



# God's Place for Children

BOB SMETANA AND  
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A look at the ministry of the Covenant's children's homes

**F**ROM AS EARLY AS THE 1880's, the Covenant Church has been involved in ministry to abandoned and abused children. In 1883, Covenant churches in Chicago (then known as Mission Friends) hired Henry Palmblad as a city missionary to visit poor and sick Scandinavian immigrants. As part of his duties, Palmblad worked to provide food and other necessities for children. He also placed children in foster homes—taking five children into his own home. In 1886, Palmblad helped start the Home of Mercy in Chicago. Among the Home's first residents were an eighteen-month-old girl and a six year old.

In 1900, Covenant churches on the East Coast opened the Children's Home of Cromwell, Connecticut. This was followed in 1921 by the Covenant Children's Home in Princeton, Illinois, founded by the Central Conference. As the need for orphan-ages decreased, both homes started to serve, taking in abused children, and adding specialized staff to deal with the challenges that these children faced.

The year 2000 brought new challenges for the children's homes. While the Children's Home of Cromwell celebrated its 100th anniversary, the Covenant Children's Home in Princeton closed its residential program, with hopes of finding new areas of ministry for the future. Both groups also became part of Covenant Ministries of Benevolence during this time.

This month, the *Companion* looks at the past, present, and future ministries of both the Covenant Children's Home and the Children's Home of Cromwell.

## Covenant Children's Home PRINCETON, ILLINOIS

Craig Pinley

Five years ago, the thought of no children living at Covenant Children's Home (CCH) in Princeton, Illinois, would have been ludicrous. After all, CCH had just come off one of its best years financially, and the organization was having an impact on its campus and in the local community. CCH employed nearly 200 people on campus and had a \$5 million annual budget, and an eighty-year history of ministry. During those eighty years, CCH had cared for 1,700 children.

How times have changed. In the past

lect. The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services refers families to CCH and CCH assists in parent training, researching community resources, and homemaking skills, among other things.

A model program called Communities Can!, one of forty in Illinois, focuses on community-based alcohol and drug abuse prevention to junior-high and high-school students. Another program, Youth Under the Influence (YUI), provides counseling and education for children who committed a drug or alcohol-related crime.

CCH staff member Susan Barlow teaches kids how to handle anger and get along with peers through a program funded by the Illinois Violence Preven-

Basketball Association.

Some former residents even found a partner for life at CCH. Carl and Signe Nelson met when they were growing up at CCH. They have been married for fifty-five years and are members of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Princeton. Ray and Ruth Vetter, another couple that met on campus, have been married fifty-six years.

In the 1970s, increasing numbers of abused and neglected children were referred to CCH. In response, CCH became a residential treatment center, and was renamed Covenant Children's Home and Family Services. Covenant Counseling Services was established for outpatient counseling and community education in and around Princeton.

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five years, state funds for residential care programs dwindled and a major overhaul was needed at CCH. On February 19, 2000, the CCH board of directors voted to discontinue its residential program. On June 30, the last children moved out of the Children's Home.

Since then, prayer and planning have been the major priority for CCH. On July 16, a Circle of Prayer celebration gave longtime supporters a chance to grieve the changes in program emphasis and to pray for the future. CCH has also operated in a "eliminate and concentrate" mode, cutting the staff to fourteen people, and the budget to \$700,000.

CCH administrators are in the midst of an eight-month evaluation process with Covenant Ministries of Benevolence (CMB). CCH executive director David Lundberg says that by June 30, 2001, the organization will have "a business plan that will outline who will be served, how it will be served, how it will be funded, and when new programs will begin."

As CCH plans its long-term future, its ministry to the community continues, with six outreach programs. A homemakers program provides support services to twenty-five area families deemed at risk for child abuse or neg-



Children at Covenant Children's Home head to church in the 1950s.

tion Authority. A key component is educating children how to make better decisions under stress. Barlow also works with two elementary school programs for at-risk children.

### In the beginning

The Sunday School Association of the Central Conference founded CCH in 1921 in Princeton, Illinois. At first the mission was to provide Christian nurture for children whose families were unable to care for them. For many children, CCH provided a solid foundation as they blossomed into adulthood.

One young man who grew up at CCH, Joe Ruklick, played basketball at Princeton High School then went on to play basketball at Northwestern University. He eventually played for the Philadelphia Warriors in the National

CCH also began to provide in-home support services for at-risk families. Because funds were coming from public agencies, attendance at church was no longer required, although chaplains provided spiritual guidance for the children.

In recent years, the number of youth referred to CCH through the Illinois child welfare system decreased 45 percent, forcing CCH to reprioritize. Harold Spooner, executive vice-president of outreach min-

istries under CMB, says that Illinois and many other states are directing more funds toward foster care and less to residential treatment programs.

Spooner says that the ministry of CCH suffered more notably when more stringent stipulations were put on residential treatment programs. CCH is not alone in its struggles—similar Christian service organization near Princeton have shut down and another has experienced major changes in recent months.

### Looking to the future

As the ministry looks to the future, CCH and CMB staff are looking at a variety of options, both on and off the current campus site. "One of the things

*Craig Pinley is a staff writer for the Department of Communications.*

we're trying to do is not be blinded by our campus," Lundberg says. "We want to discover what the needs are and how to get those needs met, whether they are here or elsewhere."

A ministry for victims of domestic violence, a senior center, and an affordable assisted living facility are among the possibilities for future ministries, though Spooner says that no definitive plans have been made.

"We're not anywhere near that stage yet, but we will be and we will be soon," Spooner says. "One thing we can say for sure is that we hope some kind of ministry that will come out of CCH. CMB resources have opened up things to CCH—things they may have not have had in previous years or didn't know what to ask for."

Gary P. Bush, director of marketing and business development at CCH, says that having time to plan has given CCH's board and staff time to carefully plan out their mission. "I think [in the past] there's been a mode of being reactive as opposed to proactive," Bush says, "I think that's because of the number of changes that has literally assaulted this organization in a short time. We can



used to control in my life... and I think God was saying through this that life is fragile and that I needed to let God be God through it."

Despite the recent changes, many of CCH's supporters have continued to give to the ministry, says Becky Strand, director of resource development. Strand, who has worked at CCH for twenty-five years, says that reading letters from supporters has helped raise her spirits. Knowing that people in the denomination can envision a new work at CCH has helped her dream again.

"I've been humbled by the people who have sent letters to us," Strand says. "There are some people waiting in the weeds to see what will happen next, but there are many that are saying they will keep giving as they have in the past. In



*Alumni of Covenant Children's Home: (seated) Ruth Vetter, Carl Bergin, Signe Nelson, (standing) Ray Vetter, Carl "Okie" Nelson*

fact, some have increased giving and one person recently put CCH in his will. I'm just starting to allow myself to be excited again. I think there's something good out there that's yet to come." □



*Scenes from the 1950s (top, above)*

attend to the planning process now rather than putting out a lot of fires."

For Lundberg, an administrator at CCH since 1986, the past few years have been trying. In September 1999, his mother died. A month later, he had heart surgery. He says that his personal struggles and the changes at CCH have given him new perspective on life. He trusts that the future of CCH is in God's hands. "More things have happened this year than probably happened in the last twenty-five [years]," he says. "I've realized that God's timing is perfect and I've had to let go the control of a lot of things I

## Children's Home of Cromwell

CROMWELL, CONNECTICUT

Bob Smietana

In 1898, A. N. Pierson, of Pierson Greenhouses in Cromwell, Connecticut, was standing outside of a nine-room house at West Street and Olson Avenue. The house was vacant—Pierson, the owner, wondered what to do with it. He thought perhaps some charity could put the house and the surrounding property to good use.

Just then, M. Nilsen, pastor of the Swedish Congregational Church walked by. Nilsen also thought that the building could be used to for charity. Pierson agreed to donate the building. That fall, Nilsen addressed the annual meeting of Covenant churches on the East Coast

and proposed using the building as a home for Swedish orphans.

After the meeting a letter was sent to churches asking them to donate funds for the home. The churches were asked to consider two things—"the need for a Christian home for homeless children" and "the words of Jesus: He that giveth to a child in my name even a cup of cold water, shall not lose his reward." On May 30, 1900, the Swedish Christian Children's Home in Cromwell opened its door, with room for thirty children.

More than 100 years later, the Children's Home of Cromwell is still caring for children in the name of Jesus as part



of Covenant Ministries of Benevolence. The Children's Home cares for about seventy children, many who have been abused or neglected. "The abuse and neglect is not short-term," says Dave Carlson, CEO. "We are talking about chronic abuse and neglect—and that can be physical, emotional, and sexual." Other children at the Children's Home have been removed from their home school for their behavior, or have been in trouble with the legal system.

The children, who range in age from eight to eighteen, are divided into five units of about fifteen children. There are three boys units (juniors, intermediate, and senior) and two girls units (junior and senior). They live, eat, and go to school on campus under the supervision of residential counselors, who serve as mentors and role models. They also work with therapists in individual



*The campus of the Children's Home of Cromwell*

together. When former residents return to visit the Children's Home, one of the first places they visit is the kitchen. There they find food service director Mike Nagle and long-time first cook Mike Porter. Many of the children help out in the kitchen after dinner, and the two Mikes provide a listening ear and another place where children feel cared for.

late 1960's, the Children's Home operated a small farm, and the children grew most of their own food.

Many people who grew up at the Children's Home came back for a 100th anniversary celebration this past summer—including one man who had lived there in the 1920s. While they had fond memories, many told Carlson that coming back was hard. "When they left here," he says. "they were given a little bit of a stipend and were sent out into the world."

Some went to work after leaving the Home. Some went on to college. Even there the experience was difficult. "When it came time for Christmas," Carlson says, "they had no place to go. The holidays were there, and they could not go back to their families and they couldn't go back to the Children's Home where they grew up."

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and group settings.

The Children's Home also works closely with families. "We have never said, 'Give us the kid, we'll fix the kid, and everything will be all right,'" says Steve Hodge, who oversees both the treatment and education programs at the Children's Home. "We recognize that sometimes the environment needs to be fixed as well, or at least the family needs to know how to work with the kids when they come home."

One of the things that sets the Children's Home apart is how the entire staff—residential counselors, teachers, therapists, and the support staff—work

"A lot of times kids will come back here first when they visit," says Porter, a staff member since 1984. "This was a place where they could get away from their problems and do something that made them feel better."

### **Brief history**

By 1915, when the Children's Home moved to its current location on Hicksville Road in Cromwell, there were seventy-two children and staff living there. At that time, the original home was sold off, and twenty acres of farmland was purchased. An additional thirty acres was added in 1932. Until the



*The Children's Home serves residents age 8-18.*

The Home served mostly orphans until the 1960s. At that time, the Home started serving children who had been abused and neglected. Because of the special needs of these children, the Home became a residential treatment center, adding therapists and psychologists.

### **The learning center**

As many of the children had special education needs, the Learning Center was added in 1980. Hodge says that students often flourish at the Learning Center because they finally have time and energy to focus on school. "When a kid comes in," Hodge says, "and they have been in an abuse or neglect situation—they deal with that twenty-four a day. When they are in this safer environ-



*Jim Grandpre teaches in the life-skills program.*



Until the 1960s there was a working farm at the Children's Home.

ment, where they don't have to worry that somebody is going to beat them or abuse them, they are better able to focus on their academics and other parts of their life."

In one recent case, a child was helping to care for his sick father at home. His father was on home dialysis and this eleven-year-old had to keep the equipment clean. "He was told, 'If you don't do this right, Daddy dies,'" says Hodge, "so he had a lot on his plate. Within six months, he had gained a year in reading and math, because he was now free of all the other issues in his life."

Students are placed in a transitional classroom when they arrive at the Learning Center. They spend from two weeks to two months there, while the staff prepares their educational plan. From there they are placed in one of three programs—academic, vocational, or life-skills. The programs were designed in response to student needs. "We were getting students who were significantly below grade level," says Cindy Sarnowski, director of education. "Sometimes we have eighth-grade students who are reading on a first or second grade level. They needed specific skills to help them learn the basics."

Jim Grandpre, who has been at the Children's Home since 1981, heads the life-skills program. Grandpre worked in junior boys from 1981 until 1992, then went back to school to become a special education teacher. He says that many of his students don't learn in a traditional way.

"I get a lot of kids who are classified as 'school-phobic,' and this program helps them start taking an interest in school," he says. "I was writing some notes on the board recently, and when I finished, and one girl told me, 'This is

the first time that I wanted to take more notes. I wanted to keep learning."

In a look back to when the Children's Home had a working farm on the grounds, Grandpre recently started an small animal studies program. His students raise snakes, birds, rabbits, and other small animals. "The students decide what kind of animal they want to raise," he says, "and they learn about the animal's biology and reproductive cycles. They also learn about taking care of something other than themselves."

### Support from churches

Eighty-five percent of the Children's Home's budget comes from the state. The rest comes from individuals, churches, and other organizations. Programs like animal studies, a new computer lab, dance and music therapy, and summer programs are all made possible by those private donors. Covenant churches support the Children's Home by sponsoring children or entire units. "That is not only a gift support system," says Carlson. "It's also a prayer support system. We have people out there praying on a regular basis for the Children's Home. Sometimes you don't consider that as concrete but I consider that as number one."

For most of its history, the Children's Home was owned and operated by the East Coast Conference. That changed during the summer of 2000, when the Home became part of Covenant Ministries of Benevolence (CMB). Carlson says the Home joined CMB in part to make sure that the ministry would continue for the next 100 years. He also hopes that the Children's Home can become part of a broader national ministry. Staff from the Children's Home, from CMB staff, and other Covenant agencies are working to develop ministries to assist local churches. Some of the ideas they are considering are an adoption resource exchange, a foster care network, and a network of Covenant counseling services. "Given societal needs which are growing ever greater," Carlson says, "there is the question of how we in the business of mental and behavioral health can be a resource to our Covenant pastors and to their church community."

The ministry of the Children's Home is also extending into the local communities. The Learning Center serves thirty-five special education students from surrounding communities during the day. An extended day treatment program for at-risk kids is in the works. The program would run from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. and would provide academic support, activities, and even family therapy.

Carlson says that being at the Children's Home has been a "wonderful opportunity to serve." He says that he has the advantage of seeing former residents come back and talk about the difference the Home made in their lives. "There has been a common theme through the years—when they have come back, they say 'if it wasn't for the Children's Home,' or 'if it wasn't for this particular staff member, I don't know where I would be today.' Some folks have been able to say, 'I don't think that I would be alive today.' I praise God for this ministry." □



Mike Nagle, director of food services (left), and a resident

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

about the Children's Home of Cromwell and Covenant Children's Home in Princeton, log onto [www.covchurch.org](http://www.covchurch.org) and click on Associations.

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