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## FOR YOUR INFORMATION

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# Who Will Care for the Children?

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Vicki Graham

**C**hildren—the helpless babies we feed, hold in our arms, cherish, and nurture through infancy and youth to independence and adulthood. Although most of us picture children in this way, many do not.

Every day, children are neglected, exploited, abandoned, abused, and killed. These problems are not isolated; they are realities in one form or another around the globe. Worldwide, 150 million children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition.<sup>1</sup> More than 100 million children work in hazardous and often fatal conditions.<sup>2</sup> The Defense for Children International-USA reports that in Thailand alone, there are 15,000-40,000 girls under the age of 15 who work as prostitutes.

Children are caught in violent street fights, in civil, racial, and international wars in which they are the most innocent victims. Two hundred thousand youngsters under the age of 15 serve as soldiers in the armies of various nations. They are detained without trial, tortured, assaulted, shot at, and killed.

More than 80 million homeless children live in the cities of the world, and in one country, these children are routinely killed by a vigilante group determined to "clean up" the streets.<sup>3</sup>

The Romanian orphans are another example of the mistreatment of children that has recently caught the world's attention. As many as 100,000 infants and children have been forced to live in unsanitary state-run orphanages where they receive little, if any affection. The disabled children among them have been sent to prison-like institutions. Up to a third of these children die each year.<sup>4</sup>

Child-service professionals everywhere report that abandonment is on the rise. In North America, stories about abandoned infants are no longer shocking news. For this very reason, these horrifying events experienced by the weakest among us cry out for action.

Children are human beings with inherent rights, yet these have largely gone unrecognized. Should the human rights of children be protected by law? Strangely, this issue has been the focus of much controversy. Defence for Children International, UNICEF, and other nongovernmental organizations have been working toward the composition, ratification, and implementation of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, a law designed to protect the human rights of children under the age of 18. This important document specifically addresses issues of child education; health care; sexual, physical, and mental abuse; juvenile justice; and economic exploitation.

The law is based on three fundamental principles: (1) all children are entitled to the rights out-

lined in the document without regard to race, color, sex, language, political opinion or national, ethnic, or social origin; (2) all actions concerning a child must be in the child's best interests; and (3) where a child is capable of forming his or her own opinions, they must receive proper consideration. The Convention on the Rights of the Child describes the obligation of those states that ratify it and outlines implementation provisions. It also defines how compliance with this law will be monitored and the conditions under which it comes into force.

On November 20, 1989, the UN General Assembly approved the Convention of the Rights of the Child. The next step is for this document to be presented to each member country for ratification.

What can you do? If you recognize the seriousness of the situation facing millions of children today, if you have decided the only responsible choice as a conscientious Christian is to get involved, there is much to be done. You *can* make a difference. The activities in which you choose to participate will vary with the socio-political environment of your country. You will have to decide what is most appropriate for your situation. Here is a list of possibilities:

- \* Be a responsible citizen. Keep informed about local, national, and international trends and events, especially regarding children's issues. Ask yourself, "How does my country's national and foreign policy affect children?"

- \* Reflect prayerfully on how your advanced studies and eventual profession may have an impact on children's lives.

- \* Talk with the parents and children of your community. Become sensitive to their problems



and assist in practical problem-solving when possible.

\* Write letters to your local newspapers about the need to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

\* Write to your legislators telling them what the Convention on the Rights of the Child can do for children, and urge them to support its ratification.

\* Lead discussions on the rights of children in your church, in parent-teacher associations, and in service organizations.

\* Recommend to educational authorities that this document and the plight of children be studied and discussed in school.

\* Choose a local children's program, starting with your church, as your special responsibility and help those involved in making children's lives better.

\* Support the best national and international children's organizations.

And remember the words written by Isaiah:

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:

to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?

Is it not to share your food with the hungry

and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter;

when you see the naked, to

clothe him,

and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,

and your healing will quickly appear;

then your righteousness will go before you,

and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;

you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I."

(Isaiah 58:6-9, NIV.)

*If you would like more information or a copy of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, write to Vicki Graham, ADRA International, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA. Fax: (301) 680-6380.*

#### NOTES

1. *Time*, October 8, 1990.

2. Kay Castelle, *In the Child's Best Interest*.

3. *World Press Review*, October 1989.

4. *USA Today*, July 12, 1990.

*Vicki Graham is assistant director of human resources development for the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International, with special responsibilities on issues relating to women and children.*

## Challenges . . .

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produced major concentrations of members on every continent.

Due to its historic primacy and its economic and educational advantages, the North American church has supplied leadership and economic resources out of proportion to its members. However, equalization is in progress. Given current projections, membership at the close of the decade will be overwhelmingly non-North American. Economic balance will follow, but more slowly.

Worldwide availability of educational opportunities will accelerate the internationalization of denominational leadership. At stake will be the unity of the church. Given the naturally centrifugal character of large groups, the present degree of unity among Adventists is a marvel to observers.

We frequently hear calls for cultural diversity in the church. When attire, cuisine, and social niceties are at issue, the case is strong. But given the human tendency toward prejudice and division, it would benefit all believers to stress their similarities rather than their differences.

The challenge of the coming decade will be to reinforce mutual respect throughout the church. We must see one another first as brothers and sisters. Racial, ethnic, linguistic, or economic variations must not divide us. As Jesus said to His contentious disciples, "You have one teacher, and you all are brethren" (Matthew 23:8 RSV). Adventist men and women, of whatever national origin, must see themselves as part of the family of God—as pilgrims with a common mission and destiny.

*George W. Reid (Th.D., Southwestern Baptist Seminary) has been the director of the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference since 1984. He previously served as associate editor of the Adventist Review and taught theology at Southwestern Adventist College in Keene, Texas.*

## Basic Human Rights of Children

Protected by the Convention of the Rights of the Child\*

- Protection from sexual abuse and exploitation
- Protection from economic exploitation
- Protection from abduction, sale, and trafficking
- Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion
- Protection from cruel treatment, torture, and capital punishment
- Access to education
- Access to health care
- Protection from armed conflicts until over the age of 15
- Right to a name and nationality
- Right to live with their parents
- Protection during the adoption process

(\* ) A child is defined as a person under the age of 18.