

CHURCH PLANTING AMONG CHILDREN: BIBLICAL DIRECTIVES TIMOTHY MONSMA

In biblical times children often carried out important assignments. Miriam helped rescue her brother Moses (**Exodus 2:4-9**). The boy Samuel conveyed God's revelation to Eli (**1 Samuel 3**). Joash became king of Judah at seven years of age (**2 Kings 11:21**). And a young slave girl from Israel helped rescue Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, from leprosy (**2 Kings 5:2-3**).

In New Testament times Jesus provided food for thousands when a boy had the forethought to take with him bread and fish (**John 6:9**). The girl Rhoda announced Peter's miraculous presence at a prayer meeting (**Acts 12:13-14**). And Paul's young nephew worked to save him from harm when he was captured in Jerusalem (**Acts 23:16-19**).

Because of God's view that children are important, one is not surprised to hear Isaiah say, "He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" (**Isaiah 40:11**). Jesus rebuked his disciples when they started to send mothers and their children away (**Mark 10:14**). "And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them" (**Mark 10:16**). Jesus also used a child as an example of humility before his disciples (**Matthew 18:1-5**).

The pro-life movement is built on the premise that children are complete members of the human race even before they are born. If they are complete human beings created in God's image even before they are born, and I believe they are (**Psalms 139:13-16**), how much more are they human beings with worth and dignity in God's eyes after they are born.

Some evangelical Christians argue that the relationship between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism is so close that babies ought to be baptized. Other evangelical Christians argue that baptism is built on a personal and conscious profession of faith in Christ. Therefore, they conclude, baptism ought to be withheld until a child is twelve or older and can be trusted to make a personal and credible choice.

Both groups agree on the importance of children in God's eyes. Those who wait with baptism have a service of dedication shortly after a child has been born. They also begin to instruct children in Sunday school and in other ways even before they are school age. If children of believers are important in God's eyes, other children are by implication also important, for it is God's will that the good news of the gospel be told to all creatures.

In citing the importance of children, I'm assuming that all children from birth through seventeen years of age are included. From this perspective we will reflect on children in the church, the school and the Christian community.

CHILDREN IN CHURCH

When numerous first-born children were killed in the last plague on the Egyptians, the Israelites were celebrating the passover with their children and explaining it to them (**Exodus 12:26-27**). Children were involved in the sacred assemblies called by

God in the wilderness and certain ceremonies and monuments were partly teaching devices for their benefit (**Exodus 12:26-27, Deuteronomy 11:19-20, Joshua 4:5-7**).

It is not surprising, therefore, that when synagogues arose among the Jews, they were used during the week as schools for Jewish boys. Assuming that the normal pattern of instruction was followed, Jesus and the disciples learned to read and write in the synagogue schools. While still young they participated in worship services on the Jewish Sabbath. When Christians worship began, the pattern of including children continued. Young Rhoda went to open the door when Peter was knocking because she too was at the prayer meeting (**Act 12:12-13**).

It can be concluded that Christian worship would have been incomplete without at least the older children present. The presence of children forces the speaker, if sensitive to the audience, to explain Bible passages in simple words and concepts. This response to the children assures that all adults catch the meaning as well, including those who might be ashamed to complain, "You are talking over our heads."

Many married couples without children earnestly desire them. Children are a normal part of family life in the home. The family of God also includes children.

The implication for church planting efforts is that we should aim for churches that embrace all ages. Churches that deviate from this pattern are incomplete. We ought to ask, therefore, how we—even in our initial evangelistic efforts—can make provision for children.

CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

Many traditional missions have made extensive use of schools to reach entire communities for Christ. Beginning with primary schools, they have in time expanded to include secondary schools and even college level education.

Donald McGavran and others have criticized these schools as institutions that demand heavy investment of money and personnel but don't yield fruit in proportion to the investment. I'm sure this was often the case in India where McGavran worked. Educational efforts among native American children have encountered similar problems. But in much of Africa the story has been quite different. Most Africans are more enthusiastic about formal education than many Afro-Americans. Many African children first heard and responded to the gospel in a school setting. Some African missions that didn't sponsor schools were able to plant churches rapidly only because they were proselytizing the graduates of other mission schools.

Nowadays the discussion over the value of schooling as an evangelistic and discipleship tool is fading because most schools, even those that began as mission schools, are now government controlled and financed.

But the point in this: traditional missions have been involved with children for a long time through the educational systems they have fostered. If such missions would now shoulder the task of ministry to the more than 100 million children who are at risk in this world, these mission programs would be no novelty from the point of view of ministry to children. They would be a novelty only from the point of view of the type of children who would now receive their attention.

Missions have been willing to work with children in the past because they knew these children represented the future leaders of church and nation. They also knew that the transition from child to adult occurs quickly. Children 10 years of age today will be voting, working, fighting (in armies) and child-bearing adults within 10 years time, if not before.

Some cases, such as Rwanda, need extensive orphanage work. Even then the number of orphans tend to overwhelm the system because of all the fighting and killing of adults that has taken place there. A great need for orphanages and foster homes exists in Mexico and Brazil as well. Some street children sleep with a single parent in a shack somewhere. Others simply sleep on the street. In either case their most pressing need is not for lodging, but for attention from missionaries and other Christians during daylight hours. While drop-in centers, feeding programs, medical help and camps for children are all helpful, these children need training in reading, arithmetic and Bible knowledge if they are ever to become productive and responsible members of society. Orphanages also provide schooling for their children, either inside or outside the orphanage. The training they receive resembles the training children once received in mission schools.

In 1993 I was at a camp for street children sponsored by Action International Ministries and Christian Growth Ministries in the Manila area of the Philippines. The program of the camp actually involved a great deal of Informal training for the children, although it was given in a camp setting rather than a school setting. Children learned promptness and discipline in arriving at the various events on time and in cleaning up after themselves. They were taught songs, Bible stories, Christian ethics, public speaking and acting. They were also trained in the give and take of small group discussion and in sports. Thus, at camp the street children learned several functions often taught by schools. It became a sort of an informal school for children. It approached the type of work in which many traditional missions have been involved for a long time.

From the first century onward, churches have traditionally included children in the worship services. When the inclusion of children in worship is supplemented by sound education, genuine and rapid church growth is likely to occur. Therefore, attention to children is not a bothersome excursion down a deadend road; it's part of the superhighway over which contemporary missions ought to be traveling.

CHILDREN IN THE CHRISTIANITY COMMUNITY

Street children by definition live in a city. Most orphanage care is given in or near a city. The question of the integration of children who desire to follow Christ into the Christian community is a question to be answered with this urban environment in mind.

But when we have said "urban environment" or "metropolitan environment" (here treated as one and the same), we have already suggested a way in which the integration can proceed. Children are not only people in cities who may be at loose ends; many adults are also "down and out." Unless one has good networks, the city can be all a very lonely and dangerous place.

The goal of the integration of children with adults is an institutional church and a Christian community that embraces human beings of all ages. It is not a church just for children, for such a church would be very incomplete.

Missionaries and evangelists sometimes specialize in ministry to specific adult groups such as prostitutes, drug addicts, soldiers, prisoners and others. When prostitutes turn to the Lord, the goal is not a church made up exclusively of former prostitutes. The goal is rather the reintegration of former prostitutes into mainstream society. Many who were forced into prostitution by trickery or intense economic pressure earnestly desire to marry and live normal lives. Even those converted prostitutes who never marry desire to support themselves by way of legitimate work.

Not all children can be integrated into existing families. With some younger children, joining a family is a viable option. But the older these children are the more difficult it generally becomes to place them successfully in private homes. Even putting them with their blood relatives may spawn problems.

Assuming that some children will continue to live in a group setting, and some may continue to live on the street or under a bridge, the Christian community is nonetheless a place where children can receive some of the tender care that other children receive at home.

The existence of homeless children in the midst of a Christian community is a test that allows all Christians to prove the sincerity of their faith. "Do not forget to entertain angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:45).

The reception of needy children by the Christian community has two phases. The first is a witnessing phase to those children who are still strangers to the faith. Children who were mistreated by foster fathers or who ran away from their own drunken fathers, may have trouble grasping the biblical teaching of the Fatherhood of God.

A new, patient, Christian "foster" father may have to demonstrate what true fatherhood is all about. He's not a foster father in the sense that he adopts these children or even invites them to live with him. But he and his wife invite them into their home, they visit the children in their "home" wherever that may be, or they meet with them frequently at a neutral location.

The second phase of integrating children into the Christian community is the enfolding phase. Here those who have made a Christian profession are embraced as young brothers or sisters in Christ and shown the love that Christ commands. This process might be the more difficult because the young convert might still have rebellious ways even though he or she now has a new heart. Disappointments are almost bound to occur. Tough love and patience must be combined as the process of Christian nurture goes forward.

Sometimes the adults who seek to help needy children are themselves "children in Christ" because they are new to the faith. We encountered that situation in a city in Mozambique where my wife and I worked with five other volunteers for one month. The Mozambican supervisor, however, did not give up. She patiently worked both with the adults and with the children, encouraging all to grow in Christ and serve him.

I supplemented her efforts by teaching these volunteers the biblical concepts of sin, salvation and service.

When new Christians volunteer or are asked to work with difficult children for the sake of Christ, it can become for them a proving of their faith. Their faith can grow as day by day or week by week they prayerfully face the challenges at hand.

CONCLUSION

Those who embark on this adventure for God may initially encounter difficulties. Unforeseen problems may arise and middle class Christian adults may be reluctant to associate with what they consider the scum of society.

But in the past Christians have undertaken, and even now are undertaking, difficult tasks. Think of the difficulty of witnessing for Christ and building churches in the communist nations of Asia. Think also of the hardship and risk of planting churches in Muslim lands. Some of us try, anyway, out of obedience to Christ.

The children at risk in our world—more than 200 million of them—are a gigantic social group virtually unreached with the gospel. They will be among the peoples (LAOS in Greek) mentioned in Revelation 7:9 standing before God's throne with white robes, because some Christian missions of our generation have shown others the way.