

Home Grown World Christians

By Noel Piper April 1, 2002

The world came early into my life. On rainy days, Mother let us dig through attic baskets filled with mementos of her college summer in Mexico. My parents' table and guest bed were open to visitors from many places. Our mailbox saw many exotic stamps. On the back wall of our "vacation" church was a huge world map. A cousin went to Indonesia. Daddy told us stories of his days as doctor on a Navy tanker, docking off Saudi Arabia, Burma, Japan and other ports of call.

Dormancy, Roots and Evergreens

Unfortunately, in my childhood church, missionaries were mainly unnoticed pictures in denominational publications. Although family influences made me friendly toward missions and open to learn and feel more, for a long time there was little active result - dormant years in my world awareness. Probably most of us who would call ourselves world Christians blossomed into it as adults. We took classes or heard speakers, or read articles and books that opened our eyes and hearts to the immensity of the world and God's work in it. But many of us can also find significant roots from our childhood. These roots may have been lying dormant until the warmth of grown-up experiences caused the sprouts to flourish and grow. A question for parents: Can we, with God's help, raise world Christians who don't have to go through a dormant period? Can we intentionally provide an atmosphere where "evergreen" world Christians will flourish? What Is a World Christian? A world Christian sees beyond his neighborhood friends, his school, his everyday life and experiences. He'll be fascinated by the variety of people and customs next door and all over God's wide world. He yearns for the Maninka of Guinea and the Sukuma of Tanzania to be his brothers and sisters just as he desires spiritual oneness with his best friend. But those things will happen only if he's exposed to a broader world than what he finds naturally. Of course our most basic prayer for our children is that God will move them toward himself. That they will be his people. That they will become men and women of God. And then our prayer is that, as they focus on God, they will be aware of the world that needs him too. David Howard, Former International Director of World Evangelical Fellowship, one time told us that his mother used to pray fervently for missionaries to be raised up. Then God moved in her: "Will you pray for your own children to be missionaries?" She saw that she must, and an amazing family of God's workers is the result.

Difference Is not a Barrier

We have purposely fostered the assumption that many people are different from us. Over the years in our downtown neighborhood, our children played with children from welfare families and others who attended private schools. One best friend was Vietnamese and others were of mixed races. Cross-cultural ministry and experience do not have to be in another country. Are there international students or refugees or American Indians or elderly eastern Europeans in your vicinity? Nor does a cross-cultural experience have to be only with foreigners. Let's say you live in a somewhat isolated setting and have to make an effort to gather playmates for your child. Who are the children you'll invite? A migrant farm worker's child? Someone who is a different color than you? The poorly dressed little guy with the runny nose? Continuous contact with people of other cultures and circumstances prepares our children to be open to and comfortable with people anywhere. A child's world is broadened when the doorbell rings at 2:00 am and an intoxicated acquaintance wants a ride home, or a lonely man who drools and weeps is invited home for Sunday dinner, or a Cameroonian family of five spends Christmas. We assume aloud that many people don't know God. In every place we've lived - suburbs or city - our children have had playmates with unmarried parents living together. They have learned early that many people don't go to church and many get drunk and smear God's name. And those are just the outward signs of what's inside even more people. And, we have said, if people close to us are living without God, just think how much worse it is in places where no teachers of Jesus have gone yet and where there are no churches.

What Will I Be when I Grow up?

Missionaries are in and out of our church and our house just as our other friends are. Some acquaintances, friends and members of our extended family are missionaries. The more contact our children have with such

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people, the less missions will seem like an unreachable goal. Give your child the chance to grow into the assumption that if acquaintances and family are doing it, maybe he will too, someday. Why does a three-year-old want to be a firefighter or a garbage collector? Because it looks so interesting and exciting! If we're excited about what our friends are doing, it becomes an attractive possibility for our children. Why does a teenager want to be a doctor? He wants to do something important and fulfilling. He will learn that God's mission in the world must be important if his parents are giving so much prayer to it, talking so much about it, spending so much time with people who are involved in it, and giving so much to support it - by writing letters and e-mails, sending packages and by giving money.

Where Will I Live?

For four or five years, when Benjamin was a pre-teen, he planned to live in China. He would hardly read English unless driven to it, but he arranged for weekly Mandarin lessons for a while from a friend. When he was due for a treat, we'd choose something Chinese - a map, tour books, a folder to keep his Chinese items in. We often used chopsticks and ate Chinese food. We invited Chinese university students to share our holiday meals. And we'd dream aloud with him. "What might you be in China? A journalist? An engineer? An English teacher?" I kept "Benjamin's Chinese journal," in which I recorded his growing interest. Benjamin's attention has shifted now to other peoples and places, but I know that wherever God eventually puts him, his old interest in China has strongly affected his outlook on the world and his support of God's work. He has soaked in the reality that the whole world is out there. He's just as likely to live in Turkey as in Minneapolis, whatever work or profession God has given him.

Does It Really Make a Difference?

Will these efforts at growing world Christians really work? Ultimately, God will decide that. The lives and futures of our children are in his hands. But we can be sure that we are doing good for our children by pursuing their wider vision of the world and their desire that God's glory cover the earth.

But Can a Child Really Be a World Christian?

A young tomato plant is like a mature tomato plant, except it's smaller and not as strong and it hasn't borne its fruit yet. In much the same way, a young world Christian is like a mature world Christian. You can see the same characteristics - they just haven't matured into full fruit yet. When it's time for laptime reading, preschooler Talitha is just as likely to pull a book from her "world Christian" shelf as from any other. We look for the country of that book or missionary story on our large world map. She knows where to find the countries of our friends and family. She notices the names of familiar places when they're mentioned on the radio. A world Christian knows that our country is not the only country God made - that he is sovereign over all peoples and nations. Benjamin is an adult now, undertaking several years of technical and Bible training, and waiting for God's direction to a people and place. Think of his boyhood plans to live in China - he was already learning and fitting himself for God's call. A world Christian prepares himself to be ready for wherever God moves him. During Benjamin's "China" years, if you'd asked his much-younger brother, Barnabas, about his future, he would have told you, "I'm going to China with Ben." Benjamin was his hero. A world Christian uses the lives of godly forerunners as examples and models. When Abraham was four, he moved a missionary couple to tears when he ran up to them, "I know you! You're the Esplunds from the Philippines." He had never met them, but he recognized them because of our family prayers and because he loved to leaf through the pictures in our denomination's Daily Prayer Calendar. A world Christian supports missionaries through encouragement and prayer. The summer he was thirteen, Karsten was in the Dominican Republic helping to construct a church building. The next summer, he was part of an evangelistic team in Hong Kong. A world Christian moves when God pushes him - anywhere in the world. Now Karsten and his wife are praying about where God wants them . . . maybe Ukraine?

What Kind of Parents?

Good parents with small children are preparing their children and themselves for the season when they will let go of their children - when their children will be "on their own." Good world Christian parents are moving

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toward the same season, knowing that "letting go" means the full realization that our children are in God's hands and that his hands cradle the whole world. A kind of "rehearsal" can help. We've gotten practice for letting go of our children during weeks and summers they've spent in Uganda, Indiana, Ukraine, England, Florida, Papua New Guinea, Canada, Guatemala, Germany, Hong Kong, Dominican Republic, Mexico, the Philippines and . . . There is a verse of a hymn that always moves me to prayer - that I would be this kind of parent: Give of thy sons to bear the message glorious; Give of thy wealth to speed them on their way; Pour out thy soul for them in prayer victorious; And all thou spendest Jesus will repay. Publish glad tidings, Tidings of peace; Tidings of Jesus, Redemption and release. ("Oh Zion, Haste," Mary Thomson)

Oh, Lord . . .

Lord, cause us and our children to anticipate and yearn for that glorious scene of Revelation 7:9-10 - of "a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes . . . [crying] out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" Lord, cause the vision of your glory to burn so strongly in us, that our children ignite for you.

Creating World Christian Kids

Here are some easy-to-do suggestions for helping your children become world Christians:

- Read National Geographic.
- Check out library books about countries or regions of the U.S. where you have friends or special interest.
- Take and make opportunities to hear and learn different languages.
- Read aloud together missionary biographies and stories with foreign settings.
- Keep a globe or large world map handy for easy reference.
- Mark the locations of friends on the map-Detroit, Almaty, Madison, Bangkok.
- Notice aloud newscasts or articles about distant countries.
- Read together the [Global Prayer Digest](#) and pray for the day's unreached people group. Your minds will be sent daily to a different part of the world. Your children will learn what kinds of words to use when they hear you praying for God's will to be done in the world.
- Include children in conversations with foreign students, missionaries, world travelers and emigrants to this country.
- In conversation, assume a future anywhere in the world for your children, not just the U.S.
- Read letters from missionaries as personal letters, not as mass mailings-children love to get mail.
- Put missionary pictures on the bulletin board alongside your other favorite friends. Your child will grow up knowing, "Some friends live far away in Nebraska, some live far away in Cote d'Ivoire. It's all in the same world that's on my map. Who knows where I might live when I grow up?"
- Go to the airport to send off missionary friends. When you gather in a circle for one last song and prayer together, you give older children a sense of the importance of aligning with God's purposes in the world. A younger child will grasp that it's great fun to go to the airport, and this must be something special because we don't usually sing and cry at the airport!
- Most of all, help your children learn that the U.S. is not the only country God made, our ways are not necessarily the best ways, and English is not the only language.

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