

A new heart for our society

Since its founding days, Petra College has been committed to children's ministry in South Africa, because we believe that a great part of the answer to the current crisis of crime, violence, corruption, moral breakdown, etc. in which the country is finding itself, lies in bringing the Word of God to children from an early age on. Fundamental to the building blocks of a healthy society are the following:

- ❑ Childhood is the most impressionable phase of a person's life;
- ❑ Children under the age of 15 form 34% of South Africa's population;
- ❑ Ministry to children is a command from God;
- ❑ It guarantees strong leadership for the future.

Research has proven that all facets of moral and spiritual development - whether or not it relates to our concept of the world, our faith or our behaviour - start by the tender age of 2. After that the process accelerates, and by the age of 9 the spiritual foundation of a child's life has been laid and will undergo very little change from this age onwards.¹

Children under the age of 15 form approximately 34% of South Africa's population and as much as 50% of the population of some African countries. With such a huge proportion of the population in its most impressionable stage of development, it is vitally important that we take advantage of the opportunity and bring the Word to children in an effective and systematic way.

The main reason for seeing children's ministry as a priority is because it is a command from God. In both the Old and New Testament it is emphatically stated that children are part of God's strategy. Deut. 6:6-9 says: "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. *Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.*" Children need continuous guidance on God's Word.

Ps. 78:3-8 emphasises the fact that the next generation should be told about the "praiseworthy deeds of the Lord." "...which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. *Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds, but would keep his commands. They would not be like their forefathers - a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him.*"

So ministry to children is of strategic importance to the establishment and contin-



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uation of the Christian faith and the kind of lifestyle that God wants for our society.

Dr. George Barna, researcher and author of several books, writes in his book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, that we are living in a spiritual warfare situation and that children, because they are so impressionable, are the focal point of Satan. This war cannot be won by trying to change the evil of our society through law - the roots of the problem have to be addressed: people's estrangement from God. "If we effectively teach God's principles and expectations to our youngsters and instill within them a *thirst for righteousness and a passion for God, the need to wage a culture war will be eliminated by reshaping the culture from within. The cumulative effect of their character and beliefs will redefine the contours of our culture.*"² If we, as the Body of Christ, really want to make an impact in order to have people's values and norms formed by Biblical principles, we should start with children at as young an age as possible.

How much is budgeted for children's ministry?

The only investment that has eternal value is in lives that are changed forever by a living and deep relationship with God. A group of church leaders from South Africa and other African countries recently were asked what percentage of the budgets of their congregations was set aside for children's ministry, and most of them had to confess that it was only a very small percentage. Some even said that there were no funds available for children's ministry. Barna argues that this is where the root of uncon-

cerned church members lies: "...because most adults received 'ministry leftovers' (limited funding, minimal instructional resources and teaching that was ill-focused) when they were young, they became exactly what we made them: well-intentioned, inadequately nurtured, minimally equipped secular people who dabble in religious thought and activity. Nearly half of the adults who attended church regularly as children and now bring their own offsprings to a church do not even know Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, even after more than a quarter century of consistent church exposure and involvement!"³

Future leadership

Dr. Dan Brewster of Compassion International asks the following question in an article, 'Child Ministry and Mission Strategy': 'What are our strategies for growing the leadership needed to lead the churches in 2025?'⁴ The forming of leadership is not a process that starts with adults, but is nurtured from a child's early years on. Therefore, future leadership within the Body of Christ is a present-day responsibility of both parents and the church.

Petra College's former students say that many of the children with whom they have worked over the years are now acting as strong leaders in their communities or churches.

Practical guidelines

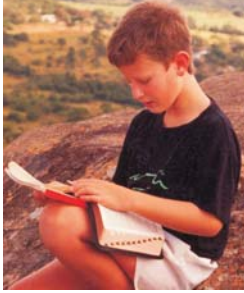
George Barna gives several guidelines for parents to follow should they wish to help their children on the road to spiritual development and

deepening:

Role-modelling: Research has shown that the most effective model is the one that parents can use to influence their children. In short: Live the values that you teach your children; be consistent with what you say and what you do! In the process you also will grow spiritually.

Interactive teaching: Involve your children during Bible study by asking them questions that get them thinking more deeply about concepts, values or situations. By doing this, they form their own views and see lessons that can be learned, not from somebody else's wisdom, but as their own insights.

Reading: Encourage children to read spiritual books themselves - thousands of new Christian books, including for children and young people, are published each year.



Creative applications: Encourage

your children to write down the spiritual lessons they learn. This helps them to think more profoundly about what God is busy doing in their lives, and also helps to prevent a superficial religious life. Another possibility is to ask children to write down their feelings, impressions, insights or reactions to a specific section of the Bible, and then discuss them as a family. Talk about the practical implementation of these Biblical truths.

Learning through experience: One of the most effective ways for both children and adults to learn is through experience. Create opportunities where children can experience Biblical truths in real life. Take them on an outdoor expedition and show them the magnitude of God's creation and how they can experience God, or use a real-life situation, such as when the child experiences fear or loss (like the death of a parent) and let them talk about their feelings, thoughts and how they experience God in that specific situation.



Discipline: The Bible makes it very clear that discipline is an expression of love (Prov. 1:7; 6:23; Eph. 6:4; Heb. 12:8-11). Set clear boundaries and expectations for your children; help them to cultivate good habits; use practical situations to reprimand them with love and remind them of what is right and what is wrong.

Combining methods: Research has shown that the impact on children is far more profound when one combines above-mentioned methods. Children get used to the same method(s) that you use and the impact diminishes.

1. George Barna, "Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions", Regal Books from Gospel Light, Venture, California, USA, 2003, p. 47
2. Ibid, p. 51
3. Ibid, p. 49
4. Dan Brewster, "The 4/14 Window: Child Ministries and Mission Strategy", Transformation, April 1997, p. 21.-

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Jim Burns
President, YouthBuilders*

"It is clear that the Lord is raising up a generation equipped with more knowledge, mobility, finances and communication than the world has ever seen. This generation occupies a unique place in the history to be used by the Lord in amazing ways for His glory. The Church will miss this fantastic opportunity if we do not begin strategic ministry to children now."

Mark Matlock
WisdomWorks Ministries*

"Once the world-view of children has been shaped and embraced, they unconsciously strive to make choices that are consistent with their perspective."

George Barna
Barna Research Group*

Taken from "Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions" by George Barna

