

## **The Troubling Trend for Tomorrow's Leaders**

**By Greg Barron**

Jesus makes one of his most challenging statements in Matthew 19:14 when he tells his disciples and others listening to allow children to come to him and not to hinder them. While the greater context of that passage teaches that the Lord wants all believers to have childlike attributes, the more immediate meaning is also quite clear. Children are important to effectively building and firmly establishing the Kingdom of God. Yet, in our post-modern culture, we don't seem to have taken that challenge to heart.

Recently while returning from a speaking engagement in Minnesota on "Architecture for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church", I read with interest articles written from two distinct viewpoints. They both address the current state of health of children in America, one from a spiritual point-of-view and the other from a secular perspective. However, the conclusions are the same. George Barna, Directing Leader of The Barna Group, Ltd. and author of numerous books and Rich Karlgaard, publisher of Forbes™ magazine lament the challenges and consequences of having a generation of spiritually ill-prepared misfits thrust into future leadership roles. They remind us children are the hope for the future and therefore we must turn our attention to training them.

In his book *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, Barna asserts "having devoted more than two decades of my life and all my professional skills to studying and working with ministries of all types, I am convinced that the greatest hope for the local church lies in raising godly children." Secular observer Karlgaard made a similar observation when Impact Lab interviewed him. He maintains in a March 29, 2005 article titled "Real-World Advice for the Young" that the United States spends \$900 billion a year on education of all kinds. He adds that this is almost 8% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Even with that much of the GDP poured into education, our K-12 schooling is no longer in the world's top ten ranking. Moreover, though our colleges are supposedly the best, a deeper look into this claim reveals a frightening decline in the moral fiber that governs the behavior of our students. Karlgaard concludes his observations by noting, "We owe our young people more than this. Every young person needs to know that he was created for a purpose." I echo their sentiments.

As the CEO of an organization dedicated primarily to developing faith based facilities for worship, education and living, I, too, am deeply concerned about the disparity of time, money and effort placed on cultivating children, the next generation of leaders for our marketplace. It also seems to me, the resources dedicated to strengthening churches in America today, our spiritual equipping centers, are far too limited. Consider this. An analysis of market trends based on figures provided by the National Association of Church Design Builders reported by McGraw-Hill Constructions (<http://dodge.construction.com/Analytics>) shows that of roughly \$5.1 billion in construction dollars spent on new construction each year, only 10% is earmarked for children's ministries. A typical 30,000 square foot facility allots approximately only 3,000 to 4,000 square feet for children's space.

There are exceptions. Among them, Lake Point Church in Rockwall, Texas, Springdale Baptist Church in Springdale, Arkansas and North Point Church in Atlanta, Georgia are examples of ministries that understand the significance of vibrant, culturally relevant children's

ministries. Because they do, they dedicate people, finances and real estate to these outreaches. Like Mark A. Holmen, Senior Pastor of Ventura Missionary Church in California, they understand the role of the church in equipping young people. George Barna and Mickie O'Donnell, a leading expert in family ministries joined Pastor Holmen in a televised training session about investing in children's ministry. During it, they observed that when the church comes alongside parents to provide training, information, counseling, and dynamic ministries, a *generation of champions* is formed (*emphasis added*).

These champions make a difference in the lives of anyone who comes in contact with them. Ultimately they impact the culture at-large. Might this be the reason Jesus said don't hinder them from coming to him? Young women and men who are mentally honed, emotionally equipped and spiritually strengthened become marketplace innovators and moral trendsetters. As spiritual champions, they are the life-producing change-agents for a decaying society. What incredible value-added to your life and mine and to the nation in which we live. More important even than the contribution children and youth make to society in general, is the reality that it is they who are the most effective missionaries for the cause of Christ. Often even the most hard-hearted person responds to the wide-eyed innocence of a child or the exuberance of youth.

Even Karlgaard, writing from a secular viewpoint recognizes that our young people are smarter than previous generations, but they weaker at the same time. Rich argues that, "most American kids today are soft. Kids weigh too much. Parents sue coaches. New college dorms resemble luxury hotels." These behaviors are indicative of character flaws developed because they lack spiritual fortitude, a lack that is responsible for the weakness.

When we train children to have morally sound values and strong ethics, they can be strengthened. So I believe it is time we reassess our intellectual and physical capital. True, adults have the most money to give to building funds; but without the earnest for the future, which is spiritually prepared children and youth, buildings are mere property.

Recall, Jesus says give particular attention to children. I wonder, is the Church in America responding to that instruction as capably as it could be? Again citing *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, Barna states "in the average Protestant church, approximately 41% of the people who attend the church on a typical weekend are under the age of 18. Yet less than 15% of the average church's ministry budget is allocated to the needs of the children's ministry. If the popular adage one's checkbook identifies one's priorities is correct, then children are clearly a secondary concern for most churches." Undeniably, it's time to change the priorities of America's spiritual equipping centers.

I am not advising that all ministries do an about face and re-allocate development and budget funds exclusively to children and youth. But just as we frequently need to look into the mirror of life to examine our priorities, we should think long and hard about being good stewards towards those that Christ loved and of whom he commanded allow them to come to me. Having top-notch programs and state-of-the art buildings for Children's Ministry is one way that demonstrates a willingness to have the mind of Christ toward American youth.

