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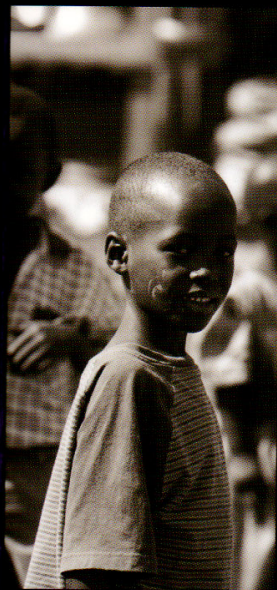
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UNDERSTANDING

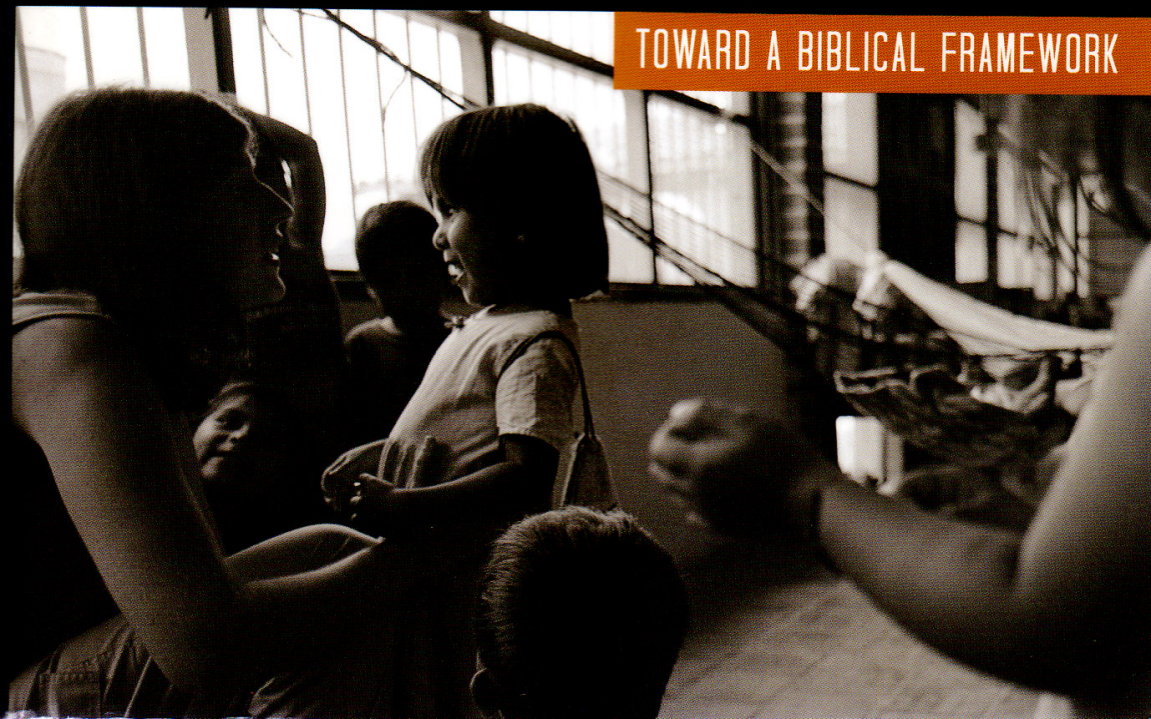
GOD'S

HEART

for Children



TOWARD A BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK



CARING IN SOCIETY

BY GLENN MILES

VIVA NETWORK

“Society . . .”

Firstly, who do we mean by “society”?

The Family

The smallest unit of society is the family, so the unit with the most “responsibility” is the family. But families in every society are breaking down. Many families are far more complicated than the simple two-parent/two-child nuclear family of northern countries, or even the wider extended family of the South all living together in one household. Even the most complicated family structure can still be a functioning family, from grandparent-headed households to child-headed households, and they must feel accepted and loved, so that they themselves can effectively function and then reach out to others.¹

We have sometimes exported a theology from the West to children’s ministries in developing countries where physical, emotional, and spiritual care are compartmentalized. Many children in all of our societies are at risk and not only of spiritual neglect. “Well-being” can mean physical, emotional, and socio-economic wholeness, as well as spiritual wholeness.²

Church Sunday schools for children are often seen as being responsible for children’s spiritual education and nurturing, but it is the primary caregivers’ responsibility to spiritually nurture children and bring them to the Lord. We must be careful not to disempower Christian parents and caregivers by taking over this important role. Rather, we must provide them with the resources they need. In the same way, we need to model empowerment in our organizations so that parents and other caregivers in turn do not disempower their own children as they grow into adulthood.

This also means that whilst we may need to fill the gap as advocates for children, it is the caregivers who must be the primary advocates for their own children, and we must facilitate them in this role.

1. For more on this topic, see the third affirmation in this volume.

2. See also the article by Meredith Long in this volume.

Who are Children's Caregivers in Society?

Outside of the family, who are children's caregivers in society? The community in which the child lives obviously plays an important role, but the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child reminds us that governments also have responsibilities, especially where there is negligence and abuse. What about the role of the United Nations' bodies, NGOs, and the church itself? Following are a few comments about the way that we sometimes look at and interface with those outside of the church.

Sometimes we can take on the characteristics of different kinds of children.

Like a child who doesn't want to play with others, we sometimes forget that God uses other organizations. Though many Christians have impacted child rights issues globally, God has also used people of no faith and of other faiths. Sometimes I wonder if it is because the church itself has not responded when it should have done so. Let's not turn our backs on opportunities where we can speak up on behalf of the vulnerable.³

Like an insecure child, we sometimes feel that we are too small. One very experienced Christian orphanage I visited said they only had the energy to do what they were doing and that was enough. In fact, I think they were actually acting as a role model for others and *were* being salt and light in the wider community. However, I was saddened that their lack of self-esteem and vision seemed to be limiting what more they could have been doing simply because they were not looking beyond their boundaries.

Like a child who is shy, we sometimes feel intimidated by the United Nations officials and ambassadors and the "successful" organizations that seem so articulate. We must remember, however, that God has put each of us into the positions we are in. As faith-based organizations who are known for our long-term commitment to children and who therefore understand their context well,⁴ we can be welcomed for what we offer in terms of understanding and willingness to go and be in places others may be reluctant to go. As Dr. Jayakaran says, the church must "mobilize [its members] to advocate for access on behalf of the poor, when society fails."⁵

Like a child who is a "show off," we sometimes give the impression that we are the only ones actually doing something, and so waste many opportunities

3. See the article by Ravi Jayakaran in this volume.

4. This is based on a statement made by M. Kul C. Gautam, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) at the Cutting Edge IV Conference, October 15, 2002. For more information, see www.viva.org.

5. See the article by Ravi Jayakaran in this volume; see also www.viva.org/en/articles/gods_heart/facilitation_guidelines.pdf.

and much emotional energy. The passage in Mark 9:49–50 says, “have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other” (NIV). We don’t have to agree with everything our brother says or does, but we must seek peace.

We are sometimes like a self-absorbed child, so heavily influenced by our own culture that we absorb the way our society and culture treat children. For example, we can overemphasize what the Bible says about children’s responsibilities towards adults and underemphasize what the Bible says about adults’ responsibilities towards children. In contrast, we need to take time to look for a biblical model and seek to apply it in our response as well as the church’s response.

“... Has a God-Given Responsibility ...”

Responsibility

Responsibility is a big word. As parents and caregivers, we have a responsibility to bring up our children according to biblical instruction. In our ministries, we have a responsibility to bring justice and restoration to children living in risky environments. However, there may be several right choices. We should never put ourselves in a position where we feel paralyzed because we are afraid to make a choice or to take the next step. Perhaps, if we saw our role as being a tiny part of the body of Christ, we would feel less daunted. If we all shine our bit of light and add our tiny bit of flavor to the world, think what we could do together as the body of Christ!

Perhaps, if we saw our role as being a tiny part of the body of Christ, we would feel less daunted.

Of course, there is a codicil here for those of us who tend to overwork. Perhaps the hardest lesson for us is learning what *not* to do.

Respecting Children’s Opinions and Ability to Participate

Society, parents, and caregivers are responsible for the well-being of children, but as the child’s age increases, so does their responsibility. Parents cannot completely relinquish responsibility for their children, but they must gradually let children make their own decisions from an early age, well before they leave home.

Similarly, in children’s ministry, we are increasingly aware that children need to be involved in decisions that concern them. We are starting to consider how we can facilitate active participation and partnership with children and are often humbled by their insightful understandings.

Protection versus Participation

Protection of children continues to be of great importance, especially where children cannot speak up for themselves. Where possible, we can encourage and empower children and their communities. In Cambodia, Tearfund UK has empowered children to speak up for themselves through our research conducted on children's own perceptions of violence and abuse.⁶

Also in Cambodia, Tearfund helped bring together a coalition of Christian agencies to develop a karaoke video about protecting children from violence as a 12-week training program for children which can be used by schools, communities, and NGOs. Children were actively involved in developing the materials. There were insights that would not have been possible had only adults sat around discussing what children needed to know! It makes sense, doesn't it? But how often do we do it?

Some of us may feel as if protection and participation cannot be done at the same time. But children often understand their context very well and are both willing and able to contribute to policy and program development, and to share in discussions about how they can be protected from harm.⁷

“. . . For the Well-Being of Children and Families.”

What exactly do we mean by the *well-being* of children and families? As Dr. Jayakaran has said, “the evidence is that spiritual well-being is linked to practical action,”⁸ and perhaps even the resilience we hope they inherit in the faith.

Three current trends of well-being focus on reducing poverty, addressing vulnerability, and promoting personal fulfillment and happiness.

Poverty Reduction

Is poverty reduction (this decade's most favored approach) *the* answer? Tearfund UK and many others have put much effort into collaborating on the “Drop the Debt” campaign to lobby governments with gratifying results.⁹ We know that poverty in itself is as a result (and a cause) of terrible injustices, but we must be careful not to see the relief of poverty as the *one and only answer*. Even in the wealthiest nations of the world, children are being brutalized and, sadly,

6. Glenn Miles and Sun Varin, “Stop Violence Against Us!” www.kone-kmeng.org (accessed August 25, 2006).

7. See the seventh affirmation of this volume.

8. See the article by Ravi Jayakaran in this volume.

9. See www.tearfund.org/News/Press+release+archive/April+2004/Tearfund+urges+MPs+to+read+the+Bible+and+drop+the+debt.htm.

sometimes in the name of Christ, such as some of the “Christian” juvenile “boot camps” in America where excessive brutality has been reported.¹⁰ Reduction of poverty alone will not stop children from being violated.

Ascertaining Vulnerability

Ascertaining and addressing vulnerability of children and/or their communities may also be an important tool, but we must be careful not to spend all our energies in assessing the problems. In presenting our research on violence against children in Cambodia to key stakeholders at the UN Study on Children and Violence regional forum in Bangkok in June 2005,¹¹ we realized that the responses from the Cambodian Government about our results revealed more about their concern for feeling misrepresented than the fact that many children were being abused and violated. In any case, in policy terms, does it matter whether 20 or 50 percent of children are being abused in a certain way? Whilst there is some validity in demonstrating prevalence through statistics, something needs to be done immediately to address the injustices taking place against children every day.

Reduction of poverty alone will not stop children from being violated.

Personal Fulfillment

It is unlikely that those of you in the field will get swept along with the armchair theorists who feel that personal fulfillment and happiness is the ultimate goal for children. You know only too well that many children have to experience terrible things that no one should have to experience. But it is useful for us to sometimes take a step backwards and look at our goals for the children, families, and societies that we serve. How are our ministries encouraging society’s God-given responsibility for the well-being of children and their families?

Conclusion

The church must support society, starting with the family, to advocate for children. But are we doing enough to ensure that their spiritual needs are also being met (without “spiritual abuse” of children)?¹² Are those of us who are primarily

10. See www.nospank.net/boot.htm.

11. See www.violencestudy.org/.

12. “Spiritual abuse occurs when a spiritual leader, or someone in a position of spiritual power or authority (whether organization, institution, church, or family) misuses their power or authority, and the trust placed in them, with the intention of controlling, coercing, manipulating, or dominating a child. Spiritual abuse is always about the misuse of power within a framework of spiritual belief or

concerned with children's spiritual needs taking into consideration the physical, emotional, and socio-cultural needs of children? Are we adequately working together to achieve this goal? What are the things that block us from achieving this goal? Pride? Low self-esteem? Unrealistic goals? Insufficient vision? Cultural blindness?

In truth, the poor will always be with us (John 12:8), and many children will continue to be poor and/or vulnerable until Jesus returns. In the meantime, God has given us the privilege of working with him and each other to bring justice and holistic ministry to many children.

practice, in order to meet the needs of the abuser (or enhance his or her position) at the expense of the needs of the child. Spiritual abuse results in spiritual harm to a child and can be linked to other abuse, such as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse." Spiritual Abuse Working Group, "Protecting Children from Spiritual Abuse," (Cirencester, UK: Cutting Edge V Conference, September 29–30, 2005).