

Congregations That Care: Child Care in Religious Institutions

by Roger Neugebauer

“She is four years old and attends the Wee Wuns Weekday Ministries. Each day as I enter the church, I notice the parents dropping off their children. Megan puts on her backpack and scurries off hand in hand with her teacher. The smile on her face tells me that she not only enjoys preschool but coming to Cyprus United Methodist Church as well.”

This observation, shared by Dr. W. Earl Bledsoe, the senior pastor at Cypress United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas, is repeated every morning in thousands of religious facilities throughout the world. What these stories highlight are successful partnerships among congregations, parents, early childhood professionals, and children.

For decades, religious organizations have played a significant role in the provision of early childhood services in the United States:

- Nearly 1.5 million children attend weekday early childhood

programs housed in religious facilities.

- Nearly one out of every six child care centers is housed in a religious facility.
- The nation’s largest providers of child care services are not KinderCare and La Petite, but the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention (see “The Exchange Top 12”).

This article will provide an update on the status of this vibrant segment of the early childhood world. In its preparation, we received valu-

able assistance from our strategic partner, the Ecumenical Child Care Network (ECCN).

Auspices

Congregations relate to centers they house in one of three ways. Three out of five centers are operated directly as a ministry of their congregation — center staff are employees of the congregation and the congregation is responsible for the financial well-being of the center.

Some congregations have elected to distance themselves somewhat from operations by setting up a separate non-profit organization to run the center. Typically there will be a mix of church representatives and center users serving on the board of this non-profit.

Finally, a minority of centers simply lease space from congregations. The actual operator may be a Head Start agency, a community non-profit, or, in some cases, even a for-profit child care organization.

According to ECCN executive director Debbie Hampton, in recent years the tendency of churches to operate centers directly is becoming even more predominant. In part, this is because national offices of various denominations are becoming more proactive in encouraging congregations to provide early childhood services.

A second factor driving direct operation is what Reverend Eileen Lindner refers to as the “edifice complex.” “With their vast property holdings and historical patterns of construction, many parishes are well equipped to provide facilities for child care” (Lindner). With the increasing demands for child care resulting from welfare reform, local advocates and public officials are pushing congregations with educa-

tional facilities to provide child care services.

Purposes

Surprisingly, religious instruction is not the primary reason most religious organizations open early childhood programs. In a 1983 survey, the National Council of Churches found that only 13% of the churches surveyed listed “spiritual development” as one of the primary goals of their program. Traditional early childhood goals of fostering “love and worth,” “sharing and cooperation,” and “positive self-image” were the most common program goals cited (Lindner).

This pattern may be changing. In our survey of the nation’s 20 largest denominations, while most respondents reported that “community services” and “healthy child developments” are the driving forces behind their early childhood efforts, “spiritual guidance” appears to be an increasingly important secondary factor. Debbie Hampton observed that in recent years many denominations have published early childhood curriculums either for their “Sunday School” programs or their weekday programs. Such materials are encouraging faith-based classroom activities.

Outreach

The community focus of most child care programs in religious facilities is borne out by the nature of the families served. In the 1983 NCC survey, only 2% of the churches responding restricted their services to church members. Debbie Hampton suspects this pattern remains the same today.

Not only does the community benefit by these non-restrictive enrollment policies but congregations often benefit as well. Most congre-

gations find their centers to be instrumental in attracting new members. For every child in Sunday School, there are an average of eight children enrolled in weekday care — making this effort all the more important (Phillips).

Dr. Bledsoe, writing in the ECCN newsletter (spring 1997), observed: “Parents and children, experiencing the care and nurture of Wee Wuns Weekday Ministries, soon find their way into the worship services of the church. It’s our most effective arm of evangelism and outreach.”

Support

One of the church leaders we surveyed commented: “Our churches send out mixed messages. They say, ‘We will provide whatever support we can, as long as we don’t have to spend any money.’” While most congregations do not provide cash subsidiaries to their centers, most do make significant in-kind contributions.

Four out of five centers receive free or reduced rent from their congregations. A significant majority also benefit from in-kind contributions of utilities, maintenance, and janitorial services.

While some congregations provide health benefits for center staff, most do not provide subsidies for salaries. Susan Corbett, writing in the ECCN newsletter (January 1991), suggested that this has to do with the fact that churches view child care as a mission of the church. “Human beings who run a mission,” Corbett observes, “are often viewed as missionaries — whether that was their intent on coming to work or not! Missionaries are traditionally expected to toil endlessly for the pure pleasure of it. They are fantasized as being self-denying, simple living creatures

whose wants and needs are somehow cast to the wayside.”

Differences

Any attempt to capture the breadth of the congregation-based child care universe in one broad stroke would be misleading. These programs are as diverse and dynamic as the entire child care field.

The quality of congregation-based facilities varies dramatically. Many of these centers are among the highest quality centers in the nation. Congregation-based centers were among the first to embrace NAEYC accreditation.

On the other hand, in the 1995 *Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers* study (Helburn), centers operated in churches were found to be among the lowest quality centers.

Another major difference among congregation-based centers is their stance on licensing. Nearly all the denominations we surveyed for this article support the licensure of their centers. For example, in its policy statement “Child Care and Christian Education,” the General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church states: “. . . the church is not beyond the law in regard to basic space, safety, health, and staff requirements. The regulation of basic health and safety conditions in a building/program that serves children are the appropriate responsibility of the state and do not interfere with the free exercise of religion.”

Lobbying for exemptions has come primarily from charismatic Christian fundamentalist churches organized at the state level. They have been successful in enacting full or partial exemptions for church programs in 13 states. Leaders of the

The Exchange Top 12 Religious Organizations Housing Early Childhood Facilities in the USA

Organization	Members	Congregations	Centers
The Roman Catholic Church	61,208,000	22,728	4,597 ^c
Southern Baptist Convention	15,692,000	40,565	4,100 ^a
United Methodist Church	8,495,000	36,361	3,800 ^b
Presbyterian Church (USA)	3,637,000	11,328	2,000 ^a
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	5,181,000	10,936	1,962 ^a
United Church of Christ	1,453,000	6,110	1,100 ^b
Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod	2,601,000	6,099	1,000 ^a
Episcopal Church in the USA	2,537,000	7,415	923 ^a
Assemblies of God	2,468,000	11,884	836 ^a
Jewish Organizations	5,981,000	3,416	781 ^c
American Baptist Churches USA	1,503,000	5,807	680 ^b
Disciples of Christ (Christian Church)	910,000	3,840	480 ^b

Sources: Data on numbers of members and churches come from *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 1998*, edited by Eileen W. Lindner (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). The estimates on the number of centers were arrived at in three ways . . .

^a Count or estimate supplied by the national office of the organization.

^b Count of centers reported in *When Churches Mind the Children* and increased by 30% to account for growth over the past 19 years.

^c Data supplied by Wilson Marketing Group, Inc.

exemption efforts contend that running a child care center is a direct expansion of the ministry of the church. Thus, they contend, it is protected from state interference on the basis of the freedom of religion safeguard in the Constitution (Phillips).

Challenges

Centers in religious facilities have all the challenges facing other child care centers plus a few unique ones. The most typical of these challenges is shared space. As one director lamented: "Our program is treated like a stepchild. We must become invisible when we are not in session. That means taking down and setting up our classrooms several times a week."

If an early childhood program shares space with a Sunday school

or choir, all equipment may need to be stored every weekend and some evenings. In addition, a center may be required to share its equipment and supplies with a Sunday school program.

Another serious challenge is continuity of leadership. If a new clergy-person comes in, her commitment to child care may differ significantly from her predecessor. If the center must report to a church committee, annual turnover in this voluntary committee may result in changes in support.

The comments of one director typify the concerns of many: "It takes me at least four months to gain the support and understanding of the president of the board of trustees. Then eight months later a new president is elected and I have to start all over again."

Conclusion

Congregations are at the forefront in supporting the early childhood needs of families. The congregation-based child care community is a dominant, diverse, vibrant, growing segment of the child care world. Look for congregations to play an increasingly important role in shaping our field.

References

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