



*Bible school at St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church, a NALC congregation in Riverside, Mo., gets a show-biz treatment. Glenda Mann (right) leads a song as her husband, Mike Mann (up on stage) keeps the kids' attention. (Photos by Brian Davidson)*

# Mike and Glenda Mann rock vacation Bible school

**By Lisa Gutierrez**  
*The Kansas City Star*

Sometimes, kids from the apartments in back of the church cut through the woods to get here. Some don't even belong to the flock, but they are more than welcome at vacation Bible school. So they come.

The classes have become a neighborhood draw at St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Riverside, Mo., a little white church on a hill just up the road from the Corner Cafe.

Sing-alongs, balloon props, puppets, magic tricks and sight gags like burning Bibles ("It's a really hot book") make it a show. Forty-three kids packed the pews of the church's community hall this night. Parents hung around to watch, too.

The kids hoot and hollered up a storm with Mike and Glenda Mann, the husband-and-wife entertainers who come every summer, camping behind the church for the week in their 33-foot travel trailer.

She's the granddaughter of a Baptist minister, with reddish hair like Reba McEntire and a husky, honeyed drawl like hers, too. He's a Catholic-turned-Baptist with dark hair and earnest eyes who can rile a kiddie crowd like a Vegas headliner.

The Manns, who hail from Hutchinson, Kan., spend summer on the road teaching vacation Bible schools from Kansas to Michigan, sometimes putting on two or three shows a day. "We do big shows. We don't go in with a briefcase," Glenda said.

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They come home in September to perform at the Kansas State Fair, where the secular crowds know them as Glenda and Mike's Mysteries and Wonders Magic Show.

"As long as it's clean, family entertainment, we'll do any type of venue," Glenda said. "We do corporate events, we do business parties, school assemblies, fairs, festivals."

For vacation Bible school gigs, they add Jesus to the magic.

The rope trick, for instance — in which two kids try to fish a money-wrapped piece of cord from a magician's bag — ends with this lesson: If you choose Jesus, you have a better life on Earth and in Heaven.

"We emphasize the importance of learning God's Word to hide in your heart because obviously you're not going to carry around a 20-pound Bible with you," Glenda said.

Their Bible school work puts them in front of hundreds of children every summer. With no



***Vacation Bible School leader Glenda Mann arranged kids for a lesson at St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Riverside, Mo. When Glenda and her husband teach, Bible school is a hands-on experience.***

offspring of their own, Glenda likes to say: "We have thousands by other parents."

Some of their children, she said, "have fur and feathers," a reference to a rabbit and the doves that travel with them.

They won't tell how long they've been married — "a long time," Glenda said. They fell in love so hard they got married less than a year after meeting.

"Christ has been the center of our married life and everything we've done from the beginning," said Mike, who worked on B-52s at Boeing in Wichita before the two became full-time performers.

Glenda's grandmother, a minister's wife, taught Sunday school classes using magic tricks. The formula still works with the Wii generation, especially for 10-year-old church member Michael Berry, who sat in the front row singing loudly and waving his hand each time volunteers were called for.

He likes vacation Bible school, he said, "because you learn about God."

The Rev. Bud Elliott has known the Manns since the 1970s and asked them to bring their show to Riverside after he arrived 10 years ago. He considers them salt of the earth, good showmen to boot.

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***Vacation Bible School student Dirk Istaro (left) received his instructions for a skit about David and Goliath from Mike Mann.***





*Reedchard Noda of Riverside, Mo., sings along to one of the Manns' many interactive tunes.*

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"They have the ability to shift gears, improvise," he said. "Every audience is different. They're very flexible in what they do and that's how they maintain that contact with these kids, and that keeps them coming back."

"Every year that they've been here, kids will be so enthusiastic the first night that they'll bring others with them the second night."

Glenda, who plays the piano, writes many of the songs they teach. They used to travel with her keyboard until they got tired of hauling it around. Now they use mostly recorded music.

Times have changed in other ways, too — namely, the kids. "Attention spans have shortened," Mike said. "We've shortened everything down. The songs are shorter."

They teach the kids hand gestures to make the words stick. Glenda shook a tambourine as the kids clapped along to her catchy little ditty, "Soul-Healin' Man."

*"He's a soul-healin' man. He's a soul-healin' man. He looks inside where no man can. He's a soul-healin' man."*

"They are so animated and energetic. The kids relate to them right off," said the church's music director Joyce Hisel, the recently retired choir director at Platte County High School.

"Between the music that they use, the hand gestures that they use, how they involve the kids in everything that they do, from the puppetry to the magic, it's all so upbeat and just very joyful. And there's always a lesson in whatever they do."

Every class begins and ends with bowed heads. At the end of their two hours together, Mike told the kids: "Let's bow our heads for a word of prayer. God's looking at your heart right now. Do you know where your heart is with him?"

"Right here," one little boy called out.

"Let's pray," Mike continued, launching into a prayer in sing-song fashion, the kids repeating each line after him.

*"Jesus I believe in you. I believe your Bible. It says that you died, on the cross, in my place, and paid the price for all my sins."*

*"Jesus, I believe in you and I ask you to come into my life as my Savior and my Lord."*

Prayers said, the crowd dispersed, kids going home wearing balloon headpieces and holding the balloon animals that took Glenda hours to make.

And out behind the church, one little boy disappeared back down the path through the woods.

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*Mike Mann and Calipo, the monkey puppet, have a message for the kids at St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church. (Photos by Brian Davidson)*