



It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

by Byron D. Klaus, President, AGTS

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 thirty 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."

Targeting Children

I suppose any parent or child who has ever watched *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* has an opinion about that show. 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, Sierra Leone, and Myanmar are led by murderous children, many no older than ten years of age, who swagger about with AK-47s bigger than they are and kill their enemies with not a twinge of conscious.

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 thirteen-year-old honor students who shoot their teachers in the head for disciplining them after throwing water balloons on the last day of classes. I do not want to take up this com-

mentary simply chronicling the horrific and unjust misuse of children globally nor bemoaning the loss of the pristine state of children's innocence to Internet pornography and A.D.D.-producing Saturday morning cartoons.

World Changers

If we have any sense of history at all, we must realize that children have always been pawns of ideologies, 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 thirty-year war ended in Germany, ten million of sixteen 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.

A Lesson From History

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 His 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 (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

This is not just the task of the experts and professionals. This is the preview 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 is why I wonder if the simplicity of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* could teach us all a lesson. Could it be that 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; by parents and grandparents who see the children in their communities and churches 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 (Malachi 4:6).

That would be a truly beautiful day in the neighborhood!

Questions For Further Study—

1. What should be the underlying motivation in responding to tragedies involving children?
2. Who should be responsible for the transformation of children's lives?
3. List three steps you can take to reach troubled children in your community.
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 - 2)
 - 3)