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By Ken Walker

A silhouette of a man and a boy against a warm, orange sunset sky. The man is on the right, kneeling and holding a book. The boy is on the left, standing and looking towards the man. The background is a bright, hazy sky with soft clouds.

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FATHER'S LOVE

BORN OUT OF HIS OWN CHILDHOOD PAIN AND A POWERFUL CONVERSION EXPERIENCE, A WYOMING BUSINESSMAN'S MENTORSHIP PROGRAM AIMS AT HELPING FATHERLESS BOYS FIND FORGIVENESS AND FAITH.

ABANDONED BY HIS FATHER while in his mother's womb, John Smithbaker intimately understands the vow many fatherless boys make: "I will never forgive him for leaving me." That's why John, a Wyoming businessman, has dedicated his life to helping abandoned boys overcome the hostility they harbor for their missing parent.

It was through accepting Christ and forgiving his father that John found the freedom to overcome his past. Later, he sensed God leading him to start Fathers in the Field, a ministry that matches boys with male mentors for outdoors-oriented activities and Christian education.



“I BELIEVE THE FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IS THE *foundation of the world.*”



(Above and opposite) There are many outdoor activities that mentor fathers can enjoy with the boys, including hunting, fishing, camping, boating, backpacking, horse packing, mountain biking, canoeing, kayaking, and myriad others. Fathers in the Field provides all the resources and training to help men mentor.

“It’s the worst thing that can happen in this world,” John says of abandonment. “I believe the father-son relationship is the foundation of the world. When that’s broken, it’s devastating.”

Statistics verify his assertion. Children from fatherless homes account for 63 percent of youth suicides, 71 percent of pregnant teens and high school dropouts, and 75 percent of teens in drug treatment.

Conversely, mentored children are 46 percent less likely to use drugs or alcohol, 33 percent less likely to resort to violence, and 59 percent more likely to get better grades.

It’s the positive side of these statistics John hopes to address through Fathers in the Field, which he started in 2005 and rolled out nationally in January.

John and his former pastor, Scott MacNaughton—now the ministry’s vice president of church outreach—spent a year developing curriculum and other aspects of the program. Then they field-

tested it for two years at churches in Wyoming and Mississippi.

Thus far, several dozen mentors from about 15 churches have signed up. John hopes to enlist 250 congregations over the next three years. With about four mentors per church, that would enable Fathers in the Field to reach 1,000 boys a year.

CRUCIAL CONNECTIONS

John says fatherless boys need the roots of a church family—a place where they can get to know traditional role models and their caring spouses and where they and their mothers can receive love and support. “What these boys are lacking is commitment from an adult male,” he says. “All they’ve had in their lives is people breaking promises.”

Mentors agree to make a one-year commitment to a boy, with a minimum of four contacts per month. These include two church visits and a monthly service proj-

ect. The program also encourages a year-end, multi-day outing, be that fishing, hunting, canoeing, or another activity.

It takes several months to introduce the concept of forgiveness. Though many take a while to work through that issue, John says it is the key to a boy turning loose his deep-rooted animosity.

The president of an outdoors equipment company in Lander, Wyoming, John knows what a difference a caring man makes. Though he enjoyed a close relationship with an uncle, the simple

gesture of a friend’s father also had a lasting impact.

When John was 12, the man invited him along on hunting and fishing trips. John believes that he wouldn’t enjoy God’s creation as much as he now does if this father hadn’t stepped into his life. “It was an escape from the confusion and self-pity I was living with,” John says. “An adult man shared an earthly passion with me, taught me how to do things, and introduced me to a man’s perspective of the world.”

PATH TO RECONCILIATION

The ministry stems from John’s infancy, which took a tragic turn when his father deserted his young family. That decision, which had terrible consequences for his older sister as well, left John feeling empty.

Whether captaining the football team, winning “Most Valuable Player,” or becoming homecoming king, he constantly sought recognition. The lack of a positive male role model at home carried into adult life, where

“THE *wound of a father’s abandonment* CUTS AT THE VERY SOUL OF THESE BOYS.”



Having a man who can take an interest in the boys and show God’s love for them can make all the difference in their lives. For many, it is through the Fathers in the Field program that they hear and read God’s word for the first time. The mentoring fathers also benefit. As one mentor shares, “As we have taken this journey together, my own growth as a Christian has moved to another whole level of commitment to Christ’s Kingdom.”

he ranked success and material goods ahead of his family and wife, Tracey.

Ironically, John’s career in sporting goods played a role in his acceptance of Christ. During a 2001 fishing trip, one of John’s clients asked him whether he believed in God, prompting him to respond, “Yes.”

“He put me in a spot where he tested my heart,” John recalls. “Looking back, I’m so glad I didn’t deny Him, [although] potentially I could have lost a big account. [The client] definitely didn’t believe in God.”

During the next year, the Smithbakers attended a small church whose pastor was a family friend. John’s primary motivation was obtaining moral instruction for their three children (now ages 6 to 13). Yet, those Scripture-based sermons took hold. John was en route to a fishing outing with his uncle when suddenly he sensed the Holy Spirit tugging on his heart. Around midnight, he pulled off the road, knelt down, begged for forgiveness, and accepted Christ as Savior.

“I distinctly remember Him saying, ‘I will forgive you, but first you need to forgive your earthly father,’” John recalls. “I said, ‘Okay, I will.’”

His conversion touched off correspondence with his father—and eventually a personal visit, which didn’t go too well. Despite his dad’s profession of love, John didn’t believe it because his actions didn’t show it.

Finally, John asked if his dad had any pictures of them together when John was young. Shrugging it off, his father said he didn’t have any photos of his boat or plane, either.

“At that moment, I understood how he viewed me: I was just a thing to him,” says John, his voice trembling slightly.

After that, their contact was limited to a few more letters. Though his father never accepted Christ before dying in 2006, their correspondence led to the ministry’s formation. One day, while sharing his life in a letter, John sensed God telling him to start Fathers in the Field. He even saw that name written on the wall.

“What God put on my heart was whatever I put together, however it came together, at a point in their relationship, the mentor had to tell this abandoned boy that he needs to forgive his earthly father if he’s ever going to be healed,” John says.

BREAKING THROUGH

Boys are getting that message. One example is 11-year-old Masen. A member of John’s church, he recently accepted Christ as Savior, thanks to Scott McNaughton’s guidance.

After six months in the program, Masen announced that he had decided to follow Jesus. Not only had the youth received Christ’s forgiveness, he had forgiven his father, a step he had vowed never to take.

“The wound of a father’s abandonment cuts at the very soul of these boys,” John explains. “Society thinks that the father has to do something visibly bad to the boy, but this is not the case. It’s the worst, most crippling event that can happen.”

Masen also asked to be baptized. As a pastor for 25 years, Scott had lost some of the concept of divine intervention that baptism represents. That Sunday morning, however, the impact of Christ adopting a lost boy back into

His family hit Scott on a deep, emotional level.

“Scott has done a lot of baptisms, but he wept like a baby up there,” John recalls.

Two weeks later, Masen’s father wrote, saying he wanted to see his son. After seeking feedback from Scott, the boy decided to visit his father and tell him about his conversion. This story doesn’t have a happy ending, however. A few months later, Masen’s father was released from prison. Instead of following through on the promises he made, he took off and still isn’t involved in his son’s life.

Masen remains in the mentoring program. John believes the youth’s wound is healing, especially because he no longer clings to unforgiveness. “It doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a scar or that he won’t limp for the rest of his life,” John says. “But that devastating anger won’t fester in him. That’s pretty special. We’re seeing more and more of those stories.”

John has experienced something special with his buddy as well. Now 13, Laine has never met his father. Before a fishing trip they took together last year, John prayed for a good catch. God answered, stirring a mixture of excitement and nervousness in the youth.

John snapped photos of the trophies, but, on the way home, Laine

was on the quiet side. Suddenly, he told John, “You know what? This is the best day of my life.”

“That gives me goosebumps to this day,” John says. “To have a boy tell you that is unspeakably joyous because you know what he’s missing and what he desires.”

Christian seniors play a key role in this outreach, with about 90 percent of current mentors age 50 or older. John calls empty nesters Fathers in the Field’s “sweet spot” because so many are mature believers and experienced fathers and often have a passion for outdoor activities.

John says numerous men hold back from getting involved in ministry because they think they will have to be a Bible scholar or teach. But if someone tells them they can go out, do what they like, and serve God, he says, they will respond.

“He needs to be a hero to that boy and share his passion with him,” John says. “Having an adult man spend time with him makes him that hero to that boy.”

To learn more about this ministry and how you might participate, visit www.fathersinthefield.com.