

CHILDREN AT RISK IN SHORT-TERM MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

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Mission to the *Piaröas*

“It is going to be a long night,” I whispered to myself as I laid back in my seat and prepared for our thirteen hour bus ride to the town of Puerto Ayacucho near the Colombian border. I had lived in Venezuela for six years, primarily working with the ministry *Niños de la Luz* (Children of the Light), but life and ministry in Caracas in no way prepared me for this mission trip into the *estado Amazona* (Amazon state). On this trip I was joined by several team members and a group of boys living at the Lighthouse Ranch Boys Home, outside of Caracas.

It was early morning when I was awoken by the boy sitting next to me. “*Hemos llegado al Orinoco*” (we’ve arrived at the Orinoco) he told me. The famous Orinoco river was something I was looking forward to seeing, I just was not prepared to see it at 5:30am! Soon enough we pulled into Puerto Ayacucho. From there we hailed a pickup and made our way towards the community in which we had been invited to minister. Upon entering the indigenous community we were immediately greeted by the children of the village. It was obvious that the urban world had made its inroads into this village, for many of the people were dressed in non-traditional wear and some even lived in small concrete homes.

The children and youth who had joined us on this trip immediately re-connected with some of the young people they already knew from a previous trip. We made our way over to where we would be staying for the next few days, set up our hammocks and organized ourselves. Over the next few days we helped with church services in the evening and work projects and games during the day. The community leaders praised the young men for their hard work in the fields during the day. The boys that joined us on this trip played a central role in the ministry assignment.

Each morning, prior to leaving for ministry, the boys would gather together for a team devotional where they would seek God for his guidance as to how they should proceed with their activities. Following the time of prayer, the youth would begin their time of service in the indigenous community, painting, clearing land and tending to other construction needs like electricity work; some were even involved in cooking. Everything was done in service to the local community where they were ministering. Each evening, upon finishing the service projects and cool baths in a local river, the youth were given opportunities to teach about Jesus with local youth through games and movies.

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of this trip consisted of watching God use these boys to minister to the children and adults in the community. Upon our return trip to Caracas, as I sat in the dark bus preparing to fall asleep, one of the boys sat next to me and asked me to tell him my testimony. As I began to share my journey with him, it suddenly occurred to me that the dramatic transformation point in my life occurred when I was sixteen going on a short-term mission trip. It was at that point where God turned my life around. Marcos himself was sixteen and it was evident that God was working powerfully in his life as well. I found it to be no coincidence that we were able to share this adventure together.

Ministry to Street Children¹

For several years now groups of young people from the ministry *Niños de la Luz* have been ministering to indigenous peoples in the interior of the country. The team prepares for such

¹ A familiar term to describe children living and working on the street is ‘street children.’ In the book *Community Children* (Burch 2005), as the title conveys, I argue that a more appropriate missiological understanding and term is that of ‘community children.’ In my book I go to great length to discuss why I feel the term street children is *not* the most appropriate wording for these children, however, due to its use in academic literature I will on occasion use it as well.

trips through prayer and fasting, raising funds, collecting clothes, toys, medicine and cross-cultural training. The youth and leaders seek to involve the local church community and others involved in the ministry in Caracas, Venezuela. While short-term mission projects have become common place for many youth groups and churches in North America, this group is different. *Niños de la Luz* is a ministry dedicated to reaching out to street-living and working children in the capital city, Caracas. As part of their ministry strategy, the mission team responds to the needs of children living under bridges and in dark alleys, shining light where there is only darkness. It is not uncommon for children to have drug addictions, and violence is a common survival technique. As part of the ministry's multi-faceted outreach program, *Niños de la Luz* runs a program called the Lighthouse Ranch which is located on a twelve acre ranch nearly an hour outside of Caracas. On the ranch are three homes where children live with house parents who care for them as if they were their own children. Some of the children leave the ranch within days after arriving, having been drawn back to the streets, while others stay for years, making the Lighthouse Ranch community their family. Each year, several staff members of *Niños de la Luz* invite a group of interested boys from the ranch to participate in short-term outreaches, mainly among indigenous groups in the Amazon basin. Over the past five years, the boys have ministered primarily among the *Piaröa* and *Warao* indigenous communities. Some young people have traveled internationally to attend mission conferences and have become involved in cross-cultural ministry in neighboring nations.

Understanding God's Heart for Children

As we have seen in the story of the young missionaries, God desires to use young people to extend his kingdom. In September of 2004, an international dialogue began about the

importance of children in the kingdom of God.² What began in 2004 became more fully developed through the Viva Network's Cutting Edge Conference in September, 2005 in Cirencester, UK. A Biblical framework document, along with a variety of papers and articles, and a book scheduled for publication in late 2007 have resulted from this discussion, further helping us to understand God's heart for children.³ The framework is made up of seven key principles. They are:

1. *God creates every unique person as a child with dignity.*
2. *Children need parental love in a broken world.*
3. *God gives children as a gift to welcome and nurture.*
4. *Society has a God-given responsibility for the well-being of children and families.*
5. *Children are a promise of hope for every generation.*
6. *God welcomes children fully into the family of faith.*
7. *Children are essential to the mission of God.*

Each principle represents a biblical understanding of God's heart for children. While all of the statements deserve to be touched upon and are critical to understanding the place of children in the mission of God, my focus throughout this paper will be primarily on principle number seven: *Children are Essential to the Mission of God.*

There are two possible ways to understand the place of children in the Community of God: (1) Children are essential in that the Church will never be what God intends for it to be until children become our emphasis in missional engagement and are invited into the Christian

² In reference to 'children' throughout this paper I am assuming that of the United Nations definition and include anyone under the age of eighteen. I will, on occasion also use the term youth or adolescents as well when making specific reference to young people.

³ See *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework*. Edited by Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley. Monrovia, CA: World Vision-Authentic, 2007.

community; and (2) Children are essential in that their active participation is required in fulfilling the mission of God to reconcile humanity to himself. That is, we ought to view the mission of God both from a ‘*centripetal*’ and a ‘*centrifugal*’ perspective. As children and youth are invited into the Church, active participation in missional engagement should be both encouraged and result as a natural occurrence of their relationship with Christ. Historically, the Christian community has focused on children only as recipients of mission, that is, it is our role, as adults, to reach out to children. We are now beginning to recognize that such children are created with a potential for being agents of transformation.

What does it mean that *children are essential to the mission of God*? Like we have seen in the story of the young people participating in short-term mission projects in Venezuela, children and young people have an ability to not only participate with adults, but to be the central actors to spread the Good News, crossing barriers and borders from church to non-church and distinct cultures to regions where the Gospel has not yet been presented and where the seeds of the Gospel have yet to sprout.

Historical Perspective

Children at risk⁴ have an enormous potential to be used by God in his mission of reconciliation. Many of those who have been touched and transformed from horrendous situations of street life and abuse are being used by God to participate in global mission outreach today. Beyond the polarizing question: Should we do short-term mission? I am proposing an

⁴ In using the term ‘children at risk’ I am referring to “children in danger of not reaching their God-given potential, physically, environmentally, mentally, socially and spiritually” (McDonald 2000, 16). This term has become a familiar one to refer to children and youth coming from a number of particular areas of risk, such as: street lifestyle, physical, verbal and sexual abuse, malnutrition, extreme poverty, trafficked children, child laborers etc. Some argue that all children who have not come to faith in Christ should be considered ‘at risk.’ While this is generally true, given the context of this paper, I am focusing on young people who have come out of one of the many social risk factors that have been mentioned above.

alternative approach that assumes the place of short-term cross-cultural mission today and encourages the active participation of those normally considered ‘children at risk.’⁵ There are few historical evidences of such practices to look at; however, some examples of children involved in mission do exist. At least some of these examples could be described as ‘short-term’ although I am hesitant to include the term *mission* due to some of the violent approaches. Authentic mission is neither violent nor coercive.

The Children’s Crusade of 1212 A.D. is one example of the efforts of young people to carry out missional engagement.⁶ Initiated by a young boy named *Nicholas* from *Cologne*, the movement attracted thousands of children from Germany and France who responded to what they felt was God’s call for them to deliver Jerusalem from the Muslims. While on their way to the holy city, many died of hunger and exposure while some were sold into slavery and faced a life of abuse (Sexton 2006). Their mission ultimately failed.

Another example comes to us from colonial Latin America. The friar, Toribio de Motolinía,⁷ writing from New Spain during the 16th century, describes young indigenous people engaged in missional activities to reach other natives who had yet to convert to Christianity:

Two years after the death of the child Cristóbal⁸, there came here to Tlaxacallan a Dominican friar named Fray Bernardino Minaya, with a companion, on their way to the province of Oaxyecac. At that time the guardian of the monastery here in Tlaxacallan was our father Fray Martín de Valencia, of glorious memory, whom the Dominican fathers

⁵ It is assumed that these ‘children at risk’ that I refer to are children and young people who have come to faith in Christ and have acknowledged their need for the Savior despite on-going social risk factors.

⁶ This event has been disputed by some historians. Some suggest that the terminology is not in fact referring to children, but rather to landless peasants. Some aspects of the event are most likely fictional.

⁷ Fray Toribio de Motolinía was one of the ‘twelve disciples’ invited by Father Martín de Valencia to join him on his voyage to preach the gospel to the inhabitants of New Spain. He was also listed sixth on the list of invitees to New Spain in a letter sent to Father Martín de Valencia from the General of the Franciscans. Prior to the adoption of his new world name “Motolinía, he was referred to as Fray Toribio de Benavente. The friar took on the name Motolinía upon learning that it meant “poor” in the Nahuatl language (Motolinía 1950, 1-2).

⁸ The child Cristóbal was a young person, reportedly, either twelve or thirteen years of age, who was found to be hidden away from the Friars by his father. The father sent his three other sons, as requested by the Dominican Friars, to the monastery. Upon the eventual conversion of Cristóbal, he began seeking to convert his father and remove the idols he had in his home. This enraged his father and one of his wives and thus they plotted to kill him, eventually succeeding in this (Motolinía 1950, 246-248).

asked to give them some of the boys whom we had taught to help them in the matter of teaching the elements of the faith, if there was anyone who would, for God's sake, be willing to go to do that work. When the boys were asked, two volunteered, both were very handsome children and sons of very important personages. One was called Antonio. He had with him a servant of his own age named Juan. The other was called Diego. At the time that they were about to start out, Father Martín de Valencia said to them: 'My sons, consider that you are to go away from your own land and that you are going among people who do not yet know God, and I believe that you will encounter many hardships. I feel your troubles as if you were my own sons and I am even afraid that they may kill you on your journeys (1950, 250-251).

These young missionaries are said to be of similar age to that of Cristóbal, who earlier in Motolinía's writings is described as twelve or thirteen years of age. The boys bravely volunteered to go with the visiting friars to evangelize others who have not yet been told of Christ. Upon hearing of their possible death for volunteering for such a work, in unison, the boys replied,

We are ready to go with the fathers and to accept willingly any hardships for God's sake, and if He should be pleased to take our lives, why should we not give them for Him? Did they not kill Saint Peter by crucifying him and did they not behead Saint Paul and was not Saint Bartholomew flayed in God's service? Why, then, should we not die for Him, if that be His pleasure (1950, 251).

The boldness and bravery of these young people certainly deserves our respect and underscores their commitment to missional engagement during this time period in early Mexico.⁹

Another example, in more recent history, is that of Emma Whittmore. Whittmore founded the Door of Hope mission to street girls. Her first home was established in 1890 in New York City, but by the time of her death in 1931, she had nearly one hundred homes in cities around the world. Many of the girls whom Whittmore helped, later went on to become missionaries themselves, reaching people in the New York City slums and beyond (Tucker

⁹ It is important to recognize that Richard C. Trexler (1982) argues that indigenous children were often used and exploited by Church officials in the evangelization of early Mexico. Trexler says, "The strategy of the Christian clergy involved pitting the young people of New Spain against their fathers and elders; in the early Spanish Conquest liminal group of the Indian young crossed, or were carried over, tribal borders and found new fathers among the Priests" (1982, 115). As Catholic Priests began to teach young Indians in the ways of Christianity, children were indoctrinated into thinking radically differently than they had prior to their internships. Many young natives were manipulated into committing violent acts upon Indian Priests and others in the name of Christianity, and they involved themselves in forcing others to convert to the faith.

1988). In this case we sense an intrinsic desire by the girls to reach out to young women in similar circumstances.

In contemporary history there are other examples as well. Recent reports from Mozambique tell of thousands of children being equipped to care for the sick and to preach the Gospel, with a number of people coming to faith and being healed. We are also told of a children's congregation in Argentina and their ministry among business people during lunch time. They often go into the parks to pray for those so desiring. As a result of this ministry, the adult congregation has also begun to grow (Glanville 2007, 275-276.).

Children as Co-Participants in the Mission of God

It should not be too surprising for us to see God use children and youth that come out of disadvantaged backgrounds as central players in his mission. Several biblical characters surely convince us of God's power to work in surprising ways. Some of those whom God used mightily were: Joseph (Genesis 37); Mary (Matt. 1:18ff.); The Leper (Mark 1:40-45); The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37); and The Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-42).

As is commonly practiced, it is one thing to participate in short-term mission work focused on reaching children, but it is another thing all together to participate in short-term mission *with* children and youth who come out of at-risk circumstances. Most consider street children and other at-risk children to be victims of dire circumstances in need of service. While this is often true, I believe it is time that we consider, given their background, inviting them to participate in cross-cultural mission projects. Many believe that children must be given the opportunity to respond to the message of Jesus Christ, and I certainly concur with this belief, but I also believe we need to think about this from a different angle as children begin to integrate

into the Church. One theory of participation that can assist us in our desire to involve children in missional engagement is the ladder of participation by Roger Hart (1992). Hart uses a ladder illustration to describe the importance of participation in responding to needs of children at risk, but I would like to apply the theory to the subject at hand, focusing on children as co-participants in short-term missional engagement (See Figure 1).

The steps of the ladder of participation develop a progressive approach towards full participation and child-centered action. The ladder progresses as participation moves from tokenism to an authentic child-centered participation. The lower half of the ladder includes *Manipulation*, *Decoration* and *Tokenism*. None of these developments would be considered authentic participation, but rather lead us to the use, and in some cases exploitation of children and youth as puppets of mission. Spiritual abuse can occur by coercing children and youth to be part of something that does not truly resonate with who they are as individuals. Care should be taken that children and youth are in no way manipulated or coerced into active participation in caring for others. This must be an authentic and compassionate response on their behalf. There are many churches and organizations that invite children to engage in short-term mission, but there are few that truly acknowledge the importance of a co-participatory action of engagement. Many prefer to allow children to participate to a certain level without granting a central role in mission involvement. Moving up the ladder of participation we find what we can refer to as areas of child-centered degrees of participation. These next areas consist of *Assigned but Informed*, *Consulted and Informed*, *Adult-Initiated Shared Decisions with Youth* and finally we encounter high participatory involvement through *Youth-Initiated and Directed* and *Youth-Initiated Shared Decisions with Adults* steps. These areas focus on a progressive approach to child and youth control over the actions and processes. As children and youth progress in their knowledge of

God's mission, their active participation should be encouraged from passive participation to energetic involvement and leadership. In applying Hart's participatory theory to mission, it would be advisable to consider a progressive approach, one in which children and youth are mentored and guided into the later stages of full-participation. A mission project should not arrive at this point without leadership training and organizational skills development, but there should come a time when the children or adolescents are ready to lead a short-term project. Increased participation, such as *Child-Initiated and Directed* or, ultimately, *Child-Initiated Shared Decisions with Adults*, should be our goal for children coming out of at-risk situations. In fact, I believe this is a key issue for transformation in the lives of children coming out of high risk situations. 'To love thy neighbor' is probably one of the greatest restorative strategies we can offer these children. Like we have seen with the participation of young people from *Niños de la Luz* in Venezuela, a progressive development of participation is needed in order to be fair to the young person involved. In Venezuela, the youth leadership has not yet arrived at a place where they are ready to take on the *Child-Initiated Shared Decisions with Adults* step in participation, but their increased involvement in short-term missional engagement has encouraged their place as agents of mission and empowerment, creating ownership of a very important ministry to people in need.¹⁰

¹⁰ We must take into account basic child development and maturity levels. I am not suggesting that we expect a very young child to plan and implement a complex humanitarian project, but rather we move towards the child/youth led mission project in accordance with their level of maturity and development. The adult project leaders are responsible to oversee the selection process of potential child-leaders.

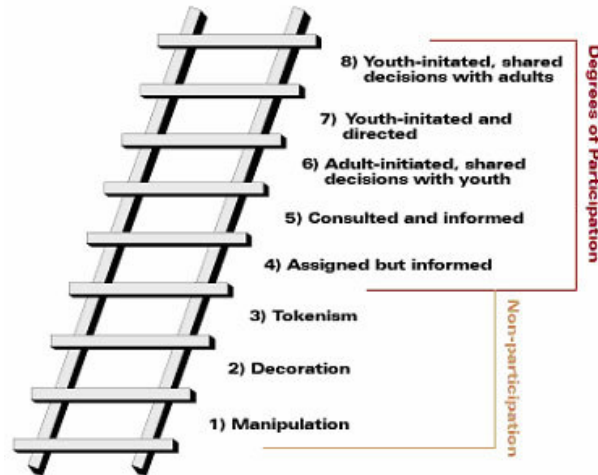


Figure 1: Adapted by Covenant House Vancouver (Hart 1992)

The ministry *Niños de la Luz* is progressively moving toward a higher youth participatory-action response in cross-cultural mission projects and stands as an example for creative solutions by encouraging children at risk to begin applying the biblical principle of caring for their ‘neighbor.’ One young man, after participating in a short-term outreach, said, “It was great to be able to cut the hair of the children and sense all that God was doing in their lives through me.” Perhaps the key in this new understanding of child-led missional engagement is the place of empowerment through service.

Empowerment for Mission

The issue of empowerment is complex. Empowerment is regularly referred to in minority movements and political discourse, and has frequently been linked to people like John Locke, Karl Marx, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King and Paulo Freire (Weissberg 1999). Empowerment is normally viewed as a top-down approach for enabling those who are considered powerless to increase their authority and power in any given area.

However, I believe that empowerment must be an internal choice; it cannot be forced upon someone. Kassey Garba (1999), in her article entitled, “An Endogenous Empowerment

Strategy: a case-study of Nigerian Women,” calls for an *endogenous* empowerment that should be viewed as opposed to the typical *exogenous* approach too often employed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Christian agencies and churches. An endogenous empowerment perspective is a bottom-up approach that encourages the agent (protagonist) to bring about change; it is something that is acquired internally, something that the subject seeks out. *Exogenous* empowerment is a top-down approach, originating with the external agent, not from within the individual or group that has been excluded and disempowered (Garba 1999). By calling for an *endogenous* approach to empowerment, I am not saying that there is no place for external animation, that is, Christian leaders and community organizers can and should play a role in helping those in positions of powerlessness to discover their self-dignity and voice. Those in a place of influence can function as change agents and stimulate the conditions for the empowerment to occur.

Children’s worldviews affect how they perceive themselves and others around them. This includes how they perceive their locus of control and assumptions about God.¹¹ One of the ways to encourage their self-dignity and healthy self-esteem is to encourage empowerment through missional engagement. If we continue to allow children and youth, coming from difficult backgrounds, to conceptualize themselves only as victims and passive recipients, we fail to rightly acknowledge the *Imago Dei* in which they have been created. As external leaders, those in a place of authority over young people, our primary task is to animate, that is, to blow the breath of life into the soul of the child and move them into action (Friedmann 1992).

¹¹ Gundelina Velazco (2002) presents one of the best studies on street children and their worldviews. The report is titled, “The Worldviews of Street Children,” and is a research report focused on selected elements of worldviews among street children in Brazil, The Philippines, India and South Africa.

In borrowing from Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientização* (consciousness-raising), there must be an awareness of the social and spiritual conditions at work in any given community. Children and youth, coming from difficult backgrounds, are often force-fed information and rarely given the opportunity to discern what God might be leading them to do in his global mission.

Freire is best known for his revolutionary pedagogy which calls for a conscientization paradigm that encourages the poor and oppressed to be about "learning to perceive, social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (1993, 35). My purpose in addressing this ideology is to ask the question: What would happen if we encouraged children and youth to read the Bible with a missional perspective? The Bible is often used to teach children right from wrong; and while I do not deny its place in guiding children and adults in our moral development, I believe we must encourage children and youth to apply all of Scripture to their lives, including the call to mission. My assumption is that within each child that comes to faith in Christ, there is an internal desire to want to missionally engage with others who are in need, regardless of their maturity in Christ.

Contemporary Christian education is missing key ingredients in encouraging empowerment that leads to missional action in the lives of children coming from complex situations. Freire calls traditional education "a banking concept" (1993, 72). This banking concept can also be understood in the context of working with street children and others at risk. We often think of ministry to children as only beneficiaries, that is, they are a type of bank account and have nothing themselves to give. Freirean philosophy interprets human relationships as subject to subject, not subject to object. If we continue to view children and adolescents as only mechanical receptacles, we fall into a belief that children are only passive beings, those that

are simply “manageable beings,” in using Freirean terminology, and not regarded as people who can participate in transforming their own lives and the lives of others. Christ calls us to be transformers as well as recipients of love. The kingdom of God paradigm calls for a radical departure from the victim mentality that so many churches and organizations fall into when it comes to ministering to children at risk. That is, they view these boys and girls as simply victims of their environment and that they are the objects that we should invest into, instead of seeing them as givers as well, people who are just as much agents of transformation as the individuals seeking to care for them. While we cannot deny the fact that street children and others are victims, in the sense that they have been subjected to immoral and dehumanizing acts, we should move beyond viewing them as non-participatory victims. Children should be perceived as protagonists in the drama of life, with agency and ability to bring about hope in the lives of others. Ultimately, this kind of interaction with children and youth will lead into a pedagogical relationship, where both children and adult leaders are educated about the mission of God. My friend Douglas in Venezuela is a good example of this type of relationship

Douglas’ Story

One of the first boys I met while on a short-term mission trip to Caracas in 1993 was a boy named Douglas. Since 1993, Douglas has gone through some severe trials in his life. In his younger years, pre-street life, he lived with his mom and stepfather. They lived in a very poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Caracas. Douglas was sent to the streets of this mega-city to beg and if he returned with enough money, he would be patted on the head and be told “good boy,” but if he returned with less than the required quota, he would be hit and cursed at.

Douglas made a decision one day to stay on the streets for good, to leave behind his life of abuse and to seek out an existence for himself on the mean streets of Caracas. He spent most of his time high on drugs and stealing food and other things he wanted. On occasion, when he and his friends were really desperate for food, they would throw dead mice onto tables that were outside so that dinner goers would abandon their meals quickly, only to give the kids time to grab the food and run. One day, while making contact with the boys on the boulevard, a colleague and I noticed him nearby. Douglas immediately showed us some sores he had on his stomach, which later turned out to be scabies. After taking him to see a doctor, Douglas was desperate to leave the street, so we invited him to the Lighthouse Ranch. Over time, Douglas healed physically, but the years of abuse and street life made it hard for him to heal emotionally. One evening, while cleaning one of the boys' rooms, I noticed a knife under Douglas' mattress. He had become so accustomed to having to protect himself he still felt the need to have a weapon.

While living at the Lighthouse Ranch, Douglas began to show an interest in God and committed his life to him. He grew in his relationship with the Lord, yet still struggled with obeying the house rules and structure. One day, we heard the sad news of the death of one of the boys on the street. Some of us from the ministry made our way over to the funeral home where the boy was being mourned. Hesitantly, I invited Douglas to come with us, knowing that he would want to grieve the loss of his friend's life, yet worried that he would come into contact with his old friends. As was feared, the group of boys with whom Douglas had spent most of his time on the street also came to the funeral. What surprised me was how Douglas responded to them. He powerfully proclaimed the hope and restorative power that is only found in Jesus. He shared about what God had done for him and how much the Lord loves each one of them. This was a

spontaneous reaction to having encountered God! We adults did not have to guide him through this experience. Through this occurrence I learned a lot about how God moves in the lives of young people who have committed their lives to him. I am grateful for friends like Douglas who have spoken into my life through their example.

Today, as a member of the *Niños de la Luz* staff, Douglas continues to proclaim the love of God to at-risk children. Douglas and his wife, Ismerling, are parents of two precious boys and are committed believers seeking to restore other children who come from at risk situations (Burch 2005, 153-156).

Beyond Charity

The anthropologist and author, Tobias Hecht (1998), discusses the issue of *asistencialismo* (help-ism) and the tendency, within charities and church-based organizations, to over help the ‘victim’ in a way that prevents true transformation and creates dependency. Perhaps one of the reasons why we have not considered allowing the involvement of children at risk in missional engagement is because many are poor. Many feel that the poor do not desire to give, but rather only need to receive. This is simply not true.

Jayakumar Christian, in his book, *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God*, says “Poverty does not . . . mar the potential of the poor to be agents of transformation” (1999, 50). The poor (including children at risk) can be agents of mission, holistically involved in both proclamation and good works. One example of the power of such young people can be seen in the political *Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua* or National Movement of Street Boys and Girls (MNMMR) in Brazil. In June of 1985, the MNMMR was formed to shape street children educators and the children themselves into a

political force that would fight against powerlessness and poverty (Swift 1997). “In May 1986, in the first event of its kind, some 500 street and working children---ranging from the most streetwise from São Paulo to the most unworldly from *Amazonia* [Brazilian State]---bussed with their educators into Brasilia for the meeting” (1997, 106). The youth and leaders went to the Brazilian national congress and protested the needs of poor children everywhere. They sought to bring about change to society. As a result of their annual pressures on the Brazilian congress and the work of child advocates, constitutional rights were awarded to children and now “family, society and the state are required to protect children and adolescents as a matter of absolute priority” (1997, 115).

Children and youth can become agents of transformation in society and in the Church. Padre Bruno Sechi, a Salesian Priest, was fundamental in the beginnings of the MNMMR. Prior to the conception of the national movement, Padre Sechi worked with a young group of Christians. They studied the Bible together and asked the question: What would Jesus do in the midst of such suffering and poverty? As a result of reading Scripture, the young people began to notice the needs of people around them (Swift 1997). It was this very group of young people that began to work with the street-living and working children and eventually formed the MNMMR. This is just one example of what empowering young people can accomplish. Full participation in short-term mission projects is something that can not only impact the lives of the recipients of mission, but the very young people that have been empowered to respond in the task of reconciling people to their Maker.

As we pursue the development of a mission mindedness in young people, biblical resources should be approached as a primary tool for focusing young people toward missional engagement. The Bible has long been a source of motivation for both short-term and career

mindful missional employment. I contend that children and youth, regardless of their current levels of social risk, should be led to Bible reading as a key resource for developing a missional approach to life. If literacy is a problem, alternative approaches to Bible reading (audio, story telling etc.) should be pursued. The Bible was instrumental in guiding me as a young person as I struggled with a number of potentially very serious issues during my childhood and adolescence. It was the positive influence of a few mentors in my life, and Bible reading, which led me to my first involvement in short-term mission action, which in turn transformed my own life.

One tool that can be employed in developing the idea of missional engagement is the place of a hermeneutical relationship. I believe dialogue or rather ‘trialogue’ in Bible reading can provide a resource for enabling missional perspectives in young people. As we pursue a ‘trialogical’ experience in our missiological reading of Scripture (see figure 2), we create a learning experience for both the child and adult alike. This triological encounter includes the place of the Bible, child-care worker and young person. Another way of stating this is that we need an integration of three voices; the Bible passage, the Christian leader and the child or youth. Included in this cooperative encounter is the voice of the Holy Spirit, illuminating the Word of God to us as we read. The Holy Spirit speaks into our lives as we dialogue between Scripture and the context.

In the triological process we are seeking a multi-faceted approach to mission on multiple levels. As the Bible speaks to us and into the context, a mutual learning atmosphere develops where both the child and adult leader are internally empowered. The multiple levels in which this happens are: (1) Social realities and (2) Spiritual realities, without fragmenting the two in a dualistic way.

Another important Biblical principle that should be invited to speak into the context is the incarnation. The incarnation should focus our dialogue toward a place of real mission in the world today. David Bosch wrote: “If we are to take the incarnation seriously, the Word has to become flesh in every new context” (1991, 21). It is the incarnation of God that steers mission for both child and adult alike. As we invite God to enter into the mission conversation, we not only invite God to speak to us through the Bible, but rather we invite him to take over the conversation guiding the future direction, plans and strategy for engagement. So in the end, it is God who that takes the primary role in the implementation of his mission.

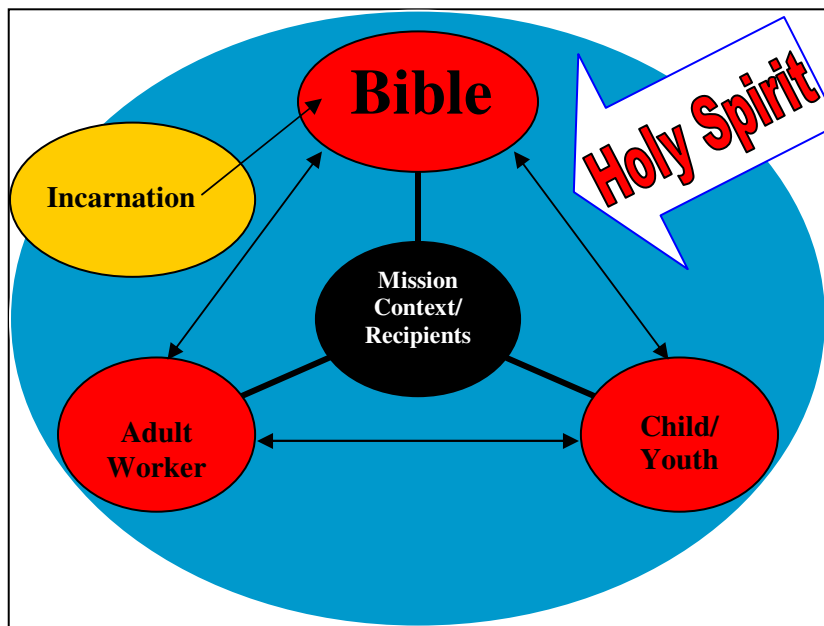


Figure 2: Trialogical Encounter for Mission Engagement

The Bible has a proven track record in guiding young people through their early years and should be our first priority in encouraging young people to connect with God’s mission. Charles Van Engen contends that “we cannot have mission without the Bible, nor can we

understand the Bible apart from God's mission” (1996, 37). The Bible is the main source for mission and without its voice we will fail to understand God's intent to mobilize wounded children into a mission force. As we encourage young people in Bible reading, we should be careful not to interpret the Bible for them. If it is necessary, basic understanding of culture and context should be explained, but the child and young person should be given the freedom to read the Bible as it is. The Church down through the ages has tended to see young people in Scripture in adult-like scenarios, failing to recognize their youthfulness. My experience leads me to believe that children and youth are not age-biased when it comes to interpreting Scripture. As adults, we often are led to gloss over the age and gender of those in the text. How often have we heard stories of Moses and Joseph without focusing on their age? As we enter into a dialogue with children and an appropriate understanding of the Bible reading, based on gender and age, we will enjoy a new understanding of some familiar passages. As children and young people are permitted to read the Bible for their own sake, they will naturally be encouraged to engage in the mission of God.

Conclusion

The current director of the ministry *Niños de la Luz* in Venezuela remarks about a recent short-term mission trip where she and a group of boys ministered to an indigenous community in the Orinoco river basin of the Venezuelan Amazon: “I can remember leaving from Alto Carinagua. José was crying as we boarded the boat that would take us to town. He asked himself: ‘why am I crying?’ After a few minutes, pondering this question, he said, ‘I love doing this--- taking the love of God to these people who have so many needs. I want to go to college and study and then go and share the word of God with people.’” As a result of this short-term

mission trip, José was profoundly impacted by the opportunity to participate in this project. This same boy, just years before, could be found sleeping on the streets at night and selling candy and roses during the day. She tells of another boy, Jorge, who had a similar reaction: “Another one of our boys sitting next to me as we left the village was also crying as he told me, ‘I feel like I have left part of my heart here!’” She went on to say, “I’ll never forget Jorge’s first mission trip experience when he said, ‘I haven’t been able to sleep because I keep thinking how self-centered I have been, thinking only about myself and now I understand that there are other people with even more needs than my own.’”

As children who come from extremely difficult backgrounds involve themselves in mission service projects, they begin to find their true selves in service to others. The “neighbor” begins to become the center of their attention, leaving a deep impact on their own lives as well as those to whom they have been privileged to minister to.

Missiological Implications for North American Churches and Agencies

While the primary context in which this chapter has been written has been focused on children at risk engaged in short-term missional activity within a Latin American context, several implications are possible for North American contexts as well. My own experience in leading a youth group to do short-term mission as a teenager myself has led me to believe that this type of mission activity is possible in other cross-cultural relationships as well. North American children and youth, as part of their authentic spiritual journey can and should be permitted to participate in holistic mission ventures that aim to provide a specific service to those in need. Just as there are young people in South America caring for the needs of adults and children alike, so North American young people should be given the opportunity to co-participate and lead mission

projects whether in their own city or in neighboring states or nations. By giving young people in North American contexts an opportunity to co-lead and eventually plan and direct mission engagement, we are providing an environment for them to grow in their own faith as full citizens of the kingdom. I believe this kind of involvement will ultimately transform the lives of both the giver and receiver if appropriate engagement occurs.

“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them” (TNIV).

Isaiah 11:6

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