

THE GREAT OMISSION
BY: Dan Brewster and Patrick McDonald

PREAMBLE: We believe that children and young people should be the single greatest priority for Christian work in the coming decade.

Christians are commanded to reveal the love of Christ to a hurting world, and no group of people are hurting more than children. Their needs are enormous, their numbers are exploding, and their age group could not be more strategic - spiritually, biologically and educationally. They are the future.

If we cannot demonstrate the love of God to children dying on our doorstep what kind of gospel do we proclaim? Our credibility as messengers is at stake. Love is selfless in nature; we need to help children regardless of what they might do for us. UNICEF states that, *"Investments in children are the best guarantee for achieving equitable and sustainable human development."*¹

The futures of individuals and of nations are shaped in childhood. Healthy physical, cognitive, educational, emotional and moral growth is either established or stunted in childhood. The same is true of spiritual development. Most people who make significant faith decisions do so before the age of 18.

Yet it remains true that less than fifteen percent of our budgets and personnel are directed to ministry amongst children and young people². This is a perilous oversight that needs urgent correction. Ministry to children is the Great Omission.

This booklet seeks to present the rationale for making children the single greatest mission priority for the coming decade. We must do this, neither as a new fad nor as a diversion from other worthwhile causes, but rather as the best way to achieve what we have already set out to do - calling the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world. Ministry to children and young people must not be secondary or peripheral, but rather primary and central.

Why?

The whole world

Children suffer: The first, overriding reason for focus on children is that, more than any other segment of humanity, children suffer, in a sense, paying for the sins of adults. Today more than 37 percent of our children live in absolute poverty - a total of 674 million children.³ Add to that children living in what is defined as 'severe deprivation', meaning:

*"lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increased morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments, social discrimination and exclusion".*⁴

¹ Poverty Reduction Begins with Children, UNICEF, New York, 2000, pp v

² Ibid.

³ Study: Gordon, D, Nandy, S., Pantazis, C., Pemberton, S. & Townsend, P. (2003) Child Poverty in the Developing World.

⁴ Ibid.

The staggering truth then is that more than a billion children or 56 percent are living in severe deprivation!⁵

To unpack this situation further, statistics tell us that:

- An estimated one million children enter the commercial sex trade every year⁶
- More than 91 million children under 5 are growing up with debilitating hunger⁷
- 134 million children have no access to any school whatsoever⁸
- 15 million children are orphaned as a result of AIDS⁹
- 246 million children work, with 171 million engaged in the worst forms of child labour¹⁰
- 265 million children have not been immunised against any disease¹¹
- Over one third of children have to live in dwellings with more than five people per room¹²
- Over half a billion children have no toilet facilities whatsoever¹³
- Almost half a billion children lack access to published information of any kind¹⁴
- 376 million children have more than a 15-minute walk to water and or are using unsafe water sources¹⁵

Half the harvest: A second reason for more serious attention to children and young people is the simple fact that there are so many of them. Almost one-third of the world's population - nearly 2 billion people - is under the age of fifteen¹⁶. An additional 26 percent¹⁷ are young people (aged 15-29). Experts estimate that one billion¹⁸ children will be born in the next decade, over 90 percent of them to mothers and fathers earning less than one US dollar per day¹⁹.

Children are the most needy and most numerous people on the planet. Never in history have we had so many children among us, and never have so many of them been at great social risk.

Children are strategic because "the clay" is still soft:

Thirdly, childhood is the most formative and therefore the most strategic stage of life. To shape an adult - reach a child. Children need our attention more urgently than any other group of people, for childhood is quickly over.

Any parent knows childhood years are formative. Anyone who has been a child knows it too! Our brains are 90 percent formed before we reach the age of three,²⁰ and 85 percent of our adult

5 Ibid.

6 UNICEF press release 18 January 2002: http://www.unicef.org/media/media_18845.html

7 Study: Gordon, D, Nandy, S., Pantazis, C., Pemberton, S. & Townsend, P. (2003) Child Poverty in the Developing World.

8 Ibid.

9 Children on the Brink 2004 Factsheet (UNAIDS, USAID, UNICEF) at http://www.unicef.org/media/files/COB_2004_fact_sheet.doc

10 UNICEF: http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_childlabour.html

11 Study: Gordon, D, Nandy, S., Pantazis, C., Pemberton, S. & Townsend, P. (2003) Child Poverty in the Developing World.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 U.S. Bureau of the Census

17 Population in July 2004: 6,383,523,865. (6.38 billion); Source: International Programs Center, U.S. Bureau of the Census;

Website: <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/popclockw>

18 Number of children age 0-14 (2005 prospect): 1,826,376,000 (1.83 billion). Source: Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, World Population Prospects: The 2002 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2001 Revision, <http://esa.un.org/unpp>]

19 Oxford Analytica, David Young's address to US Senate, October 2003.

20 Susan Greener, Celebrating Children p130.

personality is formed by the time we reach six years of age.²¹ (There is substantial truth in the Jesuits' refrain 'give me a child 'til he is seven and I'll show you the man.') The Bible simply states, "train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it".²²

To change a nation, start with children. Hitler, Stalin, the Spartans and the Mongols knew it and built their armies using children.

On the positive side, we see that poverty reduction begins with children.²³ Poverty reduction through focus on children is an achievable goal. UNICEF reports that, "the worst manifestations of poverty can be eradicated in less than a generation."²⁴

Interventions during childhood can prevent damage that would be virtually impossible to repair later in life. Significant advances can be achieved in physical, intellectual, and emotional health, in socio-economic well-being, and in all aspects of development. Working with children is an invaluable opportunity to help them, their families, communities, and their nations improve their futures.

It is the same with spiritual interventions. The vast majority of faith commitments are made between the ages of 4-14. In fact, US data suggests that up to 85 percent of Christians make their commitment to Christ in that 10-year age span²⁵. There is reason to believe that the statistics for non-Western nations and cultures are the same. Research in the UK & US shows that people past the age of 18 only have a 6 percent²⁶ chance of making a Christian faith commitment. Yet today, only 5 percent²⁷ of British children hear the gospel (down from 57 percent in a 1900). That leaves 95 percent of Britons with a 6 percent change of making that sort of commitment.

Recently, important confirmation of this limited window of opportunity for faith decisions, at least in the USA, has come from the well-known church researcher, George Barna. In a new book, Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions,²⁸ Barna presents results of extensive research related to youth and faith in the US.

Barna urges us to *"consider the facts: Absorption of biblical information and principles typically peaks during the preteen years. . . . Habits related to the practice of one's faith develop when one is young and change surprisingly little over time."*²⁹

Children are also strategic for the church and her mission. Reaching children helps the church be the church.

Children are strategic to grow the church: In Latin America the saying goes 'quien los niños ama, nos ama', or, 'we love whoever loves our children'. Parents and local authorities almost always welcome churches that work with children in compassionate ways. Parents troubled over the fate

²¹ Paul Mier, Psychiatrist

²² Proverbs 6:22

²³ Unicef report 'Poverty reduction begins with children' New York, 2000

²⁴ Unicef, Poverty Reduction Begins with Children, New York, 2000, p1

²⁵ Barna, George. Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions. Ventura California. Regal. 2003

²⁶ Barna, George. Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions. Ventura California. Regal. 2003

²⁷ Peter Brierley, Christian Research Asc., Quadrant May '04

²⁸ Barna, George. Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions. Ventura California. Regal. 2003

²⁹ Ibid. p. 41.

of their child will respect whoever seeks to help them. The key word here is love: sincere love that demands nothing fosters relationships of integrity.

Missionaries Stuart and Georgina Christie spent 15 years setting up a church of 100 adults in Brazil. They moved to the favelas of Sao Paulo and soon detected the huge need for day care centres. They shifted their focus to addressing this need, and in 3 years they had established 15 day care centres supporting 1000 children. They also had 15 congregations involving more than 1000 adults.

Where genuine love is expressed, church growth tends naturally to follow. Micah Network's declaration of integral mission explains that, "our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ."³⁰ While social action cannot be used as a means to an evangelistic end, it will impact church growth.

Children are strategic to bring mission closer to home: Children can move missions from a picture of a foreign land in the church hall to our own homes and backyards. In the UK, for example, 7000³¹ children await foster care placements, wondering if anyone values them enough to look after them (at the government's expense). Needy children are found in all nations. Caring for them is a wonderful opportunity to involve the whole family and develop skills that are easily transferable overseas.

Children are strategic to motivate local congregations for holistic ministry: Since 1974 the church has been committed to taking the 'whole gospel' to the 'whole world' and there is little question that holism today provides the church with a key challenge. If we fail to walk the talk why bother walking at all? Yet many Christians struggle enormously with where to begin. Begin with children!

Christianity is a highly decentralised movement with most of its energy and initiative resident in small congregations. Small congregations that struggle to engage with transformation and socio economic reconstruction or policymaking. But congregations CAN engage with children dying on their doorsteps. It is 'easy', obvious, and under our noses. It is a moral responsibility that's rewarding and fun. There is surely no easier entry into a holistic community ministry.

Children are strategic in fostering unity: Christians need to demonstrate practical and visible unity across the spectrum of our faith. Helping children is an extensive 24/7 undertaking and few groups can go it alone. We need each other to build a comprehensive and credible response to the needs of our communities.

To deal with the root causes of risk, we must not just feed the child but also ask why the child is hungry. A focus on children is a strategy that will engage the church in justice issues and force it to speak out prophetically. If we speak out together, our voice is heard.

Children are strategic to engage the business segment of our community: Businesses can start for-profit ventures that can fund holistic action. The church was never meant to be a club, but a community with a purpose. If we are to greatly expand our involvement in social action, then it

³⁰ <http://www.micahnetwork.org>

³¹ UK Home Office report, 2003

will cost us. Talk may be cheap, but love is expensive. Whilst working together can optimise our effectiveness and reduce the cost, and whilst our fundraising could be improved and our generosity greater, this still won't be enough to make ends meet. We need to engage our income generators - our business people - to generate funds for good causes. Paying the bill should be an opportunity for lasting involvement by the business community.

The whole church

The Church is getting younger: Most of the world's children (88 percent³² of under 18s) live where the church is growing fastest - the countries of the 'south'. In 1900 80 percent³³ of Christians lived in the 'developed' world, yet today 65 percent³⁴ of Christians live in the 'less developed' world. By the year 2040 80 percent³⁵ of all Christians will live in 'two thirds world' nations - an exact reversal in 140 years.

Many churches in the 'south' are largely comprised of children and young people. In spite of this, ministry to children is often overlooked, under resourced or not happening at all. *"This is tragic,"* comments Patrick Johnstone. *"Our clear experience from places like South Korea,"* he says, *'is that if children's work is neglected you lose the next generation. In South Korea and parts of Latin America these children grow up estranged from the church and disillusioned. Growth turns into decline. Ignore children and sacrifice the future.'*³⁶

The important 'TweenAger' study conducted by Peter Brierley³⁷ in the UK found that most children leave church simply because its too boring. Boredom in church between the ages of 7 and 10 makes them leave by the time they are 13, very often never to return. A thousand such children leave the British church each week and have done for the past 15 years! A lot of resources are later invested in youth ministry, trying to recoup what should never have been lost.

Matt Summerfield, co-director of the research states: *"The Tweenagers research revealed a generation of young teens who are disillusioned with society and disconnected with God. If we are to see the tide change then we must deliberately invest love and attention in their childhood. Failure to do so will not only result in the loss of our children - but potentially our children's children. Serious times call for significant and radical change. They deserve nothing less..."*³⁸

Children are often overlooked in our strategy planning: In spite of the strategic nature of children, they are often overlooked in our planning. They are overlooked in our literature, and there tends to be a stereotyping of child and youth ministries. Many leaders subconsciously look down their noses at agencies that work with children. This has not always been the case, however. At times in the past, for instance, there has been an emphasis on ministry to children through Christian schools.

³² [Unicef (Demographics Children). Website: <http://www.unicef.org>; No. of children in the world in 2002 under 18: 2,179,150; No. of children in developing countries under 18: 1,916,874]

³³ Patrick Johnstone, Operation World, 1993

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Patrick Johnstone, August 2004

³⁷ Reaching and Keeping Tweenagers, Christian Research Association, 2002

³⁸ Matt Summerfield, August 2004

An astonishing number of Asian and African political leaders came out of the Christian school systems set up during the early 1900s. Kenneth Scott Latourette noted³⁹ that the leader "who did most to shape the ideals of revolutionary China between 1911 and the late 1940's was Sun Yat-Sen, an avowed Christian who owed most of his formal education to Christian schools."⁴⁰ Other examples could be cited.

It is possible that the relief and development focus of Christians may have absorbed some of the energies formerly devoted to ministry through schools. Relief and development efforts are not, however, normally focused on children and youth. Our question for mission executives is, *"With what have we replaced the emphasis on children and youth in schools? How are we growing the next generation of leadership?"*

The despots of yesterday (and tomorrow) were all children at some stage and were all influenced by their surroundings. George Barna asks, *"Can we afford to let the spiritual and moral dimension of our future leaders be determined by default?"*⁴¹ Today's decision makers need to put in place strategies that intentionally develop the leaders of tomorrow.

Children are a significant part of the Church today: Children are not just adults in the making but full human beings. They are more than just recipients of our care. They are also valuable co-workers worthy of respect and attention. The biblical account is full of children serving God in remarkable ways; the boy Solomon, Naaman's slave girl, David, Jeremiah, Moses and young Jesus at the temple. Jesus called a *'little child to stand among them'* and said, *"unless you become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"*⁴². Jesus - the child advocate of child advocates - was clear about the value of children in the kingdom: *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these"*⁴³. Children have huge capacity to be channels as well as recipients of God's power. If we do not look at what is happening with children, we may miss what God is doing.

The whole gospel

Love in action, not just words: There is a direct correlation between our godliness and the well being of our children. The way a nation or people care for their children is a barometer for the well being of their whole society. When people abide by biblical principles, children fare well.

Biblical reflection on God's creator design of 'the helpless babe' is overdue. The human child that for years is entirely dependent upon caring adults draws a sinful world towards godliness, even where no knowledge of God exists. People love their children and their protection and nurture drives society towards a biblical norm of living. It is as though God knew a fallen world needed the tenderness and exuberant love of doting parents to stay sane.

The converse is also true. Where children suffer and are abused, godly mandates are systematically broken and ignored. To be very blunt, when Christians fail to reach out to hurting children, either by omission or commission, their Christian faith must be suspect. The epistle of

³⁹ Latourette, K. Scott. A History of Christianity. Vol II, Reformation to the Present (A.D. 1500-A.D. 1975. Harper Collins. San Francisco. 1975. p. 1353.

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 1317, 1318.

⁴¹ George Barna, 'The 4 / 14 Window' Forum, Chicago

⁴² Matthew 18:1-4

⁴³ Matthew 19:14

James is not subtle: *"faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead"⁴⁴*, and, *"I will show you my faith by what I do."⁴⁵* Where the church fails to respond to the needs of children *'fainting from hunger at the head of every street'⁴⁶* we fail the commands of Jesus.

This is not merely a matter of compassion, but of our integrity. How can we claim to follow *'the father of the fatherless'⁴⁷*, *'the defender of the weak'⁴⁸* and not get involved? If we cannot demonstrate the love of God to children dying on our doorstep, what can we do?

UNICEF comments that, *"The ultimate criterion for gauging the integrity of society...is the way it treats children, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable ones"⁴⁹* The same could be said of the church.

As Christians seek to demonstrate the love of Christ to a sceptical, cynical world, there is no better focus to have than children.

For God, children are a priority: *"See that you do not look down on one of these little ones,"⁵⁰* Jesus warned, for *"Their angels in heaven always see the face of my father"⁵¹*. Psalm 65:8 and Job 29 describe God as the *'father of the fatherless'*. James claims that *"true religion is to look after orphans"⁵²*.

The Oxford Statement on Children at Risk⁵³ asserts God's passionate concern for children:

"Scripture clearly shows that God is outraged about what is happening to children. Over and over again God's warning throughout the Bible is "Don't touch my precious children!" (Ex 22:22-24; Psalm 68:5, Ezekiel 16:4-14, Deuteronomy 24:17 etc.) He indicates terrible consequences for anyone harming his children: "...it would be better that a millstone be hung around his neck and [he] be drowned in the depths of the sea" (Mt.18:6).

Nowhere do we learn more of the loving and jealous character of God than in His protection and defence of children. (Deuteronomy 24:17, 27:19). Indeed, God entrusting His own son to humankind as a vulnerable child, requiring that Son to be nurtured by a frail but able family and community, symbolically provides a model of trust and responsibility which sets an example for His interaction with all humanity, and which shouts to us about the significance of children.

As Christians then, we gladly acknowledge that our profound concern for children at risk flows from God himself and our commitment to Jesus Christ. Most fundamentally, we affirm that children, born and unborn, along with the rest of humanity, are created in the image of God and therefore have intrinsic worth. (Gen 1:27, Psalm 139:13-14) Any actions that demean, devalue or otherwise diminish children are sinful. Unfortunately, we live in a world where an attitude of cynicism towards the dignity of human life has resulted in a tragic loss of respect for humankind.

⁴⁴ James 2:17

⁴⁵ James 2:18b

⁴⁶ Lamentations 2:19b

⁴⁷ Psalm 68:5

⁴⁸ Psalm 82:3

⁴⁹ Poverty Reduction Begins with Children, UNICEF, New York, 2000, pp 1

⁵⁰ Matthew 18:10a

⁵¹ Matthew 18:10b

⁵² James 1:27

⁵³ Oxford Statement for Children at Risk, 1997, produced by Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and Viva Network

Increasingly, children are the undeserving victims of human and demonic forces. The criminal waste of children's lives is an indictment upon all societies and cries out to God for vengeance."

In scripture those who angered Jesus were not just the Pharisees and the vendors in the temple, but also the disciples. On one occasion Jesus became 'indignant' - when they considered children too unimportant to warrant his attention.⁵⁴

Might he also be indignant with our attitudes as well?

The Christian response is significant but not sufficient: While stressing the need for greater involvement of the church and missions on behalf of children, we acknowledge that the overall Christian response to the needs of children is not insignificant.

Down through the ages and right across the world Christians have been on the forefront of responding to the needs of children. We stand today on the shoulders of giants: Francis of Assisi, St Nicolas, the monastic hospitals and schools, the Victorian philanthropic explosion, William Wilberforce, Lord Shaftesbury, Amy Carmichael, William Booth and many, many others who have left a legacy to be proud of.

Today Viva Network estimates the presence of more than 50,000 children's projects reaching over 100 million children. Impressive yet not nearly what it could and should be.

Investing our talents in children: The church connects with more children than perhaps any other institution on the face of the planet. This is a huge opportunity to influence them for good. As Barna puts it:

"If you want to have a lasting influence upon the world you must invest in people's lives; and if you want to maximise your investment, then you must invest in those lives while they are young"⁵⁵

UNICEF states that, *"Investing in children is morally the right thing to do. It is also a sound economic investment, with high rates of return."⁵⁶*

It's not only the UN that talks 'investment' language. The parable of the talents describes God as a shrewd investor seeking a high return on his input⁵⁷. There is no question that the greatest return is achieved by investing in children.

The church is rich in 'talents'. There is no other worldwide movement with the local geographic presence of the church and the clear scriptural mandate to reach out to the poor and needy. No other global institution has the expertise in holistic care for children plus the experience and historical track record in implementation. At the same time, there is no other global institution with such a need to match its principles with action.

A generation is waiting, wondering if we are for real or if we only talk and sing about love. Who will show these children that life is worth living, that it is full of adventure, beauty and wonder? Who will show them hope and purpose?

⁵⁴ Mark 10:14

⁵⁵ George Barna: *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, Ventura California, Regal Books, 2003, pp 42

⁵⁶ UNICEF, 2004: http://www.unicef.org/why/why_poverty.html

⁵⁷ Matthew 25:14-30

How will we invest?

Brothers, what shall we do? (Acts 2:37): This is the defining challenge for the church in the next decade. This is make or break. The opportunity is there, the doors are wide open - but it's up to each of us to respond, to grasp those opportunities, walk through those doors and make it happen.

The challenge of children changes everything. It FORCES us to rework our priorities, revisit our paradigms and programmes. Let's demonstrate God's love and correct the great omission in the great commission.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

- How can you correct the 'great omission' in your sphere of influence?
- What's going on with unchurched kids in your neighbourhood?
- Are you listening to children? Are they stakeholders with you in your work?
- What's happening to children in the church? How are they involved in reaching out to hurting children that hurt?
- What are your strategies for *growing* the Christian leaders you need for the next generation?
- What are we doing to ensure that every church has significant programmes to address the needs of children?
- How are your seminaries equipping and challenging students with the potential of child ministries?
- How should we respond to the challenge to "pour out your heart like water . . . [and] lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint from hunger at the head of every street?" (Lam 2:19)
- Are children in your budgets? Are children in your strategies? Are children in your prayer life?



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J. Patrick C. McDonald



Patrick McDonald is a leading global figure within Christian work amongst children at risk. He is a well known writer and speaker on the issue, the founding director of Viva Network and the Senior Associate for Children at Risk for the Lausanne Movement. Having dabbled in freelance journalism and photography and worked during his youth as a university ornithologist (Copenhagen), he began his career in a street children's project in Bolivia. This led to the conviction that the Christian movement had a real role to play in policy creation and service delivery and yet needed a vehicle able to ensure basic coordination and collaboration around common goals of standards and quality. Viva Network was developed in response to that need and today operates in 43 countries. It connects more than 4,000 organisations helping 157,000 children. Patrick worships at St Aldates Church, Oxford and is married to Emily. They have three sons, Isaac, Lucas and Benjamin.

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