

The 4-14 Forum

Keynote Speaker George Barna says morality set by 9; belief system by 13

"Children are central to the health and future well-being of the church. Reprioritizing ministry to children is the beginning of a revolution."

So said researcher and cultural analyst George Barna before a strategic two-day session attended by 94 Christian leaders representing 54 organizations, including churches, parachurch ministries, media, and academia, at AWANA Clubs International headquarters in Streamwood, Illinois.

Barna's clarion call to churches was doubly strong toward parents, as he claimed his recent research shows that "while 85% of parents believe they have the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children, more than two out of three are abdicating that responsibility to their church."

"And very few churches" Barna continued, "go beyond seeing children's ministry as 'bait' that enables them to land the real treasure — i.e., adults. We spend roughly 68 times more money per capita on caring for the average felon than on a church's ministry to a spiritually hungry child."

Barna presented the findings of his research on the state of children's ministry in the U.S., which fueled group discussions concerning the "4-14" window; that is, the critical age timeframe wherein the vast majority of people decide what they will—or won't—believe. Barna's findings—and their meaning to a church and family in transition—are spelled out in the book, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* (Regal, 2003).

"Our children will determine the future, which makes them our most significant and enduring legacy," Barna proclaimed, "can we afford to let the spiritual and moral dimension of our future leaders be shaped by default?"

A surprising outcome of the gathering was the uniform acceptance of Barna's words of challenge, even among those participants who have appreciated children's ministry for years, beginning with pastors.

"I'm in the process of rethinking the direction and priorities of our church," stated Dr. Ed Johnson, Senior Pastor of First Baptist Church in Ocala, Fla. "I'm going home with the

deep conviction that children need to be the number one priority of what we're doing."

So strongly did the majority of attendees respond to Barna's challenge, that they themselves issued a number of calls and challenges.

Specifically, the Forum:

- Called for churches to strategically place their resources toward ministering to children within this window of opportunity and to assist parents in their role of being spiritual shapers.
- Called for parents to step up to their biblically directed responsibility to be the primary source of spiritual nurture for their children.
- Encouraged strategic partnerships among organizations to work together to create awareness of this window of ministry opportunity
- Called for ministries, churches and parents to adopt a comprehensive system of high quality teaching and mentoring efforts that include meaningful assessment and evaluation of children's understandings.
- Agreed to a coordinated ongoing effort at shifting the perception of ministry to children from that of mere appreciation to that of strategic priority in the local church.

To implement these general strategies, a Subcommittee has been formed under the direction of John Crupper, Director of Strategic Partnerships at Awana. This group will present its initial plans for implementation within the next 3-6 months.

Sponsoring organizations for this forum, held April 5 and 6, included: *AWANA Clubs International, The Barna Group, Child Evangelism Fellowship, Christianity Today International, Gospel Light, and LifeWay Christian Resources.*