

Children's Rights Focus of IYC

Children's rights are getting attention and action from Churches in preparation for observing the United Nations sponsored International Year of the Child in 1979.



The observance was formally announced in 1976 by The United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child. That document calls, among other things, for "opportunities and facilities" to help the child develop "physically, mentally, morally, spiritually, and socially ... in conditions of freedom and dignity."

In the United States, the National Council of Churches (NCC) has taken the lead both in coordinating programs of its member denominations and sponsoring projects in communities to promote child welfare. A working group on "The needs and rights of children" has been organized within the NCC's Division for Church and Society to organize this work.

The Rev. Eileen W. Lindner, a United Presbyterian minister and staff associate for youth concerns with the NCC, has been named by President Carter to a 25-member panel that will promote projects in connection with the International Year of the Child.

She and James A. Hamilton, director of the NCC's Washington office, declared in an article they co-authored for Christianity and Crisis magazine last year that "if there is to be a national policy toward the needs and rights of children and youth, we Christians have something to offer."

Entitled All Our Children: The American Family Under Pressure, the report contended that the central goal of public policy on the family should be "to give parents more authority and responsibility in bringing up their children." Under the Child and Family Justice Project, NCC staff will help to organize committees in 200 communities. Each committee will survey at least 300 people to ascertain the problems of local children and families, launch public-education campaigns to illustrate the relationships of the problems and the public policy, and aid local projects that address the problems.

International Year of the Child was given a strong endorsement by the late Pope Paul VI during a special audience he held in June for Henry R. Labouisse, the American executive director of UNICEF, and John Grun, director of the IYC Secretariat in New York.

The Pope noted that the general objectives of the UN observance include "enhancing the awareness of the special needs of children in the part of decision-makers and the public," and promoting "sustained activities for the benefit of children."



Child advocacy projects are being started in several U.S. denominations to focus on these and other problems of children which have not received major attention in public policy planning.

In a study paper entitled "On Being a Child," the Program Agency Board of the United Presbyterian Church has pointed to what it describes as crises in "The health-care system which discriminates against the children of the poor, especially, in the education system whose failure to help all children learn has led to widespread disillusionment with schooling, in the justice system whose critics charge that juveniles are denied basic rights and are not rehabilitated, and in the religious system whose traditional attention to children is being obscured by other preoccupations while other groups have become concerned with value education and deliberately ignore the faith dimension."

Franna Diamond, program specialist for the Children's Defense Fund of Washington, D.C., says that "children are the poorest age group in our population; they constitute an even larger group than the elderly poor." Federal government statistics also indicate that 10 million children in the U.S. have never received any medical care, half the nation's children have never seen a dentist, and one million children were physically abused by their parents in 1975.

In reporting such information to a recent task force meeting of the United Methodist Church's Women's Division, Ms. Diamond cautioned, "The temptation will be to debate the issues rather than doing something about them. We know what children need. We don't need a study on hungry children. We need to do something about feeding them."

The United Methodist agency is coordinating a variety of programs for International Year of the Child, including distribution of resource materials, sponsorship of several regional consultations, and a human rights seminar focusing on children, to be held in New York City next February.

In addition to developing their own programs, most Churches that are involved in IYC efforts have also expressed interest in helping to develop a more broad-based approach, along the lines of the programming being implemented by the National Council of Churches.

Priest Began It All

The current observance of the International Year of the Child is a priest's "baby."

The Belgian priest, who thought up the idea and nurtured it through a formal decree of the United Nations General Assembly, is Canon Joseph Moerman.

Canon Moerman, quoted in a King Features Syndicate interview, made available to the Courier-Journal by the United States Committee for UNICEF, said recently, "The International Year of the Child is everyone's concern, because children are the future, and children are everywhere face problems."

"It's not just the problems of these needs," he said, "but the

psychological, moral and educational problems that beset children in the industrial nations."

"Think about teenage suicides," he urged, "the statistics on unwed mothers, drug addiction, the increase in child abuse, the problems of uprooted children of migrants or refugees and the need not to create new ghettos for them."

"Perhaps," he opined, "it is a good thing that the International Year of the Child is to take place in a trough of world economic crisis because we have known for some time that man's happiness is not to be found in the unlimited increase of material possessions, and that this technical civilization very often turns man against himself."

It was Canon Moerman's work as secretary general of the International Child Bureau of Geneva, Switzerland, and his association with children of Africa, that led him to the notion that a year of special study on children's needs should be established.

Canon Moerman was able to cut through miles of international red tape to advance his idea. Not only have two popes endorsed the priest's program, but 115 nations have established national commissions to study children's problems this year. He estimates that more than half a billion people are involved in the project.

The priest believes that the breakdown of the family is at the root of many of the problems to be studied this year.

"When I analyze it," he said, "the origin of many of the problems besetting children is the family crisis. It involves either broken families or incapable families. The family crisis is symptomatic of the crisis in our society."

"Our whole world will collapse if we don't save the family."

Although the year is only just underway, "We already perceive the need for follow-up," he said.

But the year's observance is not just for large committees, Canon Moerman said. "It's a year during which people should question themselves about children — their children, the children of friends, the children they meet in the course of each day. It's for parents, teachers, police officers, neighbors, everyone."

While serving as a spur to programs designed to meet the needs of children, the International Year of the Child may also lead Churches to develop a "theology of childhood." The Rev. John Pridmore, Anglican chaplain at King Edward's School in Surrey, England, has made a tentative approach to this question in an article in Third Way, a British evangelical magazine.

"Our theology of childhood," he writes, "must concentrate on the 'continuous now' of the young child's life. The norm of that child's humanity, and of his relationship to God, is given in the childhood of Jesus, what he is to be now, not what one day he might be. A child at any age may be wholly human and wholly God's. Theologically, this is an inescapable consequence of our faith in the incarnation."

Urging the Churches to accept children as whole beings rather than as "developing adults," Pridmore declares that "the childhood of Jesus does not allow the church any understanding of childhood that measures the child by what, not yet being an adult, he lacks. Jesus was a child."

International Year of the Child provides an opportunity for action from all groups in society, but particularly from Churches. As Alan Pifer, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, says, "Churches continue to reach deep into the lives of a large proportion of families and children in communities across the nation. They should have a natural interest in playing a greater role in the development of public policies that affect family welfare."

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