

CHILDREN AT RISK: THE BIGGEST LITTLE MISSION FIELD IN THE WORLD?

Not long ago at a city park in Central America, Patrick McDonald spotted a group of 30 street children. Then he saw workers with a Christian ministry show up and begin working with them. Then another group of workers arrived, then another, all within half an hour, all targeting the same children.

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Another time, McDonald discovered that in a certain South American city, five soup kitchens provided food to children. The only problem was that all five offered the food only on Mondays, with nothing available the rest of the week.

“It is evident that we at present are unable to meet the needs facing us, and this forces us to review what we do as well as look seriously at new ways of improving our continued efforts,” stated McDonald, international coordinator of the Viva network, an Oxford-based movement seeking to coordinate evangelical efforts among the world’s “at risk: children. “our integrity, as Christians, is at stake.”

The need and the response. The needs are enormous, and are growing day by day. Here is just a sampling of some of the grim realities faced by the world’s 1.8 billion children at risk. Malnutrition and starvation kill some 35,000 children under the age of 5 daily. There are 100 million street children. Some 1.5 million children are infected with the AIDS virus. Between 100 million and 200 million are ensnared in child labor. At least a million children are prostitutes. About 2 million children die annually because they have not been immunized against preventable diseases. Between 1984 and 1994, 1.5 million children died in wars, 4 million were disabled, and 12 million lost their homes.

“The shift from front-to-front wars to civil wars has meant a shift in who becomes casualties,” McDonald noted. “At the turn of the century, 90 percent of casualties were soldiers. Today 90 percent are civilians, a lot of them children.”

Although somewhat disorganized, the evangelical army mobilized to help children is arguably larger than any other group in the world. McDonald, a native of Denmark who did ministry among street children in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, in 1991 and 1992, estimates the existence of 110,000 full-time workers and 20,000 ministries to children worldwide__ not all of them to “at risk” children. He also says that 2 million “at risk” children are being cared for in evangelical ministries every day.

The Viva Network is a leading attempt to get these groups to work together and avoid duplication of ministries and waste of resources, since the need is even larger. “There is a certain sense of anticipation in the children’s community, and of mobilization,” he said.

McDonald and others launched the network in 1994. In October that year, McDonald spread the vision among international ministries at a consultation in Miami. The following February, 38 grassroots participants from 23 organizations and 10 nations met in San Jose, Costa Rica, to review their needs and to strategize for the future. After that meeting, national networks began forming. Today, according to McDonald, there are 22 Viva-related national networks “under active development, another 40 hovering to begin.”

A neglected emphasis. Interest in ministry to children among mission agencies and churches has been slow in coming in the last decade. At the Lausanne II conference in Manila in 1989, an interest track on the evangelization of children was “really poorly attended,” according to Don Miller, who organized the track as executive director of program for Compassion International.

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At the 1992 Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies Executive Retreat, Bryant Myers, director of World Vision’s Mission Advanced Research and Communications Center, urged those present to focus more of their efforts on young people. Myers grabbed their attention with figures showing that, in the U.S. at least, 85 percent of the people who become Christians do so between the ages of 4 and 14. Dan Brewster, in charge of research and policy at Compassion, has found about 60 percent of new converts to be in that age group.

Yet Brewster, in an article in **Transformation**, said that “none of the tracks nor any of the main plenary or workshop sessions were specifically devoted to children” at GCOWE’95 in Seoul.

Some ministries engaged in outreach to children, and particularly “at risk” children, have complained for years that fellow Christians look down their noses at this kind of work. Phyllis Kilbourn, director of the ministry Rainbows of Hope and editor of **Street Children: A Handbook for Effective Ministry** (MARC, 1997), said a youth minister came by her booth at an urban conference to ask if her agency took men for ministry to children. He explained that several other groups in the exhibition hall had told him, “We leave that to the wives.”

Bill Perrow, who with his wife Wanda started the Open Arms Foundation as a ministry to street children in Medellin, Colombia, says it fulfills a need neglected by the local church. “I don’t know who is teaching the idea that children’s ministry is the least of all ministries, but we struggle to find people who want to work with children,” he said. “Most seminary students have the unspoken belief that to work with children is a lesser call. They all want to be pastors or evangelists. The local church for a long time would not lift a finger to help the street child sleep at its doorstep.”

Attitudes changing. However, attitudes are changing. As with so many other issues, media coverage is having an impact.

“I believe the attention of the media to children in abusive situations, both in the home and around the world, such as the horrendous plight of children in wars in Rwanda, Liberia, Zaire, and Bosnia has begun to draw people’s attention to this segment of needy children,” Kilbourn said. “Some groups are responding and making a genuine effort to be more biblical in their response.”

A Children’s Consultation was added to last summer’s Global Consultation on World Evangelization in Pretoria, South Africa. There they were recognized as “the largest people group” and “a legitimate door to the 10/40 Window.”

A year ago, in Oxford, England, 51 representatives from 38 children’s ministries on five continents gathered for a consultation on children at risk. There they drafted a document, **Children at Risk: Statement of an International Consultation**, that called on churches, grassroots ministries, and all Christian agencies to recognize the needs of children and work together to maximize their effectiveness.

Ministry and modern Menaces. Such cooperation is necessary because the forces arrayed against children are so pervasive. The same media that show the sad plight of so many young people also contribute to their dehumanization. Marj McDermid of Rainbows of Hopes says both children and parents are often tricked by the fools’ gold of “the good life” as portrayed by the media. “The children only find out the dangers and the reality of urban life when it’s too late,” McDermid said. “They’ve run away with little chance of turning back.”

“Modern commodities such as TV and PCs have created a new problem of ‘mental violence,’” Patrick McDonald said. “While we eagerly debate for a pollution-free environment, healthy food, and good footwear, we stuff our minds with the worst imaginable dirt ever concocted. Children have access to hardcore pornography on the World Wide Web and are literally witnesses to thousands of murders before they turn 15.

“The obvious dangers are the growth of the cities, the breakdown of nuclear families, the rise in sexual immorality, and the drop in the value of life in general.”

In such a milieu, Kilbourn and others involved in ministry to children advocate a holistic approach to ministry. Kilbourn says the kind of ministry that doesn’t stop at preaching has been too slow in coming.

“The ‘social gospel’ hasn’t been too popular in years past,” she started. “That has been the work of liberal churches, not church-planting ministries who preach the gospel. But, how can one authentically preach the gospel to children who are hungry and sick? How can we preach to them and leave them to return to slums to raise younger siblings . . . where the only employment available to them is prostitution? I have seen this happen more times than I could count!”

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The Oxford statement lists a number of different ways children are being helped. These include rehabilitation programs for exploited or addicted children; counseling for the traumatized; feeding, evangelism, education, and first aid for street children; residential care; health care (both preventative and for those with disabilities and illnesses); schooling and vocational training; fund raising, sponsorships, and small business projects; community and environmental improvements; reunification of uprooted children with their families; awareness-raising through various media; prayer; advocacy and lobbying; and partnerships between ministries.

Kilbourn advocates a ministry approach to children “where they are given viable alternatives to get out of their abusive, exploitive situations; an approach where the love of Jesus is lived before them before it is preached.”

The Perrows work with local churches in Medellin on a multistep ministry getting children off the street until they can eventually become productive members of church and society. In the first phase, children come off the streets for half a day to get their basic nutritional needs met, to get first aid, to hear the gospel, and to establish relationships with Christians. The second phase involves residential living and drug rehabilitation. Later, the children receive academic training, occupational training, and instruction in Christian discipleship. Open Arms has two buildings, one for administration and the other for dorm space and other ministry areas. The work is partly supported by a small farm, which also teaches vocational skills.

“Street children often accept the gospel message once they determine that the communicator genuinely cares for them,” Bill Perrow said. “The working out of their salvation is normally a long process. That is why we always look for the fruit before we say that a child has had a real experience with Christ. The major problem that we have encountered is unforgiveness and deep resentments.

Janey DeMeo and her husband Louis founded the Institut Theologique de Nimes in Uchaud, France, from which they had sent missionaries to Togo and Romania. They do extensive work with children in France and also run an orphanage in Guntur, India. Janey DeMeo says ministry to children boils down to attitude.

"To be honest, the way to reach street children is to go right out in the streets and just love them," she said. "It may mean spending hours with a bunch of street kids or teen hang-outs and just talking with them to love them, and providing food for them. It takes determination, willingness to get dirty, to be insulted and mistreated. It takes being like Jesus."

Children and world evangelization. Children are crucial to any efforts to evangelize the world, both now and in the future, advocates say.

"God has gifted children to bless the church **now**, not just when they are adults and future church leaders," Kilbourn said. "The enemy is pulling a double robbery on our children. First, they are losing a chance for a meaningful childhood, and, second, the church is being robbed of one of her most valuable resources."

DeMeo says that the orphans she works with who have been delivered from child slavery in Guntur are eager to do evangelism. "They have been converted from hinduism to Christ," she stated. "They are so thrilled and grateful, they delight in going out in teams with the pastor and soul-winning in the villages. Many grow up and go to Bible school and continue serving God."

McDermid points to the tremendous potential of young people through the example of Larry San Pedro of Manila. To avoid abuse and violence at home, at age 5 he ran away to live on the streets.

"As he grew older, he worked to put himself through school," McDermid said. "His goal in life was to kill his father and be educated enough . . . to defend himself in the courts."

One night, a Christian gave a sandwich and a Coke to Larry, who had taken refuge in a taxi he had cleaned. That Christian led Larry to Christ. Later, as a teen, Larry was challenged to forgive his father. His response: "No way!"

Yet eventually Larry's heart was softened, and he found his father, not to kill him, but to embrace him and ask forgiveness. Then the father said something Larry never expected: "I have always loved you."

McDermid said, "After working this way through Bible school and seminary, Larry has become a preacher and a child advocate, working with Action International (Ministries) and rescuing children off the streets."

At GCOWE '97, sponsored by the AD2000 and Beyond Movement, participants in the consultation on children noted that perhaps half of the population of the "10/40 Window" is comprised of children. They were called an untapped resource of potential disciples, intercessors, and missionaries.

In an article for **World Pulse**, Joseph D'Souza, executive director of Operation Mobilization India, applauded the focus on young people. "The AD2000 Movement must have the long-term view in missions work if it allocates a separate consultation for children," he said.

Nothing that half of the world's population is under age 15, and 1.8 billion of these are "at risk," McDonald observed, "Given the size of this problem, our ability as the church to respond to this need becomes crucial. If we fail, we lose a whole generation. If we manage, we win one."

Cooperation called critical. "We" is becoming the operative word in children's ministry as more and more agencies and churches are teaming up. Last September dozens of Christian organizations and missions agencies in the U.S. launched a national evangelical campaign, "Celebrate the Child," calling on denominations, ministries, and churches to make children a priority of equal importance to reaching adults. The effort runs through this year. Viva Network, U.S.A., is just one of the participating groups.

“People are starting to look at the Christian community of outreach to children as that ___a community,” McDonald said. “There is a strong sense of coming together, of a need to network and share resources, ideas, knowledge, expertise, and so on.”

The Viva Network has been endorsed by the World Evangelical Fellowship, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, and the AD2000 and Beyond Movement. The LCWE plans to appoint a senior associate for children at risk in February, while WEF has decided to have a children’s commission, as has the Association of Evangelicals in Africa.

Among agencies, Latin America Mission has agreed to become Viva’s coordinating center for Latin America. Trans World Radio has set up a “Next Generation” initiative, while SIM has launched a “Year of the Child” emphasis.

McDonald says national networks, especially in Latin America, have been able to facilitate training seminars, bulk purchasing, legal aid, annual retreats, and so on, providing “a new levels of service and support for local projects.”

McDonald, however, is candid about the problems and shortcomings in the movement. He cites the need for a central resource index of printed material, training facilities, accountability structures for ministries, and improved legal and medical aid. Plus, he says that while many groups are working with orphans and street children, too few are focusing on children who work, who are prostitutes, who are in prison, and who are refugees or are caught up in wars.

“A lot of people work in Guatemala and Kenya, but few (work) in Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and Thailand,” McDonald added.

Local churches are key. Local churches are the key, he believes, to meeting the enormous needs on the streets. “What other organization in, say, San Salvador, El Salvador, has hundreds of buildings dotted right across the town, hundreds of budgets, hundreds of pulpits from which to mobilize volunteers and resources?” McDonald said. “What other organization has an elaborate network of contacts in every sphere of life in that city but the church? What organization, besides the evangelical church, has a crystal-clear biblical mandate for doing something about the plight of street children and other children at risk?”

“If local networks could catalyze functional partnerships between a host of churches working together, we could start professional, highly capable projects in every city of Latin America__and Africa, for that matter__tomorrow, and that without a single penny from the west.”

The choice is ours, McDonald says. “The potential is there, the components are there, the knowledge is there, the people are there, and the mandate is there__crystal clear, poking us in the face,” he said. “The city and the world are watching us, waiting for us, wanting to know if we and our message are for real.”