

A PREZ RELEASE

from AGTS

(Monthly commentary from the President of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary)

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It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood. . .

A recent article in Christianity Today highlighted the work of Fred Rogers. An ordained Presbyterian minister, he is better known to children as Mr. Rogers on the PBS children's show Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. For over 30 years Mr. Rogers has carried out his calling as "an evangelist to work with children and families through mass media." In contrast to the frenetic pacing and imagery of contemporary children's television, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood seems to be hopelessly outclassed and boring. Yet as one media expert has observed, "Fred Rogers' life work has been to give all children a place where they are safe, educated, respected and loved."

I suppose any parent or child who has ever watched Mr. Rogers Neighborhood has an opinion about that show. But opinions notwithstanding, a life committed to giving children a place where they are safe, educated, respected and loved is a life's goal that is commendable and worth emulating. It is commendable because those reasonable conditions (i.e. safety, education, respect and love) are increasingly in short supply around the world. The political regimes that existed to create havoc for children in the times of Moses and Jesus seem to live on in the 21st Century. Guerrilla armies in Liberia, Sierre Leone and Myanmar are led by murderous children, many no older than 10 years of age, who swagger about with AK-47's bigger than they are and kill their enemies with not a twinge of conscience.

Children are the target of slave traders in North Africa and purveyors of prostitution schemes in Thailand, India and the Philippines. In the more affluent nations of the world child abuse is reaching epidemic proportions. In globalized economies children are targeted as consumers from the time they are born. Toys R' Us, Baby Gap and Lucky Charms create consumers of children with chilling efficiency.

To long for the days of Anne of Avonlea, Walton's Mountain and Leave It To Beaver is most likely an effort in futility. We live in a world of Columbine High School massacres and 13- year-old honor students who shoot their teachers in the head for being disciplined after throwing water balloons on the last day of classes. I do not want to take up this commentary simply chronicling the horrific and unjust misuse of children globally nor bemoaning the loss of pristine state of children's innocence to Internet pornography and A.D.D. producing Saturday morning cartoons. If we have any sense of history at all we must realize that children have always been pawns of ideologues, dictators, perverts and lazy parenting. While Martin Luther's Reformation impacted Christianity significantly, let us not forget that Europe was awash in war and revolt during Luther's lifetime. In the face of one particular revolt by peasants in 1524, Luther challenged politicians and landowners to devote at least as much money to children displaced by war as was spent on firearms and armies who waged war. One hundred years later as the 30-Year War ended in Germany, 10 million of 16 million people in that nation lay dead because of that conflict. Yet emerging from the ashes of that conflict were people like August Francke who created simple grass-roots systems of orphanages and schools that salvaged an entire generation of child refugees. Robert Raikes' Sunday school emerged in response to the ravages of the Industrial Revolution in England that tore families apart and created dysfunction to rival anything we know in the 21st Century. By the time of Raikes' death over half of all children who knew how to read and write in England had learned to do so in Sunday school.

The lesson from history is simple: effective response to tragedies involving children can be accomplished by people who are motivated by God's concern for children. They see children not merely as the object of romantic human compassion, but objects of God's love. Jesus embraced children – against the culture of his day, Jesus said, there is space in My Kingdom for children. Jesus even says that children exhibit the characteristics of citizens of the Kingdom, i. e. they are trusting and ready to give Jesus a hearing. If Jesus' observation is that children are central to the Kingdom, then we need to view today's worldwide epidemic of children at risk very carefully. Luther, Francke and Raikes understood a very basic principle in their response to their era's dilemmas. Transformation of society's woes requires our deepest belief that true transformation of earthly dilemmas occurs when God's transforming

power comes through a Christian community (local church) II Cor. 5: 17-20. This is not just the task of the experts and professionals. This is the purview of those who live under the rule of the King. Answers need not wait for huge funding, the next children's ministries conference or an army of professionals to solve the problem. That's why I wonder if the simplicity of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood could teach us all a lesson. Could it be the power of the "Neighborhood" is in its simplicity. The tragedy of our world's exploitation of children will ultimately be responded to by Sunday school teachers who teach the Bible faithfully; . . . parents and grandparents who see the children in their community and church as "their kids"; by children's ministers who minister to whole families, not just a select age group and by churches large and small who in their own way and empowered by the Spirit say "Won't you be my neighbor?" through word and deed.

Every child deserves to grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men (Luke 2:52). May we see come to pass a true kingdom miracle which the prophet Malachi dreamed of. . . when the hearts of fathers and children would be bound together. (Mal. 4:6).

That would truly be a beautiful day in the neighborhood!

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Check it out. . .

BOOKS

For more information on issues like the church's response to children at risk, I'd recommend a brand new volume Mission as Transformation edited by Viney Samuel and Christ Sugden. This book and many like it can be checked out at www.regnumbooks.com. The publisher, Regnum Books International specializes in focusing on biblical response to crucial current issues. (You might even see my name on a recently published book by Regnum.)

UPCOMING EVENT

Leadership Roundtable 2000

Sponsored by AGTS

St. Louis, Missouri, October 30-31, 2000

"Emerging Church Models for 21st Century Ministry"

Hear Alton Garrison, pastor, First Assembly of God, North Little Rock, Arkansas, speak on "Renewal and the Established Church,"

Hear Doug Oss, pastor, Capital Christian Center, Salt Lake City, speak on "Renewal and Generation X,"

Hear Ray Berryhill, pastor, Evangel Assembly of God, Chicago, speak on "Renewal and the City,"

Hear Paul Grabill, pastor, Assembly of God, State College, Pennsylvania, speak on "Renewal Impacting an Entire Community," and

Hear Ron McManus, president, Equip Ministries, Atlanta.

Space will be limited!

The Leadership Roundtable 2000 will be held at the Renaissance Hotel adjacent to the St. Louis Airport. Registration fee is \$175 (before October 2, discounted rate of \$150). Fee includes all meals and computer disks of all presentations. To register or for more information contact jeutsler@agseminary.edu or call 800-467-AGTS.

Hotel reservations (\$79 per night) must be made directly with the hotel by calling 888-340-2594