

THE CHURCH AND THE CHILDREN AT RISK: A CALL TO CARE THE WAY CHRIST CARED

RATIONALE:

We, the 73 delegates from 39 different Christian churches, mission agencies and service organizations, convened at the Christian Development Center in Tagaytay City on November 4 – 6, 1998, to discuss issues and formulate a plan of action concerning our ministry to children at risk. We affirm our commitment to respond to the needs of these children as a mandate from God, and by the fact that children not only represent the future of our country, already constituting about 40% of our current population. They are also the sector most vulnerable to illnesses, exploitation, abuse, and even death.

DEFINITION AND SITUATIONER:

The children at risk are minors from age 0 to 18 whose human rights are in danger of being violated. They live in especially difficult circumstances, whether with their families or on their own. They usually have been exposed to family trauma, or their very poor families are unable to provide even the most basic of their needs. In some cases, they are abused and exploited by their own family members. Riding on the exploitative situation are business entities employing children doing back breaking work for meager wages. Neglected or abandoned to fend for their own survival, the children roam the streets or the countryside as beggars, vagrants, drug addicts, vendors or slave laborers. The situation is certain to grow direr if our economy continues to slide and poverty rate increases.

Current macro statistics are staggering. The Philippines has a very young population and a large dependent ration, where children aged 0 to 14 comprise over one third of our population. More than 1.3 million are abandoned and exploited; 3.7 million aged 5 to 17 toil as laborers; more than 200,000 are homeless and roam the streets in 65 cities; about 60,000 are sexually exploited and 158,300 are with disability.

We, Christians, have been at the forefront of caring for children at risk. But we realize that the need far outstrips all the resources and services we provide, significant and responsive they may be.

ISSUES AND CONSTRAINTS:

In this consultation, we recognize a number of issues we must address in order to arrive at a more effective and efficient response. We need to re-examine our service delivery systems, methods and strategies, and our working relationships to prevent duplication of programs and optimize utilization of available resources.

We also need to address constraints like unskilled workers, weak administrative systems, and inadequate financial resources that prevent our organizations from serving our clientele to the fullest. Insufficient linkages with government agencies and with each other, and policy constraints like the weak enforcement of child protection laws have also hindered us from making a bolder response.

CALL TO ACTION:

We propose the following course of action:

1. Enhance the quality of our ministry by equipping and caring for all workers involved in ministering to children at risk. Appropriate training and educational interventions, systematic research and documentation and adequate provision of staff benefits should be pursued. We will also continue to enhance our holistic ministries to strengthen the children's families and communities.
2. Increase the number of children and communities being reached by developing innovative and effective interventions and maximizing linkages with the government and other NGOs.
3. Advocate policy changes needed to respond to the dynamic needs of children at risk and create public awareness for child welfare programs.
4. Strengthen our partnership with the Christian churches by holding regular consultations and dialogues with them so that the church will become full partners in providing manpower, pastoral care and intercessory covering for the ministry, and be a major stakeholder in transforming the children and their families in their immediate communities.
5. Establish the Philippine Children's Ministries Network (PCMN) that will serve as linkage for mutual support and upliftment, information and resource sharing, prayer and fellowship. It will also serve as the voice of children's ministries to the church and the general public.

Signed on November 6, 1998 in Tagaytay City, Philippines.