

THE “4/14 WINDOW” Child Ministries and Mission Strategies*

Dr. Dan Brewster

“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them,
for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”
(Jesus. Mark 10:14)

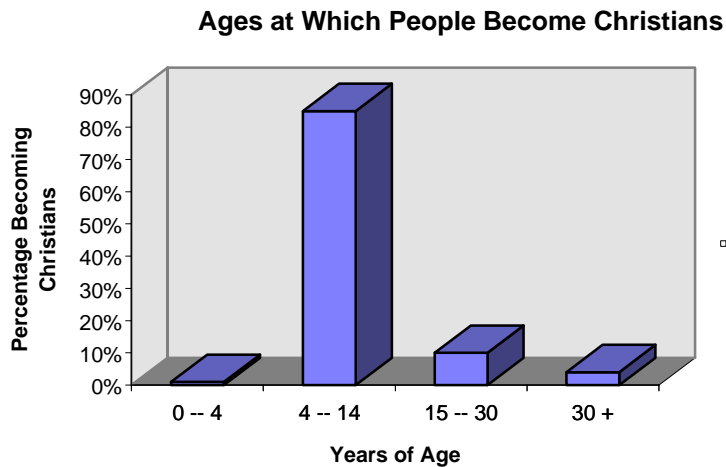
There are no more significant missiological concepts from the last half of the 20th century than the new understandings about God’s concern for the peoples of the world, and the realization that most of the peoples of the world who have not heard the Gospel live in the regions now designated as the “10/40 Window.” The words *nations*, *tribes*, *peoples*, and *languages* occur more than 400 times in the Scriptures. It is clear that God is a missionary God. Moreover, missiological reflections on the 10/40 Window provoked a refocusing of mission efforts, and a profound shift in the placement of missionaries, as well as in the strategies for mission for virtually every mission agency and mission minded church in the world. These two principles have enabled mission leaders to focus evangelism efforts in ways never before possible.

There is another “window within the window” however, which may be just as significant as we think of new strategies for mission in the 21st Century. That window is what I call the “4/14 Window.”

The “4/14 Window”

Some years ago, Dr. Bryant Myers, Director of World Vision’s MARC Ministries, made an excellent presentation to the EFMA Executive Retreat. The title was “The State of the World’s Children: A Cultural Challenge to the Christian Mission in the 1990’s.” Bryant painted a sobering picture of the numbers and conditions of children and youth throughout the world today, and noted some of the implications that this huge and often suffering people group presents to mission strategists today. But the most significant portion of his presentation was the stunning graphic below, which shows that in the USA, nearly 85 percent of people who make a decision for Christ, do so between the ages of 4 and 14!

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Recently, important confirmation that this is true, at least in the USA, has come from the well-known Church researcher, George Barna. In a new book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*,¹ Barna presents results of extensive research related to faith decisions in the US.

Barna reports that most 13 year-olds in the US, 93 percent consider themselves to be Christian, though only about 34 percent of these really have an understanding of what it means to be a Christian.² However, if people are going to become a Christian, they are far more likely to make that decision by the age of 13 than after that age. Barna states that:

...the probability of someone embracing Jesus as his or her Saviour was 32 percent for those between the ages of 5 and 12; 4 percent for those in the 13-18 range; and 6 percent for people 19 or older. In other words, if people do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim.³

Barna urges us to “Consider the facts. People are much more likely to accept Christ as their Savior when they are young. 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.”⁴

“The implication of these findings is clear,” says Barna. “Anyone who wishes to have significant influence on the development of a person’s moral and spiritual

¹ George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (Ventura, California: Regal, 2003).

² *Ibid.*, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

foundations had better exert that influence while the person is still open-minded and impressionable – in other words, while the person is still young.”⁵

I speak often in cross-cultural and inter-religious environments on this topic, and each time I do, I conduct my own survey, and it has largely confirmed this important missiological fact. Generally about 60% of the people I ask say that they became Christians between the ages of 4 and 14. So what then shall we say? Perhaps only 60% of Christians made their decision for Christ during these pliable years. Or perhaps only 50%. Or 40%. But even so! What should this say to mission leaders today? At the very least, they confirm evidence that children and young people are indeed “the world’s most fruitful field.”⁶

Children as a “People Group”

The category “children” is of course much too broad to fit the normal definitions of a people group. People groups are typically defined along ethnic, geographic, habitat or social affinity lines. But such delineations have a distinct adult bias. There are many distinct groups of children and young people who warrant not only ministry to address their physical needs, but the attention of missiologists as well in their development of effective mission strategies. Strategic consideration should be given, for example, to the children who have migrated to cities in search of employment or education. Among the 4/14 window are children in many such situations providing gateways to their people. Unfortunately, adequate attention to these groups has yet to materialize among mission strategists.

What can we learn if we as missions strategists look at children and young people as a people group?

Children: An *Enormous* People Group

We should be concerned about the state of children in the world because there are so many of them. Over one-third of the world’s population, nearly 2 billion people, are under the age of 18. Nearly half of the world’s population is under the age of 20. Surely these facts alone are enough to cause church leaders to re-examine their priorities and strategies for the coming decade. And surely these facts must catch the attention of the thinkers and planners for church ministries and missions for the 21st century.

Children: A *receptive* People Group

Missiologists are also documenting the reasons for apparent changes in receptivity to the Gospel. The School of World Mission shelves at the Fuller Seminary are brimming with theses and dissertations exploring the reasons for resistance and receptivity. One clear and consistent factor is that people tend to be receptive when their lives are disrupted. The poor and exploited tend to be much more receptive to the Gospel. There is no people group today whose lives are more disrupted than those of children and youth.

⁵ Ibid., 47.

⁶ Benke, W. and Bryan, M. “The World’s Most Fruitful Field”. *Evangelizing Today’s Child*. 1977. The 4/14 Window: Child Ministry and Church Strategies
Revised August 2005

Bryant Myers, reminded us that children are. . .

. . . **Suffering**

For years we were told that some 40,000 children die around the world **every day**, very many of them due to malnutrition and preventable diseases. Thankfully, however, the annual childhood death figure is only (!) 30,000 per day.⁷ Nevertheless, many challenges remain and children in many countries still face enormous risks. Those in the “4/14 window” remain the most affected and vulnerable group for every kind of disease and suffering.

. . . **Unwanted**

We know that very many of these children are still unwanted. One evidence of this is the appallingly high rates of abortion, especially in the so called developed nations. One of the saddest truths of the 20th century, was that the womb, which should have been the child’s safest haven, became the most unsafe place in the world for a child. An equally shocking and growing problem is that of street children around the world. Statistics indicate that between 100 and 200 million children around the world call the streets their home.

. . . **Victimized**

It is now clear that the very nature of warfare is changing. UNICEF notes that “at one time, wars were fought between armies; but in the wars of the last decade far more children than soldiers have been killed and disabled. Over that period, approximately 2 million children have died in wars, between 4 and 5 million have been physically disabled, more than 5 million have been forced into refugee camps, and more than 12 million have been left homeless.”⁸

The needs and injustices behind such shocking statistics cry out for attention. But the net result globally is a suffering, disrupted people group which is often hungry for the touch of the Gospel in their lives. Attention to this 4/14 window is then imperative for any church which is serious about reaching truly receptive peoples in any other “window” of the world. Lamentations 2:19 urges us to “Arise, cry out in the night, as the watches of the night begin; pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. Lift up your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint from hunger at the head of every street.”

Children: A *Forgotten* People Group?

In light of all these factors, it is curious then the relative lack of attention that churches sometimes give to children’s ministries. What do we have to say, from an ecclesiastical standpoint, and as missions strategists, to the most numerous, poorest, disrupted, hurting, and quite possibly the most receptive of the world’s population groups?

Sadly, apparently not much.

⁷ UNICEF State of the World’s Children 2005.

⁸ The State of the World’s Children 1995 Published for UNICEF by Oxford University Press. 1995.
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Children Overlooked in our Strategy Planning

At the GCOWE '95 Consultation held in Seoul, Korea, there were, in the “How do we get there?” section of the planning workbooks, suggestions to consider the needs of children and youth. And yes, several of the tracks could be said to have peripherally related to children and youth since obviously there are many millions of Chinese children, Muslim children, urban children and the like. But none of the tracks, nor any of the main plenary or workshop sessions, were specifically devoted to children.⁹

The picture changed somewhat at GCOWE 1997 in South Africa. There, several of us interested in child ministries and mission strategy were able to include a track which focused on the strategic importance of mission to and through children. An acknowledgement of the importance of the 4/14 Window was one of the encouraging outcomes of that conference.

The obligation of churches to care for hurting children, and the enormous potential for impact, church growth, and for furthering the Kingdom have not featured prominently in the previous two missions consultations held by the Missions Commission of the Evangelical Fellowships of Asia.

Children Overlooked in the Missions Literature

Similarly, there seems to be a paucity of articles in the professional missions journals relating to reaching this most receptive group. A colleague of mine, Gordon Mullenix, has searched the back issues of IMR, EMQ and Missiology for articles on children and mission strategy. The number of articles specifically on the subject of children and missions can probably be counted on both hands with a few fingers change.

Unfortunately, there is also almost certainly a stereotyping of child and youth ministries. Jim Reapsome, in the Editor's Analysis mentioned above, asks “Are [children] being slighted by more majestic issues, by more serious concerns? Do we, subconsciously perhaps, look down our noses at agencies that work with children?” The answer to that question may be “yes.”

An Historical Emphasis on Children Through Christian Schools

Have children always been a forgotten people group? To some extent, yes. I have recently enjoyed re-reading portions of the massive *History of Christianity* by the respected historian Kenneth Scott Latourette. Latourette documents the history of the spread of Christianity in a comprehensive and sweeping way, but one must look very hard to see discussions of credible church and missions efforts directed towards children and youth.

⁹ GCOWE 95 The AD 2000 And Beyond Movement Participants Book May 1995.
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Interestingly though, his work has frequent references to the impact of Christian schools. For example, Latourette observes the importance of Christian schools in India:

Protestantism's approach to India was varied. Much of it was through mass conversions, although at the outset these came almost unexpectedly. Some of it was through schools. . . . They ranged from village schools which to members of the depressed classes were doors of hope to a world of larger opportunity, through secondary schools, to colleges of university grade.¹⁰

We know too that an astonishing number of Asian and African political leaders came out of the Christian school systems set up during the first part of this century. Latourette notes 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."¹¹ Other examples could be cited.

One can also get a sense of the importance of Christian schools in the mind of some of the revolutionary leaders in the fact that, where Communism took over, one of the first restrictions was on Christian schools. Referring to the takeover by the communists in China, Latourette writes:

Religious instruction of youths under eighteen years of age in groups of more than four was forbidden...Special theological courses were still allowed, but only by express permission of the state. No believer was permitted to teach in a state school.¹²

It is possible that the relief and development focus of evangelicals may have absorbed some of the energies formerly devoted to ministry through schools. These efforts were not, however, normally targeted towards children and youth. Obviously, we cannot and should not try to start Christian schools – at least not on a national scale. But my 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 church and political leadership?"*

Child Ministries and Church Growth

Another reason for the Evangelical Fellowships around the world to consider seriously the needs of children is that an emphasis on children is often the fastest way to plant and to grow churches. Experience demonstrates that one of the most significant interventions for church growth is to assist the church develop a child health, education, and spiritual nurture program. If child assistance programs are done right, if non-Christians are enrolled, and if parents included, those churches will grow. Guaranteed. And in the process, many of those families - both the children and the adults - will come to Christ.

¹⁰ Latourette, Kenneth Scott. A History of Christianity. Vol II, Reformation to the Present (A. D. 1500-A.D. 1975. Harper Collins. San Francisco. 1975. p. 1317, 1318.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 1353

¹² *ibid.*, 1397,1398

We know that children are the church of the future. But we must understand that children and their parents are also the church of today.

The 4/14 Window and Social Action

The Great Commandment is just as valid as the Great Commission. Yet the adult bias that tends to overlook children in furthering the Great Commission, is also common in our efforts to meet physical needs. This is in spite of the “child survival” programs which some churches use and which often attracts considerable funding. Such a bias is a mistake in terms of effectiveness. UNICEF research indicates that **the** most significant interventions for *national* development are child health and education.¹³

Compassion’s experience bears this out. Our child development programs, if well designed, very often result in excellent community development. We have found that communities can often unite around the needs of their children even though other issues are divisive. Thus, even if a church’s goal is to do family or community development, many would do well to look more closely at ministry to children.

The 4/14 Window and Leadership Development

Frontier mission agencies until recently were focusing on AD 2000 and Beyond. While we enthusiastically supported all efforts to evangelize the world by AD 2000, I am afraid some Christians assumed that we didn’t have time to wait for young Christians to mature into their place of leadership. Clearly, however, we must affirm that we can still afford to **grow** the church!

Today’s children are still tomorrow’s leaders! NEF leaders at this GCCMM should be asking themselves, “what are our strategies for **growing** the leadership that will we need to lead our churches in 2025?”

Child development is a long-term process. Just as we as parents know it takes at least 18 years to “develop” our own children, so we realize that child development is a long time proposition. The result is, as was discovered in India and elsewhere, that many of the children receive enough Christian training input to equip them to be serious Christian leaders.

The 4/14 Window and Unreached Peoples

There is even much potential for reaching into unreached peoples areas through a strategy of focusing on meeting the needs of this most vulnerable part of virtually every people group. Many mission thinkers would like nothing better than to have child assistance programs in each of the new churches among the people groups of Asia and elsewhere. Such ministries would help to consolidate and solidify the new young churches and provide a strong foundation for further church growth and outreach.

¹³ UNICEF in South Asia. Development as if Children Mattered. 1988.

Ethics of inter-faith Mission to Children.

Let us be quick to acknowledge that the issues of conversion and faith development in cross-cultural, or interfaith evangelism are very different from the issues than the same matters in the Christian context. Evangelism or providing Christian training to children of non-Christian parents, if done with integrity and transparency, is neither exploitative nor unethical. But we must be particularly aware of the special of the sensitivities and ethical considerations involved in inter-faith spiritual ministries to children. Inattentiveness to the situation and circumstances may make overt evangelism in that time, place and manner insensitive or even unethical. This is no different, however, in any mission activities with adults.

A few principles which I believe are valid and important for ministering to children in sensitive, non-Christian environments might include the following:

- Children should not be subjected to religious teaching and training without the knowledge and consent of the parents. Most non-Western peoples tend to come to Christ as family groups or clans. I believe that in most sensitive situations, church leaders should not baptize a child until the parents are also ready to be baptized, in order to ensure that the child has support and encouragement in his or her new faith.
- Christians should not pressure children for conversion in situations where the children and/or their parents are completely dependent on the financial and/or material support of Christians.
- Christians should not seek the conversion of children with a patronizing attitude that distances oneself from the painful reality that the children are experiencing. The approach must be one of identification and compassion.
- The presentation of the Gospel to children in a way which undermines, despises or denies the validity of their culture.

The 4/14 Window and Church Ministry Priorities

The most effective churches and mission groups today are interested in getting into the 10/40 window. Many churches and mission groups may find that the 4/14 age group, may be the “window within the window.” The 4/14 window can also, of course, lead to more effective ministry to the parents and other adults of that age group. But just as importantly, ministry in the 4/14 window is a productive and fruitful ministry for its own sake and for the sake of developing the Christian leadership we need for the future.

Brothers, what shall we do? (Acts 2:37)

The plight of children around the world is well known to most of us, though perhaps most of us do not take the time to reflect on their needs. Clearly churches as well as mission groups and development agencies must deliberately include children in any efforts to relieve human suffering and become more aggressive advocates for alleviating their suffering and exploitation. From a kingdom perspective though, it is just as important that churches consider

carefully the spiritual needs of children and young people, and the potential of such ministries for fulfilling the Great Commission.

What higher calling could the churches aspire to? What initiatives could Christians around the world do which is more important or which could possibly bear more fruit over the long run? What alternatives do the churches have to secure their own futures? If the churches don't do it, who will? Surely the churches can be motivated and energized by the needs and the vast potential inherent in a ministry so close to the heart of God.

Questions for Discussion

- Is there an adult bias in our “usual” mission and church growth strategizing?
- What are your strategies for *growing* the Christian leaders you need for the next generation?
- What are you doing to ensure that every church affiliated with the Evangelical Fellowships in your countries have significant programs to address the needs of children at risk?
- What are you doing to ensure that the “4/14 Window” – the largest, neediest, most exploited, *and* most receptive “people group” have a prominent place in your church ministries and missions strategies for the 21st century?
- Do you agree with the response to the *ethics* of mission to children, and the *cautions* for such ministries in inter-faith environments?
- How do you 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)

Dr. Dan Brewster is Director for Child Advocacy for Compassion International in Asia. He has been involved in relief work and child and family development ministries for 30 years, in Africa, South America and Asia. He was Africa Director for Compassion International during the 1980s. Dan is married and has three grown children, two of them born in Africa. He has a doctorate in Missiology, from Fuller School of World Mission, and has studied and written extensively in the areas of child and community development, missions, and missions strategy.

For more information on Compassion International, child advocacy and how you can get involved, please visit www.compassion.com or call 1-719-487-7000 outside the U.S. or 1-800-336-7676 in the U.S.