental in human beings. It's a powerful drive. When people are oppressed – when their instinctual drives are not met – powerful forces go to work to meet them.

Anytime in the past, or in the present, that we see a cataclysm, at it's root, there's always a fundamental human need that has gone unmet. It's just a universal truth. It's true in nations. It's true in families.

In the work that I do, people bring their children to me because their children are acting out. What I start looking for is what the child isn't getting that they need from their family – from their parents. So this theme of seeking unmet needs can be seen all throughout human experience.

Many of us have ridden this train, too, haven't we, in times past. Our spiritual needs were not being met, so we had to move on. We had to find freedom and so, in hope of finding it – in hope of finding freedom, or peace, or security, or love, or all of those things – we became dissatisfied and we went somewhere else. Our needs weren't being met, so rather than languish, we bought tickets, packed up our stuff, and left on a train bound along an unknown route to an unknown, but hopeful, destination. We wanted to find Canaan land. We wanted to find that place where we could be free to worship God.

It wasn't until things became intolerable that I was willing to ride that train. It was a journey of desperation for me. I think probably everybody that's ever ridden the underground railroad left in desperation. I don't know about you, but I'm glad that I took that ride now that I've arrived, because I'm now free to express myself spiritually and worship in a way that, to me, is so much better than what I had before.

A friend from my old life called me up recently and we had a nice talk. At the end, he asked me if I would not tell other people that he called me. (You know, I'm sort of *persona non grata* in some quarters.) He's not a free man.

Here's what concerns me. There is another freedom train – another underground railroad that's loading on the underground track. The engineer has his gloved hand on the whistle chain and the conductor is waving his lantern and calling, "All aboard." And while you and I are here, his voice is echoing up and down the halls of this hotel. And as with the underground railroad of old, the route is not fixed and the destination is yet unknown to the passengers. But still, desperate people are boarding this train because they feel something is missing. Most of them can't put their finger on it. They wonder, "Is there no salt in the food? Are there no minerals in the water? What is it that makes me dissatisfied – like I can drink and drink and not get enough?" They are still propelled by an inborn desire for spirituality, and propelled by nature itself to seek something more – something to satisfy a deep soulful hunger.

But this time, friends, the station the travellers will be leaving is *ours*. They will be leaving for the very same reasons many of us left where we were before we were free.

Who are these people? Well, they are many of the people in our midst who are between twelve and thirty. I've talked to lots of them. And I'm gaining the very distinct impression that the way we do church generally doesn't meet their needs.

I've talked to lots of people my age who have told me the only way there will be church unity is when all of the old timers die off and only the younger ones are left. You know, they're thinking about the younger ones going into Canaan land without them. So they connect to the same metaphor. Most of the time they talk to me about this, it's a reference to all the *division* that's occurred in the Sabbatarian Churches of God.

But I don't believe division is the problem that troubles those who are younger. That's *our* issue. That happened to *us*, not to them. They do *not* feel divided. They come to activities like this. They meet new friends here. They go to summer camp and they meet people from the sabbatarian churches, or they go to the Feast of Tabernacles, and they make friends with people. It doesn't matter to them in the least that there are slight doctrinal differences. Now those differences cause *us* to rip the church apart. But those things don't matter to them.

They come to activities like this. They get to know each other. They build bonds of friendship. They also listen to the speakers, and then they text each other right in church – what they're thinking about – while people like me are up there speaking. Yes they are. They're forming their opinions and their networks, and they are expressing their desires, their likes and their dislikes to each other. And they're finding they're all pretty much on the same page and wanting the same things.

So I think the ground swell of discontent is not so much about division as it is about *omission* – omission of a number of biblical imperatives: the imperative to be mindful of the needs of *everyone* in the congregation; the biblical imperative to *include* everybody in the congregation; the Christian characteristic of *interacting* with everybody across the board; of *praying* for everyone in the congregation; of *equipping* everyone in the congregation to serve God; the need for *joyful music and worship*; for people to lead by *servicing* instead of controlling; the need to care for the poor. These are all things that we have been told out of scripture to *do*. But because we have not done these things – out of traditions from the past – so much, we kind of selectively read the Bible and we keep only the things that we're used to, or the things that we like. And we don't like *these* things, because we're not used to them and don't know how to do them.

Do you know any other group of people who have had this problem? The problem of *selective observance*? In Matthew 23:23, Jesus said:

Mt. 23:23 – “*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees – you hypocrites! You gave a tenth of your spices, mint, dill and cumin, but you have neglected the more important matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain at a gnat, but swallow a camel!*”

You know, I think that we – I'd say *we* are the older generation of the Church of God – find ourselves in exactly this same position. We know all about tithing. We know all about Sabbath observance, and the holy days, and going to church, and all that. But when it comes to knowing how to make our children feel included – or not offending them – we're not so good at that. And when it comes to thinking about *their* needs, we're at a total loss. For most of us, they're not even up on our radar.

When it comes to knowing how to interact with them, like Jesus did, we can't figure out what to do. There will be people who will object to this, because they automatically begin, in their minds, to start creating programs and activities just for kids, which is just another way to separate them out. And they tend to think that there's already too much to do, so let's not do that. And I agree that there are already enough activities. It's not more activities that are needed. It's more involvement in what everyone else does. It's more *inclusion*. You know, what we *do* just needs to change so that it includes the needs of those who are younger.

Culture is always changing. The young people today think differently than those in my generation. And they *do* things differently. Most of us don't have enough contact with young people to even know what those differences are. And yet all these things are felt as needs in the lives our spiritually-minded young people. And if they're not met, some of them are going to be driven elsewhere to find what they're looking for. The sad part of it is, when the train pulls away from the stations, some of us won't even notice. But they will still be gone.

So how does this fit in with our theme today of *equipping the saints*. Well, equipping the saints and meeting the flock's needs – feeding the flock – are all the same thing. Jesus said, "My meat is to do the will of the Father." Spiritual food is not sitting and listening to a sermon. There are lots of people that are spiritually starving to death – and they've done that for years. Spiritual *food* is *doing* what God says to do.

So, our kids – if we're going to feed them – need to be equipped to do the work of God. They need to be taught *how* not only to keep the Sabbath and holy days, but also how to worship joyfully, how to take care of the poor. They need to see an example from us about how to serve, mindful of the needs of other people – without controlling, so that they won't all become the same kind of control-oriented people that *we* have become. And just as we need to equip ourselves with social skills to engage *them* one on one, we also need to equip them to engage those who are older – even the elderly. We need to learn how to craft events that include them, instead of creating programs that divide them out from the adult group.

I was talking to a friend of mine. He lives in Michigan. They have a large family and he was talking about how after Thanksgiving dinner all the kids went down in the basement and played air hockey and whatever. And all the adults were sitting up in the main part of the house talking. One by one all the kids kind of migrated up the stairs and wound up sitting on the floor listening to what the adults were saying. It just kind of happened

quietly and slowly. They *do* want to be a part of us. But there isn't a good way for them to find a place because we haven't made places of them.

Perhaps the biggest part of this equipping is the need to be included in the planning and execution of activities so that they can learn what we know and then take it to the next level. Instead of holding them back and retarding their progress so that we can have something to do, we need to be *stretching* their abilities.

Is it possible to include people under thirty in the organizational structure of a Feast site? I mean, if you think about the Feasts you've gone to, and who does what, how many of those people are under thirty years old? Could somebody under thirty plan a tournament like this? You know, when I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight, I was responsible for all youth activities at the Lake of the Ozarks festival site. Three thousand teenagers came to a dance that I put on. I was twenty-seven! There are a lot of people walking around here that are that age that have a lot more on the ball than I had back then. Planning something like this would be a piece of cake to a lot of the folks that we don't allow to do things like that.

Why does this happen? This is not something that is just particular to our church. It happens *everywhere*! It happens in government. It happens in Catholic Church, Protestant Church – just whatever church you want to name. It happens in business. It's just a human thing that's happening.

I've thought about this thing called the Stockholm Syndrome. Have you ever heard of that? In 1976, in Stockholm, Sweden, a bank was taken over by thieves from August 23rd to August 28th. And in that six-day span, the hostages they held became enamored of their captors and began to identify with those who had enslaved them instead of their rescuers. They were on the side of their captors by the time the police showed up to free them. I think the same thing has happened among some of us. You know, the leadership that I left wanted *only* what they were used to. Anything else was bad. And I think some of us identify with that mentality more than with the mentality of freedom to express a relationship with God. For example, if the music isn't what we're used to, then it's bad. That was just how it was.

You know, several years ago here at this activity, in my opinion, the most valuable activity that we had was a trip to the Salvation Army, where dozens of our kids and adults fed dinner to the homeless and the poor. So you had young people and old people working elbow to elbow to help others. You could see in the faces of the kids that they were really feeling good about what they were doing. But it was a very highly controversial activity among the adults, because the dinner we served was on Christmas Day and some wouldn't participate. Others didn't like that we participated. You know, if it isn't what we're used to, we don't want it. We try to stop it. We try to control it. And in so doing, we ignore the spiritual urges of other people that don't have the same hang-ups that we have. And we become just like those, who, at one time in the past, oppressed us. We become just like the Pharisees of old. You know, while we were all dancing around that issue as adults, what our kids learned was, that people get hungry on Christmas Day,

too. None of them are keeping Christmas now. It didn't rub off on them. They didn't go because it was Christmas. They went because it was a chance to help hungry people.

You know, I gave this presentation previously, and the people hearing it thought I was saying that we needed to have something else for young people. It just seems to me sometimes – it's so frustrating – because it seems like all of our inclinations are incorrect. I guess they just don't like to hear that we ought to change how we *are* and then include kids in it. The idea of separating kids out from us to do what's more appealing to them is like forcing them onto the train. What appeals to them ought to be with *us*! We need to include our kids in *every* aspect of the church – not separate them out or force them away from it. The church needs to be something that includes the *whole* Bible, not just the parts that *we're* familiar with and that we've emphasized. We need to begin taking them into account.

I know many people excuse their own resistance to including children in church by saying that they don't have the gift. Some people have the gift of evangelism and others don't. But that doesn't excuse those of us who don't from talking to others about our beliefs. That's just a fundamental Christian responsibility. Some people don't think they have the gift of giving, but that doesn't excuse them from tithing. That's just a fundamental Christian responsibility. Some people don't have the gift of relating to children, but that doesn't excuse them from making an effort to treat other people's children with care and friendliness – to reach out to them socially as a part of the congregation so they can *feel* a part of the congregation.

One day Jesus' disciples were all engaged in jockeying for position. They were having a discussion about who was going to be greatest. And He pulled a little child up on His lap and said, "You need to be more like this," and He pointed to the innocent little child. "While you spend all your energy on what you think is important, you neglect them. It would be better to put a millstone around your neck and jump in the sea," He said.

So, really, it's just as simple as letting go of our resistance and discomfort, and unfolding our arms and uncrossing our legs, and getting out of our chairs, and making an effort to engage those who are younger than we in inclusive conversation. That's a first step. That's what makes people feel a part of things.

Have you ever walked into a church service, where you were new, and you didn't know anybody? If nobody talks to you, how do you feel? If a number of people come up and introduce themselves and make an effort to be friendly, how different is it? It's no different with kids.

At the Park City Feast this year we spent an entire day learning how to do need-based evangelism. Then the next day we went out and *did* it all day long. Some people – the older people (not all of them, but some of them) – said that the Feast was not for that. We're supposed to have a sermon everyday – you know, good Bible preaching. We want that. My response was that we need to start applying the Bible in our lives as well as hearing it read to us. So, in contrast to those comments – that I got on the feedback forms

from the festival...I read a feedback form written by a fifteen-year-old girl, who said, "I liked the service project the best. When I go home I'm going to try to find something like that that I can do in my community."

Now, think about that. Here's this young girl. She comes to the Feast and because of what she learns there, she's now inspired to take independent action – biblically-based, Holy Spirit led, outgoing action. That's what we want, right? That's what we're trying to cause to happen. But I'm afraid that unless she's in a congregation that will support her budding spirituality in a very robust and enthusiastic manner, that this young girl could, at some point, feel forced to get on that train. And I think if she does, God will take care of her just as surely as He took care of the second generation of Israel, and just as surely as He took care of you and me when we rode that train. But I would like us to behave differently than those who have gone before us. And I would like us to stop resisting history, and resisting nature, and resisting God and help her feel like she doesn't have to get on that train to go anywhere, because she's already in Canaan Land with all those she knows and loves.

Well, thank you for hearing me out. If you agree with me about the problem, LifeResource Ministries would be happy to come to your congregation or group and help you create a healthier environment for your children and for yourselves, also – because what's good for kids is also good for us. There are things that can be done. Just give us a call or send us an email.

Thank you.