

Evangelical church active in reaching Children at Risk

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The evangelical church as a whole provides more care for children-at-risk than any other organization including the United Nations according to the president of a worldwide consortium of Christian agencies addressing the problem.

“We know that there are between 20 and 25,000 evangelical program sites across the world reaching about two million children in residential care,” reports Patrick McDonald, president of the British-based Viva Network. “There are another 20 million plus children in partial care, in slum programs, inoculation projects, after school care and so forth.”

A newly developing street children’s ministry in Quito, Ecuador is typical of those who are helping. In the city’s sprawling Carolina Park street children live and sleep, some of them as young as two years old.

“There are three groups of children living in the park,” says Vinicio Gordon, an Ecuadorian who works with the children through his church, Sendero de la Cruz. “There are those who are between two and four years old, some of them living with their mothers. These children protect each other and especially try to help the youngest ones. The second group is those who are between five and ten, working together to wash windows or entertain people as fire-eaters. The third group, between ages 12 and 18, guard cars, shine shoes and sell gum and candy.”

Gordon says he cannot estimate how many children are living in the park, but he says that between 120 and 150 come to his church’s Monday night program on the parking lot of a nearby bank where they sing, tell Bible stories and feed the children a complete meal. His church serves another 100 or more children who live and work near the capital’s international airport and yet another group high on the mountainside near a shopping center.

In Ecuador, which has 3.7 million children, nearly 900,000 are believed to be working - about half in the capital, where they shine shoes and sell newspapers for pocket change. In Costa Rica, 150,000 children work in the countryside.

Gordon’s church just recently began their program by providing a meal one or two days a week. But, they have plans that involve a permanent center to get the kids off of the streets, something which most children’s workers agree is crucial. “If you don’t have some place to channel them, you lose them back to the streets,” says missionary Sue Leak who is building a shelter for homeless girls outside of Morelia, Mexico. “You lose them to drugs and prostitution and the addiction of relationships that aren’t good for them,” she says.

While some street children have been abandoned or are children of prostitute, others just work so that they and their family can survive. Carlos is 14, his brother Diego is 8. The two boys work the streets outside fashionable shopping centers that ring Carolina Park in

Quito. “We get here about 10 or 11 each morning,” Carlos explains as he eats a meal provided by the Sendero de la Cruz church. “We beg all day and then get home around 12:30 or 1:00 a.m.” Without the income they generate by begging, their family would not be able to eat or stay in their meager house.

Violence is at the root of many children seeking shelter in the streets. “Six million children and adolescents are subjected to physical violence each year in Latin America,” says Alfredo Mora, the Latin American director of Viva Network “In addition, 80,000 children worldwide die each year from various forms of violence in their own homes,” he said.

In response to this violence, Mora said that many families kick their children out of the house, or the children themselves choose to leave, accepting the difficult life on the streets as better than that in their home.

At the center of street children’s struggle is a lack of trust says missionary Thomas Smoak who works at a Christian children’s center in Sao Paulo, Brazil. “In every case, the trust relationship between the child and parents has been broken,” he says. “Street kids need a trusting, committed relationship to get their lives back together.” Thomas says that most broken kids won’t listen to the Gospel until they learn that they can trust their foster parent or Christian social worker.

The family is the key to getting a child permanently off of the street Smoak says. “The lack of a father figure is usually the main reason a child is working or living on the streets. Either the father is absent, in prison, or he is addicted to drugs or alcohol and turns violent.” Smoak adds that his center not only works with the children but with their family to overcome the problems that caused the child to leave home. “A Christian family is the key to success,” he reflects. “When a street child and his family accept the Lord, the child stays off the streets. It’s that simple.”

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