



Early Childhood Helps Build Churches

by Carolyn Burwell

As a former children's pastor, it is easy for me to emphasize that early childhood is one of the most important ministries in the church. While all of the reasons may not be correctly prioritized, most people would agree: ***If there isn't a place for the little ones, the parents won't come.***

Is it possible that early childhood can grow a church? I think the answer is a definite "yes"! Many research articles indicate that when young couples have children, they feel the need to attend church. While children are learning and growing spiritually, their parents will be participating in classes that will also effectively meet their needs.

While the desire to attend is there, the response isn't automatic. The church must do its part to attract and keep young couples with children. I spoke with several children's pastors to see what they were doing in early childhood that would cause parents to attend. While many of them shared special events, everyone I spoke with said they felt the key to growing a church and attracting new parents through early childhood was having consis-

tent week-to-week Sunday and mid-week programs. When they had the following, parents were eager to leave their children and would return:

- Clean, decorated, and age-appropriately equipped rooms
- Sufficient (child to adult ratio), trained, cheerful, and prepared workers
- Planned and prepared teaching for the children



- A way to contact parents during services
- Policies (safety, security, health) in place

While special events and activities were important, the regularly scheduled classes were the most beneficial and attractive to young parents.

Here are some of the responses for special activities:

• **Baby Dedications:** While these are consistently done in most churches, Pastor Petrice Wilkins, from Braeswood Assembly of God in Houston, Texas, responded that they use baby dedications as an evangelistic tool. Those parents interested in having their children dedicated must enroll in a course that thoroughly explains the plan of salvation and the responsibilities of a parent. It has been very successful in reaching new families and strengthening young couples.

• **Parenting Classes:** Classes designed to give instruction and help for parents of preschoolers. These elective classes are held during Sunday School, Wednesday evenings, or weekdays.

• **MOPS—Mothers of Preschoolers:** This program is widely and effectively used in many churches throughout the United States. It is usually held during the day, but some are held in the evenings.

• **Mommy & Me Class:** Similar to MOPS, but mother and child(ren) are together in the class. It is both fun and informative. The class is usually in two parts: parent and child together

