

HOW EXTERNALLY FOCUSED CHURCHES MINISTER TO CHILDREN

The Power of Serving Kids in Your Community

by Krista Petty



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The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that there were 82 million residents 19 years of age or younger living in the United States in 2005.¹ Externally Focused Churches are responding to the needs of this significant population of little people in a variety of ways, taking seriously these words from Jesus, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14) Externally focused churches seek to be salt and light in their communities, showing the good news of Jesus Christ through good deeds and good will. Church leaders and volunteers serving children in their communities find it to be one of the most rewarding as well as challenging ways to extend God’s grace beyond the walls of their church. In his book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, George Barna gives a glimpse into the significance of serving this age group. “Our children will define the future, which makes them our most significant and enduring legacy. After all, God never told His followers to take over the world through force or intelligence. He simply told us to have children and then raise them to honor God in all they do.”² While their efforts are blessed in a number of ways, churches continually work to overcome the challenges of working with other people’s children—helping them to also become children of God.

So what do children in America, one of the most affluent nations of the world, really need? More than you might think. According to Barna’s research, there are several dimensions of a child’s well being in America, and there are serious concerns in each.³

Educational Achievement and Intellectual Development—*It is estimated that one-third of all school-aged children are at least one grade level behind.*⁴

Health and Physical Development—*One out of every eight children under 13 is overweight. One out of every ten teenagers had sexual intercourse prior to his or her thirteenth birthday. One out of every 8 children under 13 has no health insurance.*

Economic State—*Nearly seven million American adolescents are plagued by poverty on any given day.*

Emotional and Behavioral Development—*One out of every three children born in the United States each year is born to an unmarried woman.*

Omar Reyes, Community Development Director at **NorthWood Church**, Keller, TX (<http://www.northwoodchurch.org>) is passionate about mobilizing the church and its resources to make a transformational impact in the local community, especially in the lives of children. “If children aren’t dancing in the community, then something is wrong,” says Omar.



OMAR REYES

IF CHILDREN AREN'T DANCING IN THE COMMUNITY, THEN SOMETHING IS WRONG.

Fathering the Fatherless

Omar believes a majority of children aren’t dancing because they lack an important part of God’s design for families: fathers. “Statistics show that most social ills can be traced back to fatherlessness,” says Omar. According to the National Center for Fathering, when fathers are absent, children suffer. Fatherlessness is linked to poverty, high school dropout rates, crime, adolescent drug use and teenage pregnancy. These problems have become systemic as one generation experiences and then passes on the legacy of fatherlessness.⁵

Armed with that information and through studying the Bible, Omar says he began to understand the problem of fatherlessness as a spiritual need as well as a social problem. He learned part of this lesson while preaching in a Belize prison to young black men. “I was preaching to them about the father God and the love of the father. God just stopped me there in the middle of my talk and helped me realize that they did not understand what I was saying about fathers. They did not connect with the message because they did not understand what a father is.” Instead of continuing to preach, Omar asked the young men how many of them knew their fathers and how many had bad experiences with their fathers? “Ninety-five percent raised their hands to bad experiences,” he says.

Omar began to wonder how God can reveal himself when children aren't exposed to positive fathering. "What God showed me is that he wants us (Christians) to express the heart of the father to kids." How can the church take on that kind of role and responsibility? Omar believes it begins very simply. "How do my own kids know that I am their dad? I feed them; I clothe them; I take care of them. The physical aspect of this is very important. I realized that as we provide for the physical need of children, they understand God as father. That will impact them forever," he says. Barna agrees. He writes, "Fostering spiritual transformation demands that we do our best to eliminate some of the emotional and behavioral obstacles to growth. If children are consumed by fears and worries regarding safety and capacity, little growth can occur."⁶

Matthew 5:16 says, "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Showing good works to children is precisely why Omar and his team at Northwood commit funds, time and resources to projects like the Park Vista After School Program, McFadden Farms youth mentoring and the Kids Cafe food program. "It's all about showing and doing the good works so they can see God as Father," he says.

Critical Hours for Children

It's three o'clock in the afternoon. For most adults, the work day is beginning to wind down. For the average school child, this is just when the day gets brighter. Freedom rings at three o'clock! Unfortunately, for large majority of children in the United States, that school bell ringing signifies too much freedom, leading to dangerous

possibilities. According to The Afterschool Alliance 14.3 million children take care of themselves after the school day ends, including almost four million middle school students in grades six to eight. They also note that just 6.5 million children are in after school programs, but the parents of another 15.3 million children say they would participate if a program were available.⁷

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Through their research, The Afterschool Alliance has found that after school programs keep kids safe, help working families, and improve academic performance. Is it the responsibility of the church to meet this need? Maybe it is not a responsibility as much as an opportunity to show good deeds and share the good news.

It's an ordinary school day in Keller, Texas, but to Mark Krynski, no day has to be ordinary. He believes every day is a chance to make a difference—especially in the lives of children. "I am a businessman with a software company. God gave me a wake up call on 9-11 and I realized I wasn't in control. I decided to go find out who is in control and start listening to him," says Mark. That search landed him at Northwood Church and led him to become a volunteer leader with the church's Park Vista After School program. This program is located in the recreation room of the Park Vista Town Home complex. While Keller is not known for after school problems, an undeniable need surfaced. A developer purchased land in the downtown area of Fort Worth for a warehouse/retail center. "When the developer built this center, they moved an entire African American apartment project out of the city," says Mark. These displaced families landed in Keller. Although many in the town fought the complex coming to Keller, Mark says, "The church is trying to help make this work and improve the lives of these kids.

The after school program started as a small, one-day-a-week project. It was actually about ready to die before Mark and his teenage son and a friend came along. "The boys were interested in helping with a program for kids in Dallas. I wasn't the one serving, but I kept encouraging them to find something right here in Keller to volunteer in" admits Mark. When they showed up at Park Vista for the first time, they saw 35 kids in a room and one woman trying to tutor them. "It was hard to find volunteers and the one volunteer there told us that they are closing it down at Christmas. My son and his friend *insisted* that they wanted to do this," says Mark. So he assured them that he would talk to the church about it.

After talking with the pastor and church leaders Mark said he was given a challenge to pray about keeping the program open. After two weeks, Mark got a call from the pastor. Mark told him, "Every

time I pray about it, I see these kid's faces. We can't drop these kids in the middle of the school year. So, we just did a one-day-a-week program for three more years."

After Mark's three years of service, Omar Reyes was hired to lead the local community service efforts. Again, the program's effectiveness came into question. "When I first came to Northwood I found Mark, who was really doing something. He was sort of like a lone ranger out there doing stuff in the community—taking care of kids every Friday through this after school program." As Omar became acclimated with the community, he found another after school program called Love Never Fails, associated with Calvary Chapel Church in Keller. "I saw how if we partnered together, we could make this program ten times the size. We didn't push Love Never Fails to accept our apartment complex at all. We simply thought we would partner wherever they wanted to work."

Omar began preparing Mark for the bad news that Park Vista may not stay the same and they may have to let it go to participate in a larger program. Not long after that difficult conversation, Omar received a phone call from the Calvary Chapel pastor about the location for the new after school partnership. "He said he had driven by a place he thought would be the right fit for a full time program with Love Never Fails. It was Park Vista! The place where Mark had been faithfully serving for years! They adopted Park Vista, brought a teacher full time and we brought our existing relationships into the program. God just opened that door," says Omar.

Today, the program is a full, five-day-a-week after school program assisting kids with homework, providing incentives like trips, camps and activities for good behavior and good grades. To launch the new program, the apartment complex management advertised it in the community newsletter and held a kick off event for families. Sixty kids, pre-K through 8th grade, are now enrolled in the program, most of which come from single parent families. Mark and a full-time program director from Love Never Fails help provide a moral compass for the kids in the program through Bible studies and stories. "Without this program, most of these kids would be home by themselves and have no help with

homework or any supervision," says Mark. The volunteers stay connected to the kids' lives in many ways. Along with the relationships formed during the couple of hours after school, Mark mentors the young boys by taking them on his own family outings and adventures. They most recently took Brandon, 11, to the state fair. "It was his first time to ever visit a fair like that," says Mark. Through camping trips and weekly rides to church, Mark helps them see glimpses of what a father is like—hoping they will come to know their heavenly father.



Mark Krynski with friends at the Park Vista After School Program.

In the summer of 2006, the Park Vista program did not stop, but extended the program to a half day, providing stability and care for the kids at the complex. "Seventy percent of the volunteers came from Northwood Church. We mobilized 300 people this summer from 12 - 5 p.m., five days a week," says Omar. Northwood continues to find ways to enhance and build the partnership. "Our church brought on a part-time support staff member to support Love Never Fails. This after school program is an example of how effective a partnership for children can be. We accomplished a 500 % increase—going from one day a week to five—because of our partnership with Love Never Fails," says Omar.

Healthy Children = Happy Children

Just as the Park Vista program ends, another program ten miles away is just getting started. Fifty-six kids are sitting down to dinner at the **Christian Center Church** (<http://www.ccofw.org>) in the heart of Haltom City, TX. The Kids Cafe is a another unique collaboration between Northwood Church, the Christian Center, the local elementary school and the Tarrant Area Food Bank (<http://www.tafb.org>).

"This is another testimony of how God works," says Omar. This food program was a dream that went unrealized until networks and partnerships were formed. "Christian Center was a mega church with large facilities until the inner city grew up around it. Most people eventually bailed

out,” says Omar. Some of the remaining members had a dream to provide kids from the local school (one of the poorest in the area) with good meals at night. “It was a huge need, but initially failed because the kitchen needed a \$5,000 renovation. They had a facility, the desire and hungry kids, but no funds,” says Omar.

Omar and members of Northwood Church stumbled across this dead dream during a combined fall festival. “Olga, a woman from Christian Center Church shared with a friend and me about this dead dream. My friend said to me, ‘Omar, we need to do that!’” Together, the two churches began to pursue the dream again. Connections through Northwood provided the \$5000 and in return, Omar asked if volunteers from Northwood could serve with the program. “I went to all the teams (small groups) in our church and asked them to adopt a night and serve the meals to these kids. Every month we mobilize a great number of people from our church to be a part of this,” he says. At last count, over 250 people a month from Northwood serve at Kids Cafe.

“The Christian Center is so grateful that we—as a big church—want to partner with them,” says Omar. The partnership also includes the local school, which provides the transportation for the kids from the school’s after care program to the church. Parents pick up the children at the church. To greater sustain the program, Omar helped the Christian Center connect to the local Tarrant Area Food Bank’s Kids Cafe program. According to the food bank, many children in this service area have access to school breakfast and/or lunch programs but do not have access to a nutritious evening meal. To address this issue, they adopted a national program designed by America’s Second Harvest (<http://www.secondharvest.com>). Tarrant Area Food Bank establishes Kids Cafes in neighborhoods where at least 70% of children qualify for the national free and reduced-price school lunch program. The food bank provides the food, administrative support and salary for the kitchen coordinator of each cafe. “Christian Center tells the food bank how many kids they took care of and they pay them back for feeding the kids,” says Omar. Because of \$5000 and partnerships, the dream for this inner city church was realized on September 11, 2006. They feed 55-60 kids each weekday evening.

Without the program, Chuck Langford, associate minister at the Christian Center, believes these kids would either go hungry or eat junk food for dinner. “Eighty-two percent of the kids in the Academy School at Birdville are on the free lunch program at the school,” says Chuck. Between what the school and Kids Cafe provides, these kids get at least two good meals a day, helping them stay healthy and ready to learn.



Hannah Langford serving friends at the Kids Cafe.

What’s the next step? Omar shares that Northwood and Christian Center are looking at a partnership with the John Peter Smith Hospital Network, which was built to take care of the poor in the Fort Worth area. “All of the illegal immigrants go to this particular hospital. Now, John Peter Smith is setting up local clinics. They staff it with a nurse and receptionist, but they do not provide a facility,” says Omar. Always a connector, Omar sees yet another potential collaboration, increasing the ability to minister to children. “Christian Center has a facility they would offer and Northwood has additional people to bring as volunteers.”

Additional Health Support for Children

While not all churches have the means to support a health clinic partnership, they are finding innovative partnerships to optimize the health and well being of children in their community. In an effort to provide eye care for children, **Harbor Presbyterian Church**, San Diego, CA (<http://www.harborpc.org>) partnered with Lens Crafters to facilitate eye exams and glasses for disadvantaged children in August 2006. “We provided glasses for over 400 children in the San Diego area,” says Laura Brewster, volunteer leader in the church’s externally focused ministry. Lens Crafters has a number of programs to assist children of need in North America through the company’s Give the Gift of Sight programs. These programs work in tandem with local agencies such as Lions Clubs, United Way agencies, schools and churches. (<http://www.givethegiftofsight.org>)



Laura Brewster sharing Harbor Presbyterian’s model of Externally Focused Ministry with other churches in California.

West Conroe Baptist Church, Conroe, TX (<http://www.wcbc.us>) offered a healthy head start for education as a part of their Back to School Bash with the Bellshire Apartment Ministry. The apartment complex has 85 school-aged residents. “One of our dentists donated his time to provide screenings for the kids and we also had a barber provide free haircuts to the boys. The big give-away, of course, was school supplies,” says John Moody, associate pastor of education. John also says, “One of our more aggressive members solicited lots of door prizes from retail establishments for food, oil changes and other essentials.” A lay-led leadership team of four adults serves the Bellshire Apartment ministry and Senior Pastor Jay Gross served as the “point man” for the Back to School Bash.

Holistic Ministry to Children

To meet the spiritual, physical, and educational needs of children in their area, **University Baptist Church**, Houston, TX (<http://www.ubc.org/>) has invested in church planting, tutoring and a food pantry on site at the Emerald Pointe Apartment Complex in nearby Pasadena, TX. All of these services offer a very holistic approach to meeting the needs of children.

Sally Williams, a volunteer with University Baptist Church, set up a tutoring program at Emerald Pointe to supplement the Emerald Pointe Fellowship church plant. Her involvement in the ministry came after meeting Pamm Muzsly, pastor at the church plant. “I went on the Holy Land trip last year and met Pamm. She described her work there and I started attending the Sunday service. I was looking for a way to contribute when the opportunity of tutoring came up. We contacted the local elementary school and asked how we could be of the help to the children there. They suggested tutoring and parent workshops. So far we have the tutoring program in place and hope to offer some parenting classes,” says Sally.

Having a rapport with the school allows for Sally and other volunteers to better direct funds, supplies and help to children in need. “We contact the school and they give us a list of the children that need school supplies and we pay for those. We also have a food pantry at Emerald

Pointe to help out when people run out of food.” In addition to cooperating with the school, none of this community ministry to children could be done without cooperation from the Emerald Pointe Complex management, who has allowed University Baptist Church to have space in the complex, called The Dream Center. When the community ministries at Emerald Point first started, they were housed in a single apartment. “The apartment complex told us we could move to what is now called the Dream Center. It is where the former owners of the complex used to live. It has four classrooms, two baths, a kitchen, and a chapel area,” says Sally. Volunteers from University Baptist Church renovated it and what the complex had been using for storage has now become a place where children receive hope of a future. “We have Sunday School with 20 to 30 children on the weekends, Tuesday night tutoring hosts about ten children and our Thursday afternoon Victory Club has probably 20 children attending. If we were not at the Dream Center—where the children can walk to us—they most probably would not be able to attend church or the programs,” says Sally.

Beyond the Dream Center, volunteer Amy McDonald coordinates a pen pal program between adults at University Baptist Church and teens at South Shaver School. A local business started the program and when they chose to discontinue, the church took up the program and has been running it for two years. “Teachers believe the letter writing gives students an opportunity to practice their writing and communication skills in a practical and fun way. Students at the school passed their latest state language arts test with an incredibly high percentage!” says Amy. Her job is to match the kids with church pen pals. “There are approximately 90 students this year, writing and receiving about a letter a month,” says Amy.



A few children enjoy an activity during a Thursday Afternoon Victory Club at the Dream Center.

Through the Dream Center, pen pals and the Emerald Pointe Fellowship, children from this complex in Pasadena, TX are receiving a number

of positive experiences with caring Christian adults. “Student pen pals who know University Baptist Church at home also know that the church is working with them at school,” says Amy.

Serving Hispanic Children

According to a special report from the U.S. Department of Commerce issued in December 2004, 35.2 million Hispanics live in the United States, accounting for 12.5% of the total population. Of those, over one-third are under the age of 18.⁸ **The Crossing**, a church in Costa Mesa, CA (<http://www.thecrossing.com>) has a big heart for supporting the large population of Hispanic children and families in their immediate area. “The Crossing had a vision for reaching out to the local community,” says Sarah Porterfield,

director of the Maple Learning Center, an outreach ministry of the church. “The local schools expressed a need for more after school educational support and tutoring for their English Language Learners whose parents are not equipped to help them at home,” she continues. Parents are often ill-equipped not because of lack of care, but language and educational barriers, as well as time constraints from working and taking care of the family. To

meet this need, the church hired Sarah and formed a team to research and pray about the ministry, giving input to the program’s format, location, and other logistics.

What resulted was the Maple Learning Center which currently serves 50 students, but has capacity for more. The Center offers tutoring and mentoring, with anywhere from 17-25 adult volunteers involved weekly. “Our students are from Spanish speaking homes and most come with the ability to speak conversational English; however their academic English and comprehension are generally much more of a

struggle than might be immediately apparent in a normal conversation,” says Sarah.

Most parents of children in the program do not speak English, are generally of low socio-economic status and are the first generation emigrating to the U.S from Mexico. Sarah notes that most of the parents are working hard to support their families and trying to provide their children with opportunities to pursue success and the ‘American Dream.’ “We are blessed with the opportunity to assist these students in their ability to succeed in school so that they will have options and opportunities in their future,” says Sarah. Introducing children to a personal relationship with God through mentoring is an important part of the program. “We believe that these things will continue to sustain them so that they will not lose hope or experience the lack of options that can lead to dropping out of school, teen pregnancy, gangs, crime, drugs, and other social and spiritual issues,” she continues.

Along with the dedication to Hispanic children, The Crossing is dedicated to knocking down the communication barriers with their Hispanic neighbors in specific and direct ways. Ian Stevenson, Outreach Pastor says, “As we have looked at what Orange County is becoming, we sensed a greater need to ‘bridge the divide’ that exists in our community between the Anglo and Hispanic cultures. We feel the impetus is on the group with the most ‘power’ to move towards those with less, therefore our senior pastor, Tim Celek, felt very compelled to learn Spanish.” To learn the language, Tim traveled to El Salvador in a Spanish immersion program, goes there for study breaks and is working hard to learn the language. Ian has also participated in language learning skills through immersion experiences and practices whenever he can. They have six bilingual members on staff. On learning the language, Ian says, “It is a challenge, but we are hoping God uses it to help us reach more of our

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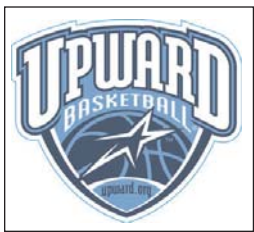
community for Him. It really got off the ground because Tim, our senior pastor had the vision and heart for it.”

Meeting Spiritual Needs through Sports

An estimated 41 million American kids play competitive youth sports. The number of children involved in youth sports has risen significantly over the last 10 to 20 years, according to Dr. Steve Carney, a professor of sport management at Drexel University in Philadelphia.⁹

Many churches are trying to have a voice of influence in this sports-driven culture. In addition to their Bellshire Apartment ministry mentioned above, West Conroe Baptist Church finds that sports are another great way to meet kids in the community, connecting sports with life skills and the gospel. They have 120 children from the church and community playing basketball together each week. But it goes beyond shooting hoops and learning good sportsmanship. “This ministry began as a passion of one of our members; using recreation to spread the gospel. At each practice, prayer and sharing the gospel are components,” says John Moody.

West Conroe partners with Upward Basketball to facilitate this child and family-centered sports program. Upward Basketball



(<http://www.upward.org>) is a nationally recognized program across the United States that involved 397,469 youth in various basketball, soccer, cheering, and flag football programs during 2005. According to John, “Upward’s non-competitive approach in sports is

appealing to parents and kids who are not ‘NBA bound’.” Ultimately, the spiritual needs of the kids and families are met through mentoring and sharing the gospel at half time during every Saturday game.

According to Upward, “This evangelistic sports ministry is designed to promote community involvement, develop volunteer leadership, and share the love of Christ with children and their families through something as simple as basketball.” Along with their partnership with Upward, West Conroe also partners with a local United Methodist church as well. It has gone so

well, that the Upward approach to community involvement is expanding for the church. “We intend to use Upward in a church plant environment this summer,” says John.

Serving Today’s Orphans

James 1: 27 says, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Who are the orphans in America today? According to a 2004 report from the National Crime Prevention Council, an estimated 1.5-2 million children have at least one parent in prison and an estimated 500,000 children were in foster care in the U.S. in 2005.¹⁰

Children of Promise

In Fresno, CA, there are an estimated 10,000 children who have a parent incarcerated in a state or federal prison. Fresno actually sits in the middle of a triangle of prisons. One by One Leadership (<http://www.onebyoneleadership.com>) is a faith-based organization that engages people in urban leadership for economic, educational and spiritual transformation of this community. The organization began a mentoring initiative called The Promise Project where mentors from congregations are matched to mentoring relationships with children of prisoners. Matthew Watson, grant writer and former staff member led the successful launch of the program after helping One by One secure a \$1 million grant for the project, the largest grant in the organization’s history. The Promise Project hinges on the involvement of local churches, which provide the volunteer mentors. One By One provides the training, screening and up to \$5,000 to each congregation to help establish the mentoring services in the congregation. Most churches use part of the stipend to equip a person to lead the program initiative in their church, and training the mentor coordinators on conflict mediation, and how to give mentors training, affirmation, feedback, and recognition.

Don Simmons, member of **The Well Community Church**, Fresno, CA (<http://thewellcommunity.org>) is a mentor for the program. He admits that he is not your typical mentor. “I am a middle age white guy from the north side of town mentoring a

young man from the south side of town. When the program first launched, Matthew, the program's biggest advocate, targeted churches to get involved that were in the neighborhoods where the children of prisoners are most likely to reside. Our mentors are a rainbow of colors and a wide range of ages."

Being a mentor is not always easy. Sometimes it is not a good match with the family because expectations of the mentor's role are not aligned. Sometimes values of being on time or making it to appointments are not the same between the mentor and the family of the child in the program. Don says, "I don't always know what they are dealing with. It teaches you to examine your own life much more and be careful not to judge." To help him through the ups and downs of mentoring children of prisoners, Don says that his church supports him via his small group, rather than setting up an additional support system structure. "My support system is my life group. They pray for me, give me tickets to do things with my mentee, and ask me about my mentee. We do maintain the guidelines of confidentiality, but it is a natural support system," says Don.

A busy consultant, Don travels a lot for his work. Most people let that become an excuse for not engaging in mentorships. He hasn't let that stop him. "Everywhere I go, he wants to hear about it! I get to show him where I've been on a map and talk about my experiences. For a kid who has never been out of the state, my life gives me a lot to talk about with him," says Don. He admits that sometimes he wonders if he is giving his mentee *enough* time. "Once I'm there, I like to think I am giving him my *best* time," he shares.

When you ask a mentor why he or she does this volunteer work, Don says the answer after the first meeting might be "I go to serve." After the second or third meeting, a mentor sees a bigger picture. "When the child asks you simple questions like 'Why do you wear black socks? Why do you listen to this radio station?' you begin to realize that they do not have parents that give them answers or even the basic life skills you were given. The reasons you serve quickly becomes about a relationship."

According to One by One, without effective intervention, 70 percent of these children will

likely follow their parents' path into incarceration. These caring and compassionate mentors, like Don, stand between these children and a future in prison.

Stepping up to the foster care crisis

A report issued in 2003 by the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System, a division of the U.S. Children's Bureau, ranked foster care population by state.¹¹

State	Population	% of Children in Foster Care
1. California	97,261	18.6%
2. New York	37,067	7.1%
3. Florida	30,677	5.9%
4. Texas	22,191	4.2%
5. Pennsylvania	21,768	4.2%
6. Illinois	21,608	4.2%
7. Michigan	21,376	4.1%
8. Ohio	19,323	3.7%

These staggering statistics led **Calvary Chapel**, Fort Lauderdale, FL (<http://www.calvaryftl.org>) to change the course of their ministry and engage in solutions for children in their South Florida community. In 1997, Calvary had planned to open a school. When the senior pastor, Bob Coy, and others from the congregation began to realize that area children needed *homes* first, funds and focus was redirected. The church hired a team of four people and recruited foster parents from the congregation to help begin what is now known as 4KIDS of South Florida (<http://www.4kidsofsfl.org>), now a separate 501(c)3 organizational arm of the church.

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Working in tandem with the family ministry of the church, staff and volunteers from 4KIDS promote, educate and connect would-be foster parents with 4KIDS of South Florida. 4KIDS has grown from a grass roots organization to a booming ministry serving hundreds of children each year.

Their ministry includes many dimensions of care including providing shelter and supervision at SafePlace 4KIDS while they await a more permanent placement. Following that step, children are either placed with a foster-care family or at KidsPlace Shelter, a family-style shelter for up to six kids, age 4 to 14. This shelter allows for siblings to stay together while they await a foster home placement or reunification. Children not placed with a foster-care family or family member are welcomed into GirlsPlace (a home for teenage girls), GuysPlace and GuysPlace 2 (homes for teenage guys), and KidsPlace 2 (a home for sibling groups and children who are difficult to place).

4KIDS also facilitates adoption information. Oftentimes foster parents desire to adopt their foster children. 4KIDS is ready to come alongside these families and provide advice, mentoring, and support. Their staff is familiar with the state's requirements and walks families through the process. Those families wanting a private adoption are encouraged to contact Adoption 4KIDS (<http://www.adoption4kidsofsfl.org>), who

match courageous birth parents with committed Christian families.



Adoption 4Kids provides stable, hope-filled lives for children facing uncertain futures by connecting birth and adoptive parents.

Calvary Chapel connects volunteers, foster parents and resources to support 4KIDS and all of its various programs. In addition to their Foster Care connections, the Calvary Chapel Family Ministry offers family resources. They offer parenting classes for the church and community, family counseling, family mission trips and retreats, single parent

ministry, mentoring and opportunities to serve with the youth in crisis through the juvenile justice system in Broward County.

Improving Outcomes

There are a number of factors that can stand in the way of successful externally focused ministry to children. Here's how churches are overcoming obstacles to improve outcomes.

Volunteers

How do you invite adults to love and minister to children outside of the church? Sarah Porterfield, from The Crossing says that communication through a variety of church publications and partnering organizations is a key factor. "We create awareness of our program by advertising for mentors and tutors in our church bulletin, the outreach kiosk on campus during weekend services, and the quarterly newsletter." They also advertise volunteer opportunities through a relationship with the outreach staff and a student liaison with Vanguard University.

Short bursts of service experiences at the learning center also help people become aware of the program. The Crossing participates in the annual Orange County Serve Day, which involves a number of area churches in serving with multiple projects, including one-day projects with the learning center. She says they also host volunteer encouragement events at the church. And, one of the best ways to grow a volunteer base is "personal invitations extended by those who serve currently or have served," says Sarah.

Funding

Almost all of the programs highlighted here are provided free of charge to children and families. How do churches sustain and grow these ministries financially? By using a variety of methods, including collaboration with others, fund raising and simply aiming people's hearts to the issues facing children. Northwood Church has shown (in the example above) how collaboration between churches, schools, government and community agencies can come together to fund and support after school, food and health programs.

Sarah Porterfield from The Crossing says that the major fund raising vehicle for the Maple Learning Center is an annual golf tournament. "We have several businesses that are corporate sponsors of the center through this event. There are additional individuals who contribute throughout the year as well," says Sarah. Though they are continually seeking new avenues to develop their support base for the center, Sarah notes, "We do not accept any government or private grants that would dictate how we run our center or discourage our faith-based biblical focus and foundation."

Safety

How do churches reduce the risk factors in working with other people's children? The great fear factor in ministry with children is safety, especially when working with children outside of the family relationships within church membership. According to Childrensministry.com, playground accidents result in 17 deaths and 170,000 emergency room visits each year and

car, bus, and van accidents are one of the top three types of injuries for which churches are repeatedly sued. Additionally, two of the largest insurance companies that insure churches report they receive up to two claims a day from churches for serious injury and one a day for sexual molestation. Judi Bailey, author for Childrenministry.com writes, "A ministry that makes safety and security for kids a high priority is a witness to God's love, expressed through caring staff and volunteers."¹²

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To help protect the children she works with, Sally Williams says that tutoring volunteers are all members of the church and no tutors are allowed to be alone with any children. "We tutor in a group setting and I do background checks for sex offenders," she says.

Sarah Porterfield says that The Crossing utilizes a comprehensive application including background screening, interview process and fingerprinting. "Volunteers must also complete an involved application that includes questions about their personal faith, reasons for serving, what they hope to get out of it, etc. I personally meet with and interview each person myself as well," says Sarah. When a volunteer at the Maple Learning Center begins serving, he or she is trained and observed. "We have strict policies about contact with the students outside of the learning center and do not allow the children in the center without at least two adults present and two children present," she says. Large windows in rooms also help provide openness and safety for the children.

Parents of children who attend the Maple Learning Center are well informed about the policies and procedures. "The registration form that parents sign also requires them to initial acknowledgements of their awareness that we are not a licensed child care facility and it is the parents' responsibility to ensure that their children attend and are transported safely to and from the center," says Sarah.

Communication

How do mentors overcome communication barriers with those they are trying to serve? America is truly a melting pot. Many of the externally focused ministries to children in the above examples serve children from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Removing communication barriers between children and volunteers sometimes goes beyond language skills. Culture training can improve the outcomes for transformation in the life of a child and the family. For 70 years, Child Evangelism Fellowship has been improving communication skills with children in more than 150 countries. Six million children have been served through their various programs including after school clubs and prison ministries.

They highlighted the work of Sylvia Foth, Karin Fleegal and Ralph Edmonds in their November/December 2000 issue of *Evangelizing Today's Child* magazine.¹³ When working with African-American children, Sylvia, Child Evangelism Fellowship curriculum writer and executive director of Kidzana Ministries, shares, "Check biases at the door." Teachers need to treat children with the same acceptance regardless of race and not assume that the child comes from a broken home or is more likely to misbehave because of color."

Working with Asian children presents unique challenges and opportunities. Karin is the children ministry director of May Valley Alliance Church and writer for Child Evangelism Fellowship. She shares, "Asians are often puzzled by the casualness between American teachers and students. This can actually hinder participation." She suggests giving children plenty of observation time before developing high level interaction. Another important lesson she has learned is differences in body language. Asian children are

often taught not to make eye contact with their elders, but to gaze at their feet in respect.

Pastor Ralph Edmonds worked with Chicago Hispanic communities for 18 years; He is also a writer for Child Evangelism Fellowship. Ralph recommends getting to know the families of the children. “As the family sees that you genuinely care they will open up to you and to the gospel.” He also cautions volunteers to not be surprised by negative comments about the United States or Anglos. “This demonstrates that your Hispanic friends are either beginning to trust you or are testing you to see if you are open to honest dialogue.”

The Making of a Movement

On September 4, 2006, the world, including children of all ages, mourned the loss of Australian conservationist and television personality, Steve Irwin. Omar Reyes believes that there were many things to learn about service to and for children through Irwin’s life. “While watching the ceremonies celebrating his life, I realized that Steve Irwin started a movement—a true, *bono-fide* movement. Thousands of people are now giving their lives to animal preservation because of his work. Here was a man whose influence will go on for generations. What were the keys to his success?”

Omar outlines two points to creating a movement as successfully as *The Crocodile Hunter*. “First, he had passion. He was very passionate

and believed in animal preservation. His finances were right there with it, too. He created zoo and animal conservation funds. He put his money where his passion was. Second, he touched presidents, scientists in the field as well as the little child. His life spanned every generation. He brought the message down to where kids understood and appealed to the kid in all of us. You can see his legacy already living in his daughter,” says Omar.

If churches fail to span the generations Omar says, “We have a shelf life. When you look at the life of Christ, what kind of people were attracted to him? Children and sinners. There was something about Jesus and kids related to him. Sinners related to him. The normal church today attracts neither. We will die out if we fail to bridge that. I saw Steve Irwin’s influence span every generation and embrace his passion. The church must find ways to do the same.”

A Legacy of Service

How important is it to help kids receive service as well as learn to give in service to others? The Bible records several accounts of families that served together such as Noah and his sons (Genesis 7-9); Aaron and his sons (Exodus 27:21) and Joshua’s household (Joshua 24:15). George Barna writes, “Attitudes about the viability and value of church participation form early in life. Habits related to the practice of one’s faith develop when one is young and change surprisingly little over time.”¹⁴ Many churches are implementing one-day service events to complete large projects and give people short-term opportunities to try serving. Eric Swanson, Externally Focused Leadership Community director encourages churches to provide many family-friendly projects for all ages and abilities. “Find projects that should be so easy that every family member could do something,” says Eric. At his home church, **Calvary Bible Church**, in Boulder, CO (<http://www.calvarybible.com>) Eric annually participates in ShareFest, a day of area churches serving the local public schools. “I’ve seen a single mom scrub down lockers with her kids and grandparents serve with their grandchildren. During one-day service events, you can create a mechanism by where good things happen in the long-term for the next generation,” says Eric.

If you visit the Kids’ Cafe at the Christian Center, you’ll likely find Chuck Langford, associate minister, there along with several youth and children who aren’t eating a plate of spaghetti,

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but serving it. “We have five words we say a lot around here: serve, serve, serve, serve, and then serve,” says Chuck. This emphasis on service isn’t just for adults. This message flows down to the youth and children. And when the youth group comes to serve, Chuck says, “I don’t micro-manage them. It’s amazing watching them step up.” That includes watching his daughter, Hannah (10), serve dessert to the entire room of 50 kids. Why does Hannah do this weekly?

“Because these kids need food. This is their dinner,” she says. Kids eating at the Cafe see what giving is all about through the servant peer leadership shown by Hannah.

Calvary Community Church, Westlake Village, CA (<http://www.calvarycc.org>) is working hard to serve children and teach serving as well. Vanessa DeVere, Community Care Director, wanted to engage families in meaningful service together with her ministry, Angel Threads. Angel Threads provides clothing and necessary items to Honduras, a place she has visited several times. To prepare for hurricane season, Vanessa organized a service day at her home for families where they prepared first aide kits and clothing boxes. “Parents sorted clothing while the kids wrote letters to go in the packets. The kids also packed the first aide kits. While working together, we talked to the kids about missionaries there and the kids who live there,” says Vanessa.

Ariel Holochuck, member of **First Baptist Church Elk Grove**, in Sacramento, CA (<http://www.fbceg.org>) is one of those next generation servants. At 14, she could be spending her summer shopping at the mall or playing at the pool. Instead, she chooses to serve at a camp for special needs children called Camp Barnabas which is connected to the ministry at the church. Ariel says, “I felt very blessed after serving as a volunteer at Camp Barnabas. I worked as a barnstormer, which was basically kitchen patrol. To my surprise cleaning dishes was tons of fun!”

Besides kitchen duty, Ariel served campers their meals and had opportunity to talk with them one on one. “Knowing that I was helping people with mental and physical disabilities enjoy a week at summer camp was a blessing to me. During the week I had a handful of spiritually deep and mentally challenging conversations with several campers, which I thought I wouldn’t have. Some of the campers, to my complete surprise, *are* the brightest crayons in the box.” Ariel admits that she had a stereotypical thought process towards others before her Camp Barnabas experience. “The world makes people who aren’t the same as us seem like complete strangers with no feelings. Camp Barnabas really opened up my mind to people I had avoided before. I was completely wrong!”

Ariel’s mom, Mary, says that the camp experience had a tremendous effect on her daughter, long after the week of camp has ended. “She is now more sensitive to people who are physically or mentally challenged and makes a special effort to make eye contact with those in wheel chairs.” In a very polite but firm way, Ariel told her parents that if family vacation plans interfered with serving at Camp Barnabas, she would not be with them on vacation. “She is very certain of her new priorities in life,” shares Mary.

George Barna notes, “When we do not tap into this beautiful and wonderful resource of ministering to children, what is lost? The result is that each generation feels as if it is re-inventing Christianity.”¹⁵ By giving children like Ariel and Hannah opportunities to serve



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others, externally focused ministry will not be a wave that passes, but a sustainable movement, improving the future of the church's ability to reach the lost. Eric says, "Imagine raising up another generation of kids that did service projects and then found it hard to walk away from faith when they went away to college because they could not walk away from the history of faith in action."

Making Deposits

Working with children, especially those in the community who may come and go out of a program, can be frustrating work. "People don't always get involved because they do not see immediate results. You have to pour your life into kids and realize that you may never see the results," encourages Omar. He makes this statement not simply from observation, but from his own childhood experiences. Born and raised in Belize, Omar says Canadian missionaries had a huge influence on his life. "They came in 50 years ago and won my parents to Christ. All the

way from elementary to college, the missionaries taught me. I was the kid that they reached out to. I was on the other side. I didn't know how much it formed in me until much later in life."

After he left Belize, the missionaries never saw him again and may never know what an impact they had on his life. "I would go in Monday and stay all week, like a boarding school. Those missionaries had me cutting wood and baking bread and they poured their life into me. And yet, I grew up rebellious, and most of them don't know what's going on with me now." Omar's own life is testimony that to work and change a generation means pouring out and leaving the results up to God.

"Abraham should be our example of what it means to pour your life out and change a nation," he says. The Bible says that Abraham gave his life to something that he could only see from a far off and Hebrews 11: 1, 2 says; "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for." Omar says, "You cannot care for glory if you are going to work with kids. It is not the work that pleases God. It's because of their faith that God commended Abraham, Moses, David, Samuel and others. Even if we don't see immediate results in serving children, we have faith that God will bring the results and change a nation and a generation."

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Source: <http://www.census.gov/popest/national/asrh/NC-EST2005-sa.html> Annual Estimates of the population by Sex and Five-Year Age Groups for the United States: April 1,2000 to July 1, 2005. Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau.
- ² Barna, George. Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions, Gospel Light, Ventura, CA, 2003, p 18.
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- ⁵ <http://www.fathers.com/urban>
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- ⁷ http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/about_us.cfm
- ⁸ <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/censr-18.pdf>
- ⁹ <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/07/03/rise.kids.sports/index.html>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.fastennetwork.org/qryArticleDetail.asp?ArticleId=001CFD60-4A47-47FA-A7FE-01F6860B55FD>
- ¹¹ http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm
- ¹² <http://www.childrensministry.com/article.asp?ID=1041>
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- ¹⁴ Barna, George, Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions, Gospel Light, Ventura, CA, 2003, p 41.
- ¹⁵ Barna, George, Transforming Children Into Spiritual Champions, Gospel Light, Ventura, CA 2003, pg. 92.