Embedded in the 2010 Seventh-day Adventist Annual Council Action Document entitled “God’s Promised Gift” is the affirmation of the church’s recognition that “God is going to use children” in the last mighty revival. The strategy document “Tell the World,” in its turn, highlights youth retention and mission participation under Adventist goals for in-reach. Significantly, children are not even mentioned in this five-year plan, except in a quotation referring to students in Adventist institutions.

How are Seventh-day Adventists as a church to participate in God’s work of engaging children in this last mighty work? Are children essential or incidental to the mission of God? Who are the children that God calls the church to engage during this last mighty work? Must the church’s engagement of children of necessity be primarily incidental or secondary to that of their parents? These questions and more merit our best thinking in view of the realities of our time.

Ellen White, in a letter dated 1892, said, “From the light given me of God, I know that as a people we have not improved our opportunities for educating and training the youth” (1970:581). A sober review of the present realities of children in our world, and our corresponding work among them may bring us to the same point (Annual Statistical Report for 2009).

Indeed, a vital component of revival and reformation must be in improving the Adventist Church’s opportunities to reach up for the children of our world, reach across to the children in our congregations, and to reach out to the overwhelming majority of children who have as yet not heard the everlasting gospel in any context. The challenges and descriptions of the world’s children as listed below portray children as a huge percentage of the world’s population that is marginalized, stigmatized, and at risk.
Why Is Mission to Children Important?

Children Are Uniquely Receptive to the Everlasting Gospel

Christ, knowing that children would more readily listen to him and accept him as their Redeemer, adjusted his teaching to them, simplifying “His important lessons to meet their childish understanding” (White 1970:579). Using the well-known adage “as the twig is bent, the tree is inclined,” Mrs. White acknowledged the developmental principle that early training and experience is, in most instances, life defining.

When through Christian witness people stamp God’s Word and ways on the “plastic” minds of children, he works to ensure that the lessons are never effaced. We should learn the lesson from Christ’s outreach to children “that the hearts of the young are most susceptible to the teachings of Christianity, easy to influence toward piety and virtue, and strong to retain the impressions received” (White 1952:275).

The Barna Research Group, cited in an article in Christianity Today, corroborates this by indicating, “What you believe at age 13 is pretty much what you’re going to die believing.” Their research shows that “children between the ages of 5 and 13 have a 32 percent probability of accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior. That likelihood drops to 4 percent for teenagers between the ages of 14 and 18, and ticks back up to 6 percent for adults older than 18” (Kennedy 2004:53).

Children Comprise a Third of the World’s Population

The second reason children warrant specific attention is their number. In the countries classified as “least developed,” children below the age of fifteen comprise 41 percent of the population. In the countries classified as “less developed,” excluding China, children below the age of 15 comprise 33 percent of the population. Almost one third of the world’s population—27 percent—is children under the age of 15 (Population Reference Bureau 2010:6), making children arguably the single largest population group. For a detailed analysis of per country ratio of children below the age of 15 see http://www.prb.org/Datafinder/Topic/Bar.aspx?sort=v&order=d&variable=94

In Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, there is almost a 1-to-1 ratio between working-age adults (classified as ages 15-64) and children under 14 (World Population Highlights 2010). At least 65 percent of the world’s children are classified as “at risk” (McConnell 2007:7). There is “a web of risks and vulnerabilities” that underlie the classification of a child as being at risk, “including sexual abuse and exploitation; trafficking; hazardous labor; violence; living or working on the streets; the impact of armed conflict, including children’s use by armed forces and groups; harmful
practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child marriage; lack of access to justice; and unnecessary institutionalization, among others” (UNICEF Child Protection Strategy 2008:2) Essentially, when a child’s needs for survival, development, and well-being are compromised, that child is said to be at risk.

Seventy Percent of Children Live in the 10/40 Window

A fourth factor that merits focus on children is the fact that more than 70 percent of the world’s children reside in the 10/40 Window (Koh 2010:18). Given the Adventist Church’s concern for prioritizing work in the 68 countries in the 10/40 Window, it is worthy of note that children below the age of 15 constitute the majority in two-thirds of these countries, and 33 percent of the entire 10/40 Window population is comprised of children under the age of 15.

As crucial as these four factors are, the most significant rallying cry to the strategic engagement of the church in behalf of and to children comes from Christ himself, for he commissions us not only to bring children to him, but to work against that which would keep children from him (Luke 18:15-17; Matt 18:1-6; 28:18-20, emphasis mine). This mandate to work for children goes beyond those children that are our own, to that vast number who are not part of our families.

Source: PRB 2010 World Population Data Sheet.

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The State of the World’s Children
Children Are Not Receiving Basic Needs

Children are not receiving the basic needs of food, health, education, and shelter. More than 1 billion of the world’s children lack access to basic resources and services necessary for their survival. It is estimated that 148 million children under five years of age are underweight, 19 million of whom are born as such, and are thus vulnerable to the associated developmental challenges (State of the World’s Children 2009:4). It is estimated that 8.8 million children die before the age of five every year in our world of preventable causes, and survivable diseases, and four million of these die within the first month of birth from causes that could be prevented by simple nutrition and health education (State of the World’s Children 2009:5).

Children Suffer from Prejudice and Inequality

Children are also suffering prejudice and inequity based on their ethnicity, their abilities, their gender, the cultures within which they are born, and more. For instance, in six child-marriage high prevalence countries within the 10/40 Window, more than 60 percent of 20-24 year old women were married as children. Globally, more than 64 million young women 20-24 years old have reported that they were married before age 18. Half of these women live in South Asia (Progress for Children 2009:26). Of the 64 million, roughly 50 percent of this number was married before the age of 15. By contrast, in only 7 countries does the prevalence of child marriage for boys exceed 10 percent (Progress for Children 2009:10, 11).

It is conservatively estimated, using Research International’s rough calculation estimate of 10 percent of the world’s population acquiring disability at some point in life, that more than 150 million children are disabled, and suffer cultural and societal ostracism on account of their disabilities, particularly within the majority world (UNICEF and Disabled Children and Youth 2003). However UNICEF indicated in 2010, from a survey of 22 countries, that the disparities in risk of disability are huge, indicating that from respondent data disability ranged from 3 percent of children in Uzbekistan to a full 48 percent in the Central African Republic (Progress for Children 2009:18).

Furthermore, of the over 30 million persons under the responsibility of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees due to displacement, more than 18 million are children, and often the displacement has been due to ethnicity (State of the World’s Children 2009:9)
Children Are Ravaged by War

One billion children live in countries or territories affected by armed conflict. Aside from children being forced to become refugees or internally displaced persons, UNICEF states, “More than 2 million children have died as a direct result of armed conflict over the last decade, and more than three times that number, at least 6 million children, have been permanently disabled or seriously injured.” Furthermore, “An estimated 300,000 child soldiers—boys and girls under the age of 18—are involved in more than 30 conflicts worldwide. Child soldiers are used as combatants, messengers, porters, cooks, and to provide sexual services. Some are forcibly recruited or abducted, others are driven to join by poverty, abuse, and discrimination, or to seek revenge for violence enacted against themselves and their families” (Children in Conflict and Emergencies 2010).

Children Are Abused and Exploited

Although it is hard to nail down trafficking data due to the illicit nature of the vice, the Initiative Against Sexual Trafficking (IAST) states that over 1 million children are entering the sex trade annually. According
to UNICEF data, approximately thirty million children have lost their childhood innocence through sexual exploitation over the past 30 years (IAST).

Admittedly, the full extent of violence against children is difficult to quantify, but from data compiled by the Innocent Research Center for the UN Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children in 2006, UNICEF estimates that between 500 million to 1.5 billion children experience violence annually (State of the World’s Children 2009:8). Three out of four children in the Middle East and North Africa are subject to physical abuse. Children suffer domestic violence, are living on the streets, and are sold into hazardous labor (Progress for Children 2009:28).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that one third of the children in sub-Saharan Africa—where child labor is most common—are engaged in child labor. Further, it estimates that more than two-thirds of all labor is in the agricultural sector, and found that in rural areas, children, particularly girl children begin agricultural labor as young as 5-7 years old. UNICEF estimates that 150 million children 5-14 years old are out of school, due to their engagement in child labor, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty that necessitates their present labor (Progress for Children 2009:15).

By the term “child labor” the ILO in the above data is referring to three categories:
1. The worst forms of child labour, including slavery; prostitution and pornography; illicit activities; and work likely to harm children’s health, safety or morals, as defined in ILO Convention No. 182.
2. Employment below the minimum age of 15, as established in ILO Convention No. 138.
3. Hazardous unpaid household services, including household chores performed for long hours, in an unhealthy environment, in dangerous locations, and involving unsafe equipment or heavy loads (Progress for Children 2009:16, 22).

Children Are Suffering Family Breakdown

In 2007, 24.9 million children in Eastern and Southern Africa were orphans. More than a quarter of the children under 15 in Lesotho, South Africa, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe are orphans (Progress for Children 2009:24). Globally 2 million children are in institutional care around the world (19), and 1 million children are detained in the justice system at any one time (State of the World’s Children 2009:9). In the United States in 2009 the State of Mississippi had 48 percent of its children living in single-parent homes (The Annie E. Casey Foundation). Domestic violence, the ever increasing divorce rate, and the quest for careers are threatening the
norm of children growing up in families.

As averse as most of us are to statistics, these are but a portion of the numbers. The stark reality is that the vast majority of the world’s children are in crisis. In the face of this reality, what must the Seventh-day Adventist Church offer?

A Call to Action: We Must Do Who We Are

It is widely recognized in the childcare industry that the sheer magnitude of the problem leaves the church as the only capable entity to address the challenge of children at risk with the scale and longevity that any credible response requires (McConnell 2007:7).

The children of the world are uniquely within the reach of the Seventh-day Adventist Church because a crucial type of our nature and role as a remnant people is that of the shepherd laboring under the True Shepherd. As such, we, of all Christendom, cannot afford to exclude ourselves from this critical component of the Missio Dei and engagement in the strategic mission to children at risk (Luke 15; John 10).

As those called to shepherd those that are God’s sheep in every fold, we must recognize that these children too, and the millions like, yet unlike them in our churches, in our schools, in our social circles, are those we are called to seek and to search for.

Are not these children the weak we are to strengthen, the sick we are to heal, the broken we are to bind up, the driven away we are to bring back, the lost we are to seek? Are not these too that have been scattered because there was no shepherd, and so have become prey for all that is evil in our world? (Ezek 34).

As such, I humbly submit that the Seventh-day Adventist Church needs to repray, rethink, and restudy its mission strategy so that it can include an adequate component that coheres with the reality that almost a full one-third of the world that it has been commissioned to tell is comprised of children whose plight has been ever so slightly highlighted in this short article.

Works Cited


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