

# COMBINING SCHOLASTICS

*Bringing Christ to the city* By Laura White



he Holland neighborhood of northeast Minneapolis is one of the most culturally diverse communities in the entire state. More than 50 different nationalities are enrolled at the community's Edison High School. Up the street, an Islamic community cultural center is under construction. ¶ The building of minds and spirits is also underway. Steve Moen, a pastor and educator, has placed himself in the inner city there to address the most urgent needs of elementary-aged

children and their families: their need for education and their need for God.

His concern stems partially from his own experiences. While serving for two years at Timberlee Christian Center—an EFCA camp in Wisconsin—Steve fell in love with inner-city kids and heard clearly from God that they would be part of his future.

When he returned from camp, however, he didn't have a place to stay. So, for six weeks during the most severe period of Minnesota's winter, Steve slept in his car and various shelters until he was

able to live with a friend and begin a tutoring program, which eventually grew into Living Hope Community Center in Minneapolis.

On the streets he learned that academic deficiencies can stem from a lack of encouragement in the home. "When these kids get into high school, it is as if their minds are in some ways made up," he states. According to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (October 25, 2001), fewer than half of the district's students graduate in four years. Thus, Steve chooses to reach elementary-aged children.

Volunteers from 20 different churches tutor children one-to-one in two different tutoring sessions each week. Living Hope currently tutors more than 40 children from four public schools.

Following the tutoring, children can choose to attend Bible club. Last year, 25 of Living Hope's 37 students asked Jesus into their life and are now sharing the gospel with their friends.

To help these new Christians grow in their faith Living Hope also runs Kids Club on Saturday afternoons, where the kids pray, sing and study the Bible. And each summer, Living Hope sends between 40 and 60 children to the EFCA's Bridging Urban Ministries Program (BUMP). The week-long program shares both good news and good fun with children through Vacation Bible School, block parties, sports clinics and carnivals.

Steve also provides opportunities for the children to serve others, starting in their own backyard (helping elderly people with yardwork, for example) and then moving outward from there. "One year we traveled



**Tutoring with love:** Volunteer tutors (both pages) create an environment at the Living Hope Community Center where children can flourish. Says Steve Moen, "They can and want to learn if they can be given something worthwhile to be involved in."



COURTESY STEVE MOEN (4)

# AND SALVATION



to Wisconsin," he says, "to assist a rural church with its VBS program. I would [eventually] like to expose some to an international missions trip.

"Unfortunately for many inner-city kids, they don't get involved in serving. It's great to see how they respond when they see God using them in this way."

Steve believes that the church is the key player in transforming America's urban areas. "If you want to have healthy communities, you have to have healthy churches," he states. "And 'church' has to be Monday through Sunday, [providing] housing programs, shelter, food, clothes or tutoring. These need to be the avenues [through which] the church can be seen."

When he first moved into the city, Steve did his research to discover the key players around him. "What about the churches?" he asked the staff of various community organizations.

Without fail, he remembers, they responded, "We don't want to have anything to do with the church. The church used to be an integral part of the community. They used to really take care of the people here. But they've left."

Christian flight, Steve calls it. Until they're willing to move back into the city, Christians will have minimal impact there, he asserts, because they'll be seen as outsiders.

While Steve is at times discouraged by Christian flight, he knows that God has placed his family in northeast Minneapolis to be a beacon of hope. He also recognizes how much more could be done to influence this community with the gospel, with additional people and resources.

And he can't describe the joy he expe-



riences when he sees children grasping spiritual and academic truth.

Steve welcomes anyone who would like to minister alongside him. "God will use these kids in incredible ways," he says passionately, "if we simply give them the tools and the opportunities to use them. I have a heart to see great leaders come out of what we're doing." ■

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## TRANSFORMING OUR CULTURE

*by Enrique Fernandez*

Whether we want it or not, we create the world in which our children live. When we build a park, children laugh; when we build a school, children have a place to learn the basics of life; when we create a context for worship, children have the opportunity to come in contact with God.

But adults not only create contexts that promote the welfare of little ones. Adults also create a world that erodes the structures on which children build their future.

When adults break marriage vows, children lose the value of commitment. When adults focus on money and jobs, children lose the value of worthiness. When adults neglect their families, children lose the value of a home.

To complicate the problem, this erosion of values is compounded in the streets of our cities: children of immigrants living in two worlds, trying to make sense of confusing worldviews; children having only a mother's last name, looking for a solid identity; children following the lie that happiness is found at the end of a marijuana cigar.

What can we, the Church, do to rescue children from this erosion of values?

*We must teach children truth:* God is a good God and He created a good world. Even in the midst of confusion and crime, God is still in control and human beings are still the objects of His love. Also, true freedom does not come with rebellion against parents. Real identity is not acquired from membership in a gang.

*We must affirm the value of all children:* Children of immigrants, especially, struggle with difficult identity issues. The color of their skin creates an inferiority complex. The accent in their voice creates insecurity and withdrawal. The value system practiced at home is in conflict with that of their school or neighborhood. The Church can do much to affirm their value and help them cross the bridges of misunderstanding.

*We must empower our city churches:* The Church is the key to both validating children's worthiness and empowering city churches with resources to reach them.

True, the values of our country are eroding quickly, and that erosion is perhaps most visible in our cities. Yet as believers, we have the exciting ability, through the Holy Spirit, to change that context as we bring children into contact with our loving, transforming God. ■

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