Q & A with the Experts: Karen L. Worthington

*Barton Fellow, Director of the Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic, and Senior Fellow in the Center for the Study of Law and Religion*

**Q:** Why did you become a Senior Fellow of the Center?

**A:** It was an opportunity for me to be more involved with scholars from around the campus who were doing research in a variety of disciplines. I brought to the Center very practical, public policy experience, working with day-to-day agencies, the state legislature, and others, developing laws and policies that would impact children today.

**Q:** How has the Center affected your work?

**A:** One of the impacts of being involved in the Fellowship process is the constant interaction, particularly in the first semester of the first year. The exposure to the theologians, their conversations, and what they could share with me about the different faith traditions perspectives on justice and children and advocacy were very helpful in work I was doing with faith communities locally on an advocacy aspect.

**Q:** What impact has the Center had on Emory?

**A:** One of the most significant impacts on the university is bringing attention to critical issues that Emory can have some influence upon, for example, the public dialogues and conferences that focused on children’s issues. Emory has a lot of information to share that could result in changes in practice and policy locally and internationally around these issues. The Center provides a forum by which the public dialogue can be expanded, enriched and also informed by the work of other scholars at the university.

**Q:** What role do you prefer for the Center, advocacy or scholarship?

**A:** Because I come from a background where my work is focused on public policy and implementing improvements in the lives of children, I wish to see the side of the Center that does more public policy and advocacy. I think there is a role for both.

One of the benefits that I got out of being a Senior Fellow was traveling to other countries and learning about public policy development there. For example, in Northern Ireland, where I attended a conference and met scholars who were involved in public policy, one difference is that the government relies on the academies to provide the research to drive public policy. That
is less common here in the United States, but it’s definitely a model to consider. And there is a place for centers of excellence, like our Center, to be one of the leaders in bringing scholars and public policy makers together.

**Q: Are there any examples of how this is happening now?**

A: Although I can’t draw a direct correlation between the exact work of the Center and a specific law or policy that’s changed, one of the ways we make public policy changes in the country is through public opinion. And a huge benefit of the Center is in influencing public opinion by providing forums for public education. The reputation of the Center is incredibly strong, so strong in fact that I feel that if it chose to put its influence behind certain public policy initiatives, it would probably have great success.

**Q: What issues should the Center tackle during the next 25 years?**

A: I would really hope that the Center continues to have a focus on children. In this country, we continue to make the health and well being of children one of our lowest priorities. And I believe that the status of the Center and the influence that it could have could work to bring together scholars and policy makers and really put the best minds in this country, and perhaps around the world, together to focus on those issues and make improvements in the lives of children. What I would like to see, though, is some focus on sustained public policy outcomes. So, for example, one of our side projects focused on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Perhaps getting it ratified in the United States is a good project for the Center's next phase.

Another area might be building on child health. Healthcare for children is reaching a critical point in this country, particularly in the state of Georgia today. And the Center could choose, with the huge medical complex here at Emory, to really focus on making sure that all children have access to universal healthcare.

In addition, the world is now facing a critical environmental crisis. In the next 25 years, there needs to be a concerted effort to really look at what we humans are doing to the world and our environment. Scholars in theology, scholars in ethics and philosophy and in moral decision making could really add something to the scientific discussion of the environment. And I think that might be an area of focus for the Center in the future.