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## CHILD DEDICATION

### *And a Little Child Shall Lead Them*

## The Kingdom Belongs to These

BY BETHANY SPICHER

*Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood is being made, his mind is being developed. To him we cannot say tomorrow. His name is today.*

—Nobel Laureate Gabriela Mistral

Children are famous for living here and now. Rarely persuaded by parents’ promises of “later,” they want to see and do everything today.

Jesus chided his disciples for turning away the children who came for a blessing, even though they interrupted a debate with the Pharisees. “Let the little children come to me,” he said, “and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14, NIV).

In all his teaching, Jesus emphasized that the kingdom of God has to change the way we live our lives in the minutes and hours that are today. In this year’s *Washington Memo* series, we are examining church practices—rituals like Communion and baptism—and their everyday implications beyond the sanctuary doors.

This issue focuses on child dedication. More than a one-time ceremony, child dedication is a life-long congregational covenant to create an environment where children are nurtured. In the following pages, we ask, “What if the U.S. government considered a similar covenant with children before declaring war, cutting taxes or allocating funding?”

As it is, children are usually the last-consulted and the first-affected when governments around the globe make decisions. And because of the power of the United States, the way we structure our society and economy can affect all the children of the world—for good or ill. In this issue, we explore how our foreign policy might look if we consulted children scarred by war or orphaned by AIDS.

In our own country, the federal government can’t seem to find money to fund health care, education, welfare, and housing for children—even as Congress cuts taxes and increases military expenditures. In this issue, we imagine how our domestic agenda might be different if we asked children trapped in the juvenile justice system or denied welfare benefits.

Also in this issue, Immanuel Mennonite Church provides an example of a congregation that takes dedication to children from the nursery to the neighborhood. And, in excerpts from the winning entries in our Public Policy Essay and Speech Contest, high school youth share their vision for wise foreign policies and just domestic agendas.

Children aren’t served by rhetoric about homeland security or economic stimulus if it doesn’t deliver the resources to meet their everyday needs. As our churches and communities make good on their covenants to children and call our government to the same commitment, we move—like children—toward the kingdom of God here and now. ■

Children are usually the last-consulted and the first-affected when governments around the globe make decisions.

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

**“I am a little boy. I have the heart of an old man,” lamented Charlie, a 7-year-old Palestinian.**

## Bread or Stones?

Child dedications were one of my favorite events as a pastor. They were sacred congregational moments—unscripted infants cradled by parents and congregation, together celebrating new life and promising to create a nurturing environment.

Not all children are so lucky.

While some 40 countries have campaigns to ban child soldiers, more than 300,000 children under age 18—some as young as age 7—are currently fighting in conflicts worldwide. Child soldiers, both boys and girls, are sent on suicide missions, forced to blaze paths through heavily mined fields so that senior soldiers can pass through safely, and used as sex slaves for military commanders. Children who survive are permanently scarred by such experiences.

Other children may not be required to fight, but are also traumatized by war. Last year, Palestinian children sent postcards to President Bush appealing for his intervention to help end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their messages—which could well reflect the fears of many Iraqi, Israeli, Colombian or U.S. children—were gripping reminders of the impact of violence.

“Every time the sun comes up I feel that death is near,” wrote 13-year-old Luna from the West Bank. “I am a little boy. I have the heart of an old man,” lamented 7-year-old Charlie. “All people sleep on beds, we sleep under them,” wrote Zakieh, 14. “I forget what I learn at school because I’m afraid,” said 11-year-old Manet.

I delivered more than 1,300 of these postcards to the White House last summer. The staffer who received them was captivated by their powerful messages and quickly invited his colleagues to come see the cards. This spring I went back to the White House to appeal for alternatives to another war with Iraq. As I walked down the corridor in the Old Executive Office Building one White House aide came over to speak. She didn’t remember my name but she remembered something more important: “You’re the person who brought those postcards from Palestinian children.” The cards and their words had made a deep impression.

Jesus assumed that, even in our brokenness, we have a natural instinct to care for children: “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?” he asked. “Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?” (Matthew 7:9–10).

Which of our nation’s public policies offer the world’s children bread and fish? And which offer stones and snakes? This might be a helpful lens for evaluating the many bills before Congress.

Indeed, eight years ago, the late Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota introduced a bill that said Congress “should not enact or adopt any legislation that will increase the number of children who are hungry or homeless.” Unfortunately, the bill—which finally passed after many attempts—only expressed the *opinion* of Congress, not its binding commitment.

Child dedication services give public expression of our commitment to nurture the children in our congregations. Let these sacred rituals also be a time where we rededicate ourselves to work for a world in which all children are cared for and blessed.

Next time your congregation dedicates a child, why not write your member of Congress? Describe the commitment of your church to care for children. Ask your elected officials to support public policies that do the same. ■

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# Children Orphaned by AIDS

BY MARTIN SHUPACK

HIV/AIDS is devastating the lives of children in many parts of the world. About three million children under the age of 15 currently have the AIDS virus, and 1,500 more become infected every day. The vast majority acquire the infection from their HIV-positive mother. Additionally, more than 13 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS. This number is expected to rise to 25 million by 2010.

When children are orphaned by AIDS, their lives are torn apart. They commonly experience grief, fear about the future, separation from sisters and brothers, abysmal economic conditions, absence from school and discrimination. The extended family members who adopt these children are usually impoverished themselves.

Mennonites have begun responding to this tragedy. For example, the Tanzania Mennonite Church, in partnership with MCC's Generations at Risk program, works with children who have been orphaned by AIDS in the community of Mugumu. Church members provide food aid, shoes, school uniforms and supplies, as well as spending time personally with the children in a variety of activities.

The U.S. government is also beginning to help. In May, Congress passed legislation authorizing \$3 billion each year for five years for global AIDS prevention, care and treatment. "Authorization," however, only establishes a program. Congress must still approve the money in separate legislation, and it may choose to give less. This is a danger since President Bush asked Congress to provide only \$1.6 billion for global AIDS prevention and treatment in 2004.

We need to urge our senators and representatives to ensure that the higher number, \$3 billion, is actually spent for 2004, and at least that much each year following.

Part of these funds will provide treatment to prevent HIV-positive pregnant mothers from passing on the infection to their children. Advocates are also asking that 10 percent, or \$300 million, be designated for assistance to children orphaned by AIDS.

By 2010, six percent of all sub-Saharan African children will be orphaned by AIDS. In 12 African countries, 15 percent of children will be orphaned, mostly due to AIDS. The impact on social stability and human security will be extraordinarily high.

In Acts 16:9, Paul has a vision of a man pleading with him to "come over to Macedonia and help us." Do we have eyes to see and ears to hear the pleas of a child across the seas burdened by AIDS? How will we respond? ■

## CAPITAL QUOTES

*"It appears . . . that the American people may have been lured into accepting the unprovoked invasion of a sovereign nation, in violation of long-standing international law, under false pretenses. . . . [But] eventually, like it always does, the truth will emerge. And when it does, this house of cards, built of deceit, will fall. . . ."*

*What makes me cringe even more is the continued claim that we are 'liberators.' . . . In fact, if the situation in Iraq is the result of 'liberation,' we may have set the cause of freedom back 200 years. . . . Democracy and freedom cannot be force fed at the point of an occupier's gun."*

—Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W. Va.), in a Senate floor speech on May 21, 2003.

## Pontius' Puddle



## Communicating Peace

BY KATIE MEYER

Katie Meyer's essay, condensed here, won first prize in the essay category of our annual high school essay and speech contest. Katie is from Dalton, Ohio and graduated this spring from Central Christian High School.

**If our country wants Iran as an ally, rather than an enemy, we need to treat it as such.**

The history of relations between the United States and Iran has been full of hard feelings and angry actions. U.S. intervention in Iran began in the 1950s. When Iranian nationalists tried to exile their shah, [Reza] Pahlavi, the CIA helped him to remain in power.

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew Pahlavi and brought an Islamic government into power. When President Jimmy Carter allowed Pahlavi to receive medical treatment in the United States, Iranian revolutionaries seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran, holding the Americans there as hostages. The hostages were finally freed in January of 1981, but hostility between Iran and the United States remained.

In 1980, Iran entered into a war with Iraq. In 1987, the United States agreed to protect Kuwaiti ships endangered by this fighting, allowing oil shipments to continue. This led to violence and the accidental shooting down of an Iranian passenger airplane. In 1997, Iranians elect[ed] a moderate cleric as president. [Mohammad Khatami's] leadership created an environment that encouraged warmer relations with the United States.

President George W. Bush practically crushed that possibility, however, in January 2002. In his State of the Union address, the president accused Iran of supporting terrorism, as part of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and North Korea.

These bold statements are seriously antagonistic toward Iran. When Bush portrays Iran as an enemy, he gives the Iranian people a new, powerful reason—added to a long list of reasons from the past—to dislike America.

MCC worker Evelyn Shellenberger experienced the effects of Bush's statements. A young student whom she met in Iran came to her with some questions. Amazed that an American Christian would voluntarily live in Iran, the student asked, "Why have you decided to come and live with people who are your enemies?"

If our country wants Iran as an ally, rather than an enemy, we need to treat it as such. Instead of buying more missiles and preparing for war, we should prepare for peace.

How do we prepare for peace? First, leaders from the United States and Iran need to be willing to talk to each other. A face-to-face talk is much more likely to promote peace than name-calling through the media. Talking to those with whom we have a conflict is a biblical principle. Following this principle requires both sides to be open-minded and willing to change.

A second way to prepare for peace is to encourage more interactions. If more Americans would visit Iran and work there, Iranians might have a better idea what American people are like. [In addition, Americans] could experience the Iranian way of life and abandon stereotypes they had previously formed.

A third way to prepare for peace and foster better relations with Iran is for Bush to apologize for his name-calling.

Perhaps the United States should try doing some of the things Bush wants Iran to do. For example, if Iran must get rid of its weapons of mass destruction, why should the United States keep all of its weapons? Once the United States makes a clear commitment to peace, Iran will be more likely to do the same.

Though the United States and Iran have not had a good relationship in the past, we can improve that record with communication and consideration. ■

### WINNING SPEECH ON CIVIL LIBERTIES

Nathan Klassen, of Webster, N.Y., won the top prize in the speech category of our annual high school essay and speech contest.

Nathan's speech, on civil liberties and the war on terrorism, told of his personal experiences with security checks at airports and the U.S.-Canadian border. In preparation for the speech, Nathan visited a local mosque to hear the perspectives of Muslim Americans. He suggested ways in which the U.S. government could address security concerns while maintaining civil liberties.

Nathan, who will be a junior this fall, is home-schooled.

# Domestic Violence, the Church, and America Today

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WINNING  
HIGH SCHOOL ESSAYS

Little Mary clamps her hands over her ears. Her mom and dad are fighting again. Every time her dad has a rough day at work, he takes it out on them. But young Mary is not alone. Battering is the single largest cause of injury to women in the United States.

The current domestic violence laws could be improved in numerous ways. A federal law could [require] more education about domestic violence. Specific information should be made available to doctors, faculty members at schools and all employers.

The government also could build more shelters for battered women. For every one woman accepted into a battered women's shelter, two women and their children are turned away.

Another thing the government could do is [enforce] equal rights in the workplace. Often, women are afraid to leave men who abuse them, because they are financially dependent on the man.

A restorative solution would be to [provide] abuse offenders [with support services and] housing. Most batterers have been abused themselves when they were children.

Anabaptist theology can connect domestic violence to a bigger issue—violence is never the way to solve any problem. The church community can play a huge role in prevention of domestic violence and the healing of its victims.

Kids like little Mary should never have to deal with abuse. While this is a complex issue, there are things that could be done by both the government and church community. It's up to us to get ideas started. ■

BY ANITA HOOLEY

Anita Hooley's essay, excerpted here, won honorable mention in our contest. Anita is from Canton, Ohio.

**Anabaptist theology can connect domestic violence to a bigger issue—violence is never the way to solve any problem.**

# Domestic Violence: And the World Remains Silent

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Abuse is a reality for nearly one-third of American women at some time in their lives. Their scars, both physical and emotional, are hidden but painful.

How does one stop this vicious cycle? As a society, laws can be made, people put in jail or issued restraining orders, and programs and shelters for victims can be started and supported. Personally, one can refuse to support violent media, give time and money to shelters for victims, and most of all, reach out towards those involved in domestic violence.

The government could impose mandatory rehabilitation programs for all offenders. Yet, unless the abuser wants to change and conscientiously does so, the time and money spent are wasted. A positive, personal connection with individuals in the community might help the perpetrator develop a desire to change.

Children are caught in the middle. Some may lash out at school, while others become withdrawn. Some attempt to be the perfect child, so as to give their abuser no grounds for abuse.

A child intervention program for children at risk might give the greatest results. Children with an abusive parent could be given time with a counselor to talk about ways of dealing with pain, anger and depression. The children should also be given time to voice their experiences.

Silence continues the progression of domestic violence but we as a church, a community and individuals can express the voice of hope. Through programs for abusers, victims and children of violent families, words of non-violence and peace can be spoken. Together we can shatter the silence and give words to those still speechless. ■

BY ASHLEY SPEECE

Ashley Speece is from Wooster, Ohio. Her essay, excerpts of which appear here, won honorable mention.

# Fair Child Care

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BY BETHANY SPICHER

Lack of affordable child care has neared crisis proportions in the past two years.

You're five years old and your family receives benefits from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Both of your parents are required to work to be eligible for assistance, which means day care for you.

However, TANF doesn't guarantee that you'll get child care subsidies. And if your parents are like the average TANF recipients, they're making \$6.75 per hour. So Mom's taking two jobs or Dad's working overtime to keep you in day care, at a cost of \$4,000 to \$10,000 per year. Something's wrong with this picture.

Lack of affordable child care has neared crisis proportions in the past two years, as close to half of the states have restricted eligibility for child care subsidies in order to balance their budgets. Currently, only one-fourth of eligible children receive subsidies, and states have long waiting lists of applicants.

This spring, the House passed a revised version of TANF (H.R. 4) that proposes increasing the current work requirements (20 hours for parents of pre-schoolers, 30 for everyone else) to 40 hours for all TANF recipients. Imagine the extra hours of day care!

Even with the current work requirements, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that \$4.5 billion to \$5 billion more in child care funding to the states is needed to make up for cost increases since 1996. The House version proposes an extra \$2 billion.

Contact your senators and urge them to keep the current work requirements—especially for parents of pre-schoolers—in the Senate version of TANF, and to include an increase in child care funding of at least \$5.5 billion.

Perhaps you could ask them to imagine that they're five years old . . . ■

# Juvenile Justice Needs Support

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BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

*Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute (Psalm 82:3).*

The juvenile violent crime arrest rate in 2000 was the lowest since 1988. Still, law enforcement in the United States made close to 2.4 million arrests of persons under age 18. Annually, nearly three million persons in the same age group are victimized by crime. The peak hours for crime by some youth are 3–6 p.m. (on school days) and for victimization, 3–9 p.m.

Recently, the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act was reauthorized. It:

- prohibits detaining status offenders (runaways, truants) in jails and prisons;
- requires separation of juveniles from adult inmates;
- prohibits detention of juveniles under juvenile court jurisdiction in adult jails (with only a few exceptions); and

- requires states receiving federal funding to systemically address the disproportionate representation of minorities (i.e., youth of color) in the juvenile justice system.

Congress is now deciding the appropriate funding levels to maintain these core protections and support services for youth. This includes \$1.75 billion to help schools and community-based organizations start, operate, and expand 21st Century Community Learning Centers. The centers have provided supervised, productive after-school activities for 2,600 communities thus far. Additional funds would advance: new initiatives; street outreach, emergency and transitional living programs for runaway and homeless youth; mental health services and other follow-up services; and greater accountability in the juvenile justice system.

Public policy and programs can and should assist parents, communities and youth to deal with violence and crime. Juveniles should not face the justice system, crime and violence, or life, alone and unsupported. ■

# Dedicated to Kids:

## Immanuel Welcomes Children from the Nursery *and* the Neighborhood

Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.” It was June 2001 and my husband and I were worshipping for the first time with the congregation of Immanuel Mennonite Church. As parents of a toddler, we were encouraged to feel the genuine heart for children within this body of believers. While the worship team led the congregation in singing, a young boy stood next to his father who was playing the guitar. His presence there was not a distraction but a simple child-like display of wanting to be close to Dad.

Later in the service, the children were called to the front to collect the offering. We were once again touched to see a gathering of children around the podium as Pastor Basil Marin blessed the offering and the young hands that were participating in this act of worship. As the children were dismissed for children’s church, we sang the words of the classic song—“red, brown, yellow, black and white”—and saw children of various races join hands and file out of the sanctuary. My husband and I looked at each other, knowing that we had found a beautiful place to worship.

Soon after we became members at Immanuel, we received the exciting news that we were expecting our second child. The congregation rallied around us with prayer as we anticipated her arrival. When we dedicated her to Jesus at two months old, we were assured of her special place in the body. Pastor Basil lovingly held her in his arms and prayed that she would live free from bondage while carrying on all that is good from her heritage. There’s no greater gift than for us as parents to know that we aren’t alone in raising our children to follow Jesus.

From the beginning, Immanuel has made children a priority. In 1994, Immanuel located its building in a diverse neighborhood in response to a request from the community for a day care program. The lower floor of the church is now used by Roberta Webb Child Care Center, which

serves 44 children—many from the community and most requiring financial assistance. The church shares this space for children’s church and Sunday school.

Upstairs for an hour on weekday afternoons, Immanuel staff and volunteers offer after-school activities for community children. Monday through Wednesday, Kids Club participants learn and play on computers secured through a grant and get help with their homework. Friday’s club provides group games, Christian songs and a Bible story. Older children from the congregation help with snacks and mentoring.

In Kids Club, children have learned to cross the street safely, acquired relationship skills for avoiding fights, and found a desire to care for each other. We have also nurtured leadership skills in several of them by encouraging them to lead games, songs or even entire activities. Near Easter this year, a child from the congregation told the story of the crucifixion to a wide-eyed group of community children gathered around the cross in the front of the church.

Yes, Jesus does love the little children. Caring for, nurturing and leading the young ones is no small task. With God’s guidance, we pray that we’ll continue to be a place of refuge for His precious children and that He alone will be glorified as we reach out in His name. ■

### IN OTHER’S WORDS

BY BONNIE YODER AND JOHN STAHL

Bonnie Yoder is a member of Immanuel Mennonite Church in Harrisonburg, Va., and mother of two children. John Stahl is on staff at Immanuel Mennonite Church.

There’s no greater gift than for us as parents to know that we aren’t alone in raising our children to follow Jesus.

#### UPDATE ON SUDAN

In early April, President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and John Garang, chairman of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army met for only the second time since the rebel group took up arms in 1983. In the meeting, the leaders agreed to continue moving toward a comprehensive peace agreement. The agreement is currently in the final negotiating stages. Under intense pressure from international observers and envoys (United States, United Kingdom, Norway and Italy), the conflicting parties will resume formal negotiations in July. Among the strongly contested issues are wealth-sharing, the separation or unity of armed forces, and political power-sharing. There is some hope that the two parties will find an agreement by late summer. For monthly e-mail updates, contact John Ashworth at [sudan@sacbc.org](mailto:sudan@sacbc.org).

(For background on the situation in Sudan, see the May–June issue of the *Washington Memo*.)



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**SOUND THE TRUMPET!**

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
IMMIGRANT BENEFITS	Since 1996, legal immigrants who have been in the United States for less than five years are ineligible for federally-funded Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid and the State Children's Health Improvement Program (CHIP). The Senate Finance Committee will likely propose restoration of these benefits in their version of TANF this summer.	As Congress considers TANF, urge your legislators to restore TANF benefits to all legal immigrants, and to extend Medicaid and SCHIP coverage to pregnant women and children who have been in the United States for less than five years.

**ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**DEATH PENALTY CONFERENCE**

On Oct. 16–19, the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty will hold their Annual Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. The conference will include workshops, keynote addresses, training and resources. For more information, contact the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty, 920 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, Washington, DC 20003; (202) 543-9577; info@ncadp.org; www.ncadp.org/html/conference.html.

**PETITION ON NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT**

While the U.S. military has been busy looking for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the Bush administration has been busy convincing Congress to approve research funding for two new nuclear weapons—"bunker busters" and "mini-nukes." Log on to www.nrdi.org to register your appeal for the United States to take steps toward nuclear disarmament instead. The goal is to get 20,000 Menonite and Brethren in Christ signatures on this petition.