

Asian Children's Life

Last year was the International Year of the Child (IYC). For Asia, it had a special significance as fully half of its population of more than two billion is under 15 years of age.

Children have an important place in Asian families. For example, in the Philippines children are welcomed and loved almost at the point of overindulgence. Yet they are expected to have their share in providing support for the family. At an early age the child starts to carry water, care for the water-buffalo, look after babies, and do other small but necessary chores.

The young are subordinate to their elders and owe them respect. The youth acquire knowledge from the older members of the family. A teacher is esteemed for he or she symbolizes that most important task of preparing youth for their future role in family, society and nation. The responsibility for training children weighs heavily on parents; for in a real sense the future of their children is also their future. The security of the parents is tied to the future financial, social and emotional well-being of the children.

What impact did the IYC make upon Asia? Beyond the slogans and hoopla, 1979 turned out to be another difficult year for Asia's children. IYC's activities didn't reach beyond the cities. Last year also marked the 20th anniversary of the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which affirms all children's entitlement to education, adequate nutrition and a healthy, caring environment. Despite this noble sounding declaration, Asia's children remain trapped in their poverty, malnutrition and lack of opportunity. A 13-year-old girl from the Philippines said about her burdens: "I have a lot of responsibility. I look after my two sisters and two brothers all week while Mum and Dad are working. They only come on weekends. Dad leaves us 100 pesos (U.S. \$12) for expenses. I'm responsible for all of us then. I make all the decisions."

The global inflation fueled by OPEC's price increases, and weak economics have reduced the hope for a better future. Young people are hit by high unemployment caused by lower exports of manufactured goods to the West.

Since Asian nations have different levels of development, the levels of injustice and hardship vary greatly. Japan with its vast industrial complex reports an infant mortality of 10 per 1000 births, while countries like Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal have an infant mortality rate of 200 per 1000 live births.

Why such high infant mortality? Most deaths could have been averted through proper nutrition, good medical facilities, improved living conditions, sewage facilities and clean water supplies. Health education and stewardship courses would also be an important step in the right direction.

Extreme poverty conditions can lead to heart-breaking situations. Last year, more than 250 Sri Lankan babies were "exported" - mainly to Scandinavian countries. Most of

these foreign adoptions were done illegally. According to the Deputy Minister of Social Services, J.L. Sirisena, infants are being sold by several women, masquerading as social workers. Said Sirisena: "The prices range between U.S. \$1,000 and \$3,000 ... and illiterate parents are being cheated into parting with infants."

Selling of children has become a last resort for desperately poor Sri Lankans. Scores of infants are abandoned every month in hospitals, railway stations and crowded urban areas. The government tries to prevent the sale of children. Yet it appears to make little progress. Local adoptive parents are not easy to find in Sri Lanka.

What hope can the church give to Asia's needy children? Conditions need to be fostered which will bring relief to young lives. The CRWRC and the Christian Reformed Board of World Missions have a fine opportunity to proclaim-in word and deed - the message of Jesus, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14 N.I.V.).

As Christian Reformed agencies face the challenge, I hope that they concentrate on one or two strategic countries. We are a small denomination. And as I see it, we are over-extending ourselves. Relief workers see young lives saved through feeding programs; where meals are provided for children, mothers are taught nutrition and health care. The same workers are also discouraged because they can reach only a few from the masses of children with their hungry eyes and bloated tummies. There is neither sufficient help nor funding available to make a real impact. We cannot help all of Asia's children; but in the Lord's name we can reach out love and bring hope to some.

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