



Now & Next

A COMPENDIUM OF PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE
Now & Next THEOLOGICAL CONFERENCE ON CHILDREN
NAIROBI, KENYA, MARCH 9-12, 2011

EDITED BY

SIGA ARLES

DAN BREWSTER

CHIK-BU KOK

ROSALIND TAN

KEITH J. WHITE (GENERAL EDITOR)



NOW & NEXT

Together in Mission

Theological Conference on Children
NAIROBI, 2011

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The Findings Committee had the important task of capturing and summarizing not only the proceedings, but also the flavour and essence of the conference. The team headed up by Dr. Siga Arles of CFCC in India did an outstanding job, providing entertaining and insightful summaries each morning, and compiling the remarkable Findings Document at the close of the *Now and Next* event. Dr. Arles' team also included Dr. Gregory Burch (Missionary, Latin America), Dr. Genevieve James (University of South Africa), Mr. D. J. Konz (Compassion/OCMS, Australia), Ms. Sally Malinda (Journalist /Musician, Kenya), Dr. Nativity Petallar (Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary, Philippines), Rev. Dr. David Ramirez (Church of God, Chile), and Rev. Dr. Dietrich Werner (World Council of Churches, Geneva).

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Particular thanks go to Dr. Keith White, founder and leader of the Child Theology Movement, and general editor of this work. Keith envisioned the overall shape of the conference, and his fingerprints are on every page of this Compendium. Keith did the introduction and overviews of all the papers and responses, pulled together some often very sketchy documentation of the group interactions, and in the concluding comments, helped us see where we have been and the overall place and role of this conference in the developing disciplines of theological reflection on children.

Keith was assisted in the editorial work by Dr. Siga Arles, Mr. Chik-Bu Kok, Dr. Rosalind Tan, and myself.

Finally a very special thanks to the multi-talented and multi-tasking Mr. Chik-Bu Kok. Chik Bu designed and managed the conference email registration process, provided the participant lists and breakdowns, helped in a variety of ways with conference communications and systems, did the photographic work at the conference itself. Then, in a final heroic contribution, did the layout and formatting of this book, including designing of the covers. This Compendium truly would not have been possible without Chik-Bu.

Of course the life blood of both the *Now and Next* Theological Conference on Children, and this Compendium of the proceedings were the scholarly papers presented and the official responses to those papers. Their work is prominent throughout this book. I won't list them again here, but you will enjoy and learn from their wisdom and insights on every page that follows.

One further point: we in the editorial group have done considerable editing and made numerous corrections to the papers and responses which were presented for the conference. But have not sought to correct everything, nor standardize styles, footnoting, or punctuation, or even to do full reconciliation of British and American (and other!) English.

We began by thinking we would need to do all of the corrections and standardizations (or is it standardisations?) in order to create something of value and substance. But as we went on, I began to feel that might be unnecessary. I realized I was handling something very special – something with power and vitality. I was challenged, stimulated, convicted and affirmed in my own commitment to the importance and strategic value of children and childhood. In this, I believe I am speaking for the whole committee.

So what you see here will reflect not only the very cogent, innovative, and often very powerful and convicting thinking some of the writers, but also the rough and tumble of a lively conversation – not formal and precise, and certainly not correct in every way, but expressed with openness and persuasiveness. I hope you will read this

through, not in just a cursory fashion, but carefully and critically as I did – not to find errors or things which need correcting or standardized, but rather with an open mind to discover anew, or for the first time, some very remarkable truths about the child in Scripture, and especially about the child whom Jesus placed in the midst.

In these papers and reflections, presented here in very nearly their original form, I believe you will, as I did, begin to feel that they make a noteworthy statement on the theological significance of children, and represent a striking and conspicuous milestone on the journey of theological reflection.

For the children and the churches in the *Now and Next* Generation,

Dr. Dan Brewster
Chair of the Steering Committee
Penang, Malaysia
August, 2011

AN INTRODUCTION TO *NOW & NEXT*

BY KEITH J. WHITE

The prospectus was clear about the purpose of this international gathering: “to do sustained and serious theological and missiological reflection in which children and young people are seen as agents of God’s mission, and lenses through which we find, with the help of the Holy Spirit, new insights into God in Christ. We expect and pray that the conference will open the way for new streams of theological understanding of church and mission.”

There were eight organizations who joined together to organize the event, and they had their own priorities and stories. CTM was celebrating its 10th birthday; INFEMIT its 35th anniversary; the 4/14 Global Summit looked to *Now and Next* to deepen its theological and missiological roots; it was a follow-up to Lausanne in Cape Town with a specific focus on children. All supported the importance of the theological focus and aim. Here are three examples from the welcome given to participants at the front of their programme.

Wess Stafford, President of Compassion International wrote:

“it is so rewarding to see how a deeper understanding of biblical and theological issues surrounding children is rising higher on the agenda of many organizations, and especially in the programs and curricula of many seminaries around the world.”

The Chair of the Child Theology Movement wrote:

“This is possibly the first international conference that has set out to deepen our theological understanding of God in three-persons and His Kingdom by focusing on little children as signs.”

Geoff Tunnicliffe, CEO of World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) wrote:

“The biblical narratives have much to say about the importance of children. The narratives are often the vehicles of God’s message of hope and judgment; they display the characteristics of God’s Kingdom. Thus they challenge us to live more faithfully the life of discipleship to which we were called.”

Shape

The overall shape of the conference, as seen in the programme, was intentionally and unapologetically theological. The plenary speakers were all sent a theological paper setting out a rationale for the framework and anticipated movement of the event as a whole. It is worth noting therefore that the process of which the conference is a part, began long before the event itself. Pioneering new territory requires exploratory work, and this paper sought to map out some key theological landmarks and contours. The four main themes around which the conference was organized follow a theologically coherent progression.

The starting point is the action and teaching of Jesus when he placed a little child in the midst of his disciples. Given this the conference was invited to consider the theological implications for every aspect of church life and mission, personal and corporate. So we deliberately started with biblical teaching and action of Jesus as they illuminate the relationship between God, children and the Kingdom of Heaven. It is Jesus who marks the entry point to theological reflection¹ on church, seminaries and Christian organizations. In saying this it is difficult to articulate precisely what he does. In a way he is teaching and providing new theological insights, but his aim (as all through his ministry) was to get the disciples to change so they would follow him and get into the Kingdom of God. Doing theology and doing it differently was subordinate to this living process.

¹ The term “theological reflection” is crucially important because it implies prior engagement, commitment and action in the name of Jesus. Every participant, whether a teacher in a seminary or a “practitioner” could do theological reflection, whereas not all were equipped to do systematic and academic theological writing or lecturing.

What we sought to avoid was a programme that began with church and mission, and then tried to see where children fit in. This would have tended to replicate (though with a view to enhancing it) the way things are. The sign of the child given by Jesus is intended to challenge and disturb our existing understandings and practices, not to reinforce or sacralise them. We cannot have an adequate understanding of church until we receive the child placed by Jesus in our midst. We cannot assume that the way we organize our mission, however seemingly effective managerially, is in line with the ways of the Kingdom. We dare not ask God to bless our endeavours without first enquiring diligently what he is seeking to reveal to us about His ways, His priorities, and His scale of operation and time-frame.

The Opening paper sets the scene with a summary of biblical understandings of children and childhood and resources for church and mission.

There are then four main themes:

- 1) Children as Signs of the Kingdom of God: A Challenge to us all
- 2) The Church and the Child: A Challenge to the Church
- 3) Child Theology: A Challenge to the Seminaries
- 4) Children in Mission: A Challenge to Christian Movements and Organisations

The overall movement is from our theological roots in the Scriptures, always paying attention to children, through the church and seminaries and towards mission for, with, alongside, by and to children.

Discussion groups formed an integral part of each theme, and summaries of points recorded in these sessions, are presented in the report.

Content

Children have of course been part of the Judaeo-Christian story and tradition from the earliest days, and there has been theological reflection that involves children throughout the span of Christian

theology. Marcia Bunge's book, *The Child in Christian Thought*,² is an important document in that it charts some of the ways in which major theologians have noticed children as part of their theological work.

What is more, Christians have been motivated to rescue, care for, teach, nurse and support vulnerable children in the name of Jesus. It is universally true that where the Gospel of Jesus Christ has touched any land, there have been activities aimed at helping, educating or caring for children.

In the last two centuries there have been many Christian organizations whose focus has been the teaching, rescue, care and evangelization of children. A substantial number were represented at the conference, and particular mention was made of the historical role and impact within and beyond the churches, of the Sunday School Movement.

In some respects therefore the *Now and Next* conference was part of a long tradition. How then was it intended to be different from all of this Christian child-related activity and thought? The answer lies in one of the major discoveries and themes of the Child Theology Movement: despite all this reflection on, and activity for children and young people, mainstream theology, and mainstream church have commonly continued as if children were marginal or even invisible. It is possible therefore to study major works of Christian systematic theology, only to find children absent from the content and index. It is equally possible (some would say probable) that Christian pastors can complete their training without any contact with, or reflection on, children and their place in church and mission.

This is curious for the simple reason that children are part of the whole story, part of the church, and part of the biblical narratives. Why should they be singled out for marginalization? Some would respond by pointing to the way in which the poor, women, or those from a range of ethnic groups have likewise been marginalized.

² Marcia Bunge (ed), *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

Such a line of thinking only leads to a greater paradox: Jesus made specific theologically-significant statements with children in the midst of his disciples, or even in his arms. These statements, which are found in all three synoptic gospels, are not primarily concerned with urging adults to care for, teach (or venerate) children. They are about fundamentally important aspects of Christian theology: the Kingdom of God; greatness and humility; the change needed to enter the Kingdom of God; how welcoming a little child in the name of Jesus is a way of welcoming not only Jesus, but the One who sent him.

Without privileging children and childhood, or arguing from the perspective of those who are engaged in the name of Jesus with children (whether as advocates, evangelists, carers, teachers, doctors and nurses), it is difficult to see how one can be a committed follower of Jesus without paying careful attention to what he says about children, and how he relates to them. If Jesus is Lord, then we are duty bound not only to listen to what he says, but also to heed and obey.

Those who are committed to the well-being of children and who do pay attention, find there is encouragement and inspiration both in what the Scriptures in general teach, and also in what Jesus in particular does and says. They find what might be called a theology of children. A good example of this is *Understanding God's Heart for Children*.³ The book is based on seven principles derived from a reading of the Bible that should guide a Christian's attitude to children because they are seen as stemming from the nature of God.

This approach would seem unexceptional, but it is instructive to realize that Christian organizations concerned with doing good for children, are often so consumed by the urgency and scale of the need, that theological reflection tends to take a back seat, or even to be overlooked. It is only in the 21st century that many such organizations are realizing how theologically thin their thinking is; how rudimentary their store of theological knowledge and insight. In

³ Douglas McConnell et al (ed), *Understanding God's Heart for Children* (Colorado Springs: Authentic, 2007).

such a context the *Now and Next* conference can be seen as a child of its time.

There is however a point of wider theological significance: children are by the very fact that they are children (not because of any personal qualities they may or may not possess) signs of the Kingdom of God. If we are to understand what God's will on earth is, how things are where He is welcomed and His way of doing things is mirrored and lived out, then Jesus points to little children as keys to unlock the door. One of the implications of this is that those who are engaged with children are not only doing what the Scriptures urge in many different places and ways, but are also privileged to have signs of God's Kingdom in their midst. They will see aspects of God's Kingdom that are hidden from those who do not have real, live children as signs. And they have a (prophetic) responsibility to the wider Christian community to draw attention to these signs.

The theological paper described above and shared before the conference with all the plenary speakers and respondents was based on the assumption that every participant in *Now and Next* is welcomed and respected as a disciple or follower of Jesus, and active in work that he or she believes to be significant in God's Mission. We know that the apostles were a mixed bunch, and served Jesus inconsistently. This is true of us as individual disciples, and also of our organizations. Our professed theology may not be up to the mark of our calling, and that still leaves the open question of how adequate our "operative theology" is. There were four principles that derived from this:

- 1) *Every participant is welcome as a disciple of Jesus:* Each person and every organization represented is committed to serving God's Mission. We have been called to this work. That is clear from our professed theology (in our denominational/ organisational statements).
- 2) *We are all theologians:* This is because we are followers of Jesus Christ: we pray; we teach; we plan in His name; and as Matthew 25 makes clear our actions are where God (and possibly others) can see our operative theology most clearly.

(That they may see your good works and glorify your Father in Heaven).

- 3) *Theology is missiology: missiology is theology*: We don't have two separate compartments in this conference. Whether we think of all theology being missiological, or missiology being an important part of theology, they are both theology, indissolubly linked. We must allow conversations to develop breaking down any barriers that may have grown up.
- 4) *We all stand in need of forgiveness*: This is because our operative theology time and again, day by day, falls short of God's will. Therefore we are all keen to sit at the feet of those who will expound the Scriptures, and open up to us fresh (or time-valued) insights into the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God.

Rather than assume that our activities and organisations simply need more energy, resources and/or synergy, we are intent on listening carefully to the Word of the Lord in order that we might be corrected, guided, chastened by God's Spirit. This was seen to be what a theological conference is about.

Providentially the conference began on the first day of Lent, and one of the themes that ran through the event at all levels was that of repentance. The plenary paper of Theme One, for example, was punctuated by the words from Psalm 95: "Today, if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts."

It was accepted, as in the forty days set aside for Lent, that it needs time, corporate discussion, and the willingness of each and all if we are to become humble like little children in order to welcome Jesus and the One who sent Him, and to be attuned to the nature of His Kingdom. It is God's mission, not ours, and God's Word to us is often to wait until the Holy Spirit comes upon us. Waiting is not easy or natural to us activists, but God is God, and His timing is perfect. *The Go Between God*,⁴ by John V. Taylor is an exposition of the close

⁴ John V. Taylor, *The Go Between God* (London: SCM, 1972).

relationship between the Holy Spirit and Mission, and the importance of waiting on God.

Thus the participants in Nairobi had come together willing to set aside for a time their own agenda in order to see the bigger picture: what was it that God might reveal in and through this conference? This requires the readiness to be surprised by the Holy Spirit. Frankly, not many Christians are ready to be surprised. In fact, most of us would tremble in fear just to think about it. There are many challenges to this task; and we are aware that it is also doing battle in the spiritual realm.

Emerging Theological Themes and Questions

At the end of the report there are some concluding reflections that explore possible developments arising from the conference papers and responses. Here then is an attempt to note some of the recurrent themes and issues.

Defining Child Theology

Right through the conference the term was used, by some for the first time, and understandably there was a range of meanings attached to it. For readers of the report seeking further clarification (other than that found on the CTM website), the papers that may offer the clearest expositions of Child Theology as understood by CTM are those by Keith White, Bill Prevette, Victor Nakah, DJ Konz, Beth Barnett. This was discussed in several groups during the conference and the distinction between theology of children and child theology was clear to some participants but not all. What was clear was that HCD was not identical with Child Theology. CT does not intend to be a separate or additional activity in seminaries: rather to bring light to the mainstream of all theology. One metaphor went thus: Children are a window into the Kingdom of God, not a prism through which all light passes.

Children, Kingdom and Church

Child Theology starts with Jesus, and the Kingdom of Heaven. The disciples among whom the child is placed by Jesus may be taken

to represent embryonic church (this would not be universally accepted). Be that as it may, the question remains: how are we to understand the interwoven relationships between children, Kingdom and Church? Much discussion recognized that children are to be received as signs of the Kingdom, but wrestled with the challenges and practicalities of what that meant in churches. Is child to be read as a sign of church? How applicable is entry to the Kingdom as a model of entry to the church? Is the middle of the Kingdom the middle of the church?

Bernard Boyo asks if children can be signs of many things to do with the Kingdom, or only of what is meant by greatness. Is every aspect of child involved, or only humility? And how universal are the meanings that children reflect as signs in different cultures? We need to do careful work to ensure that the meaning of the child in contemporary cultures is consonant with that that Christ intended it to have in his.

Constant conversion to the logic of God's Kingdom

The call of Jesus to those who follow him to repent and change did not fall on deaf ears at the conference, whether thinking of participants as individuals, parents, pastors, practitioners, leaders of FBOs, or lecturers in seminaries. What began to become clear however was that this was more than a single act of turning or stooping: it required a daily discipline of conversion. And one of the ways in which that was seen to be helped or enabled was direct contact with children, and welcoming or receiving them as children here and now rather than treating them as objects of care, teaching or investment. True parenting, teaching, pasturing requires children as signs of the logic⁵ of the Kingdom.

⁵ The word “logic” made an impression on the conference. It is the word used in Romans 12: “present your bodies as living sacrifices, for this is your logical service”; it is also pivotal in the work of James Loder: *The Logic of the Spirit*. In the plenary paper, Ruth contrasts child-like logic with the deadening logic of power with its exclusive categories.

Humility

Starting at Matthew 18 it was inevitable that the conference would be confronted by the call to become humble as the children. All through there was a quiet recognition that this was a fundamental challenge to the existing ethos and hierarchies of church and Christian organizations. The prevailing models of leadership owed as much, if not more, to contemporary or traditional structures and values, than to the model offered and lived by Jesus, and the nature of the Kingdom. Children provide a clue, but this clue needs careful handling if it is to be read aright.

The call of Jesus is not that we should cease to be adults, accepting our proper roles and tasks whether towards, church, society or children in both. It is more to do with recognizing that as Christians our only status is thanks to God's grace, and His salvation in Christ. There is no place for competition or for the belief that we or our organisations embody or achieve the Kingdom of God. God's amazing grace on the one hand, and the overwhelming needs of children on the other leave no room for pride or satisfaction. A sense of wonder and awe at God's love on the one hand, and an awareness of our frailty and inadequacy on the other call us to our knees, to the humus, ground level, where we find little children already.

One of the themes reiterated in Scripture, and embodied in the cross of Christ is strength in and through weakness. When Jesus stooped to wash the feet of his disciples (something specifically represented in the closing session of the conference), and stooped to receive little children, this was not a sign of weakness, but one of the ways in which the Kingdom of God prefers to operate.

Formation of leaders in seminaries

It was by design that a significant amount of attention during the conference was paid to the role and functioning of Christian seminaries. There are several implications for the life and work of these institutions if the child placed by Jesus is received as a theologically important sign. One of the aspects of this topic that threaded its way through the papers and discussion concerned the qualities of leadership that were presented and modeled. How far

were these qualities informed by the life, teaching and model of Jesus? Seen from the perspective of a church that was open to receiving little children many pastors seemed ill-equipped and ill-prepared to relate to children and families appropriately. Such preparation was not simply about the content of teaching, but the ethos of the institutions themselves.

Real children and children as symbols

Jesus placed a real child in the midst, and we encounter real children in our lives. At the same time we are invited to see them as signs of the Kingdom or representatives of Jesus and the One who sent him. It is more common for them to be seen or understood as one or the other, rather than received in a more complex way as both children qua children and also as signs. Practitioners tend towards the former; biblical scholars and academics (who notice them) as the latter. By focusing on theology it became clear that Jesus calls us to hold them as it were in creative tension.

Gifts of the Spirit and children

The more we see children as persons, agents, human beings in the here and now, the more we encounter questions about how far biblical teaching that is assumed to be for adults should apply to them. For centuries churches have wrestled with issues around baptism, church membership, and Holy Communion, and these were discussed at the conference. But theological thinking about the gifts of the spirit and children is in its infancy. Is being a child in itself, a gift of the Spirit? If so, then what is Spirit? There is much, hopefully fruitful theological work to be done in this area.

Children and adults

A focus on any section or segment of humanity risks skewing a view of the whole, and the relationships between that group and everyone else. So it is that a concern for children may disguise the fact that a child by virtue of being a child is supported by adults, cared for by adults, and is on the way to being adult by virtue of their created nature. Children bring in as it were the whole village that is needed to parent them. Theologically therefore it is wise to avoid stark contrasts

between adults and children as if children, though agents and human beings, were autonomous. Child Theology derives from an interaction between Jesus, a child and adults, and it will only serve theological enquiry and church adequately if the three are held in mind in all discourses.

A global patchwork

There was considerable attention throughout the conference to welcoming each other in the name of Christ without attention to status or rank. One practical expression of this was the way in which discussion groups were chosen and worked. Despite this it became apparent that it proved difficult to do sustained theological reflection on grass-roots examples and models of church and Kingdom. The plenary papers tended to deal with generalizations. The groups allowed people to share their own experiences, but it was not possible for the conference as a whole to reflect on them theologically together. How do you connect a range of models, resources, knowledge, networks, operating at very different levels? How do you recognise, learn from, and affirm the strengths in context given a heart to learn from each?

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

Biblical Understandings of Children and Childhood: Resources for the Church and Mission Today

Marcia Bunge draws together six ways of speaking about children derived from the Bible¹. At different times and in different places one or more of these interpretations has predominated to the exclusion of most of the others, with serious effects on children and relationships with them. Professor Bunge urges Christians whether as individuals, parents or representatives of churches and Christian organizations, to recognize that there are inherent ambiguities, even paradoxes, in being a child. For example they are both fully human, and also still developing and in need of instruction; they are gifts of God and sources of joy, yet also capable of selfish and sinful actions.

The purpose of the paper is to provide Christians with resources to inform the life and mission of the whole church. In addition to strengthening child ministries and child advocacy there are implications for the life including the worship of the whole church, and the theological and ethical reflections in seminaries.

Towards the end of her paper, Marcia Bunge draws attention to a distinction between “theologies of childhood” and “child theologies.” Discussion of the nature and relations of the two continued throughout the conference. The former are focused on Christian understandings of, and obligations to children; the latter in addition to this, is committed to rethinking fundamental doctrines and practices of the church using the lens of the child placed by Jesus. Her primary concern was to build up the Body of Christ with children seen as members, gifts, and active agents.

¹ This analysis of biblical material is also available in J. Collier (ed), *Toddlers to the Kingdom* (London: CTM, 2010), 98-113.

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD: RESOURCES FOR THE CHURCH AND MISSION TODAY

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Introduction

We have traveled here to Kenya from many countries and contexts. What brings us together for these three days? First, we all share a commitment to Jesus Christ and to God's Mission in the world. Second, we all share a concern for and love of children. Third, we all come to this gathering bearing gifts to share. We represent diverse agencies, educational institutions, and denominations. We are all active in various kinds of work that aim to serve God's Mission. We bring wisdom and experience from the diverse settings in which we work and from our various places of responsibility. We are bound to learn much from one another!

As a prelude to my remarks, let me tell you the brief story of my own interest in children and my own places of responsibility that bring me here for the first time to Kenya. My own academic background is in the area of historical theology. I have a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in historical theology and spent several years working on 19th century German theology. However, a few years ago, my attention turned to the subject of children and childhood for several reasons:

- I am a professor at a church-related Lutheran university and primarily teach undergraduate students (ages 18-22). Teaching undergraduates has raised many questions for me about the intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation of

children and young people and the challenges they face in contemporary cultures.

- I am a mother of 2 children: Isaac, now 17, and Anja, now 10. Having children has raised many questions for me about my own priorities and the priorities of the Church and our society, especially regarding the health, safety, and education of all children.
- I am a scholar, working in the areas of theology and ethics. When I looked at the work coming out of these fields, I wondered why so much had been written on all kinds of ethical issues (abortion, sexuality, cloning, etc) but so little directly on children and our obligations to them. It was as if addressing issues regarding children was “beneath” any serious theologian or ethicist.

These kinds of questions led me to start a project called “The Child in Religion and Ethics.” Its central aim is to explore the simple question: What have the great religions of the world said, if anything, about who children are and about our obligations to them (not only the obligations of parents but also religious communities and the state)? Since starting this project, I have edited or coedited three books on religious views of children:

- 1) *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans, 2001);
- 2) *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2008); and
- 3) *Children and Childhood in World Religions* (Rutgers, 2009).

I am now involved in a number of interdisciplinary, interfaith, and international projects in the Academy and religious communities regarding children.

My own work is part of a growing academic field of study called “Childhood Studies.” This field is burgeoning in all areas and disciplines of the academy. Just as “Gender Studies” and “Women’s Studies” grew once scholars began to reexamine their work in the light of gender, “Childhood Studies” has grown once scholars began to reexamine their work in the light of children and childhood.

In line with the growth of Childhood Studies in many disciplines, scholars in diverse areas of biblical studies, religious studies, and theology are also beginning to focus attention directly on children and childhood.¹ Over the past fifteen years scholars in a number of areas in religious studies outside religious education (the field most commonly focused on children) are beginning to publish more work on children and childhood. Furthermore, many interdisciplinary initiatives and international institutes are examining the spiritual development and experiences of children and adolescents in various religions and cultures world-wide, such as the Search Institute² In all areas of theology and religious studies, scholars are also finding many more opportunities to present work on childhood at professional meetings, such as at the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature.³

Given my own academic setting and the kinds of gifts I can bring to this consultation, I would like to share with you tonight some of

¹ For an overview of developments in these areas, see Marcia J. Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Childhood,” in the *Journal of Religion* 86.4 (October 2006), 549-579.

² For example, the Search Institute has opened a “Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence” and recently published two books on child spirituality: one focusing on social scientific research and the other on religious perspectives primarily within Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. See E.C. Roehlkepartain, P.E. King, L. M. Wagener, and P. L. Benson, eds., *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006); and K.-M. Yust, A. N. Johnson, S.E. Sasso, E.C. Roehlkepartain, eds., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World’s Religious Traditions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). For more information on the project and the Search Institute, see *Search-Institute.org*.

³ In 2002 the Program Committee of the AAR approved a new program unit, the “Childhood Studies and Religion Consultation,” which is now providing a forum for a more focused and sustained interdisciplinary and interreligious dialogue about children and religion. A program unit on “Children in the Biblical World” was also established at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in 2008. For information on both the “Childhood Studies and Religion Consultation” and “Children in the Biblical World Section,” see the Web sites of the AAR (aarweb.org) and SBL (sbl-site.org).

the insights gained from my project about biblical understandings of children and childhood. My remarks are divided into three parts. First, I would like to highlight briefly some of the challenges we see children facing today. In the second and main part of my remarks, I want to outline six central biblical perspectives on children that can help us, as members of the Church, to address some of these challenges. I hope these six perspectives can help prompt our thinking during this consultation and provide a way of strengthening our own work. Finally, I will draw some implications of these six perspectives for the Church, its mission, and our work together.

The primary thesis of my remarks tonight that we can explore and discuss further over the next three days is: **Although Christians today and in the past have often viewed children in narrow and even destructive ways, the Bible expresses six insightful and central perspectives on children; and by holding these six perspectives in tension (rather than in isolation), we can broaden our conception of children and strengthen our commitment to them in all areas of the Church.**

Part One: Selected Challenges

As all of you at this consultation know, although most people believe we can and should support children, our actions—not only in our societies but even in our churches—often reveal a lack of commitment to and narrow understanding of children.

For example, many countries fail to meet even the basic needs of children. Many children live in poverty and often are malnourished, receive inadequate educations, and lack proper health care. Even children in affluent families or countries often suffer neglect and abuse and struggle with drug and alcohol abuse, suicide and depression, and lack of sexual boundaries or sense of purpose in their lives. Even in my own affluent country, the United States, 16% of children live in poverty⁴ and many children attend inadequate and

⁴ For these and other statistics on child wellbeing, see, for example, the *State of America's Children* published annually by the Children's Defense

dangerous schools. Children are one of the last priorities in decisions about budget cuts on the state and federal level; road maintenance and military budgets take precedence over our children, even though politicians pledge to “leave no child behind” in terms of health care or education.

Although many in the church care for children and have created beneficial programs for them, the church also often lacks a strong commitment to children and treats them as “the least of these.” This was witnessed, for example, in the child sexual abuse cases within the Roman Catholic Church. The abuse of children involved is shocking, as well as the ways in which financial concerns, careers of priests, and reputations of bishops or particular congregations came before the safety and needs of children.

Yet the church as a whole exhibits a lack of commitment to children in other, more subtle ways. Here are just four examples (and we could all share many others).

- Many congregations do not devote time or funding to child, youth, or family programs. Even religious education programs are often weak and fail to emphasize the importance of parents in faith development.
- As a result, many parents within the church are neglecting to speak with their children about moral and spiritual matters or to integrate practices that nurture faith into their everyday lives.
- In our seminaries and universities, many theologians and ethicists consider reflection on children as “beneath” the work of serious theologians and as a fitting area of inquiry only for pastoral counselors and religious educators. Consequently, systematic theologians and Christian ethicists say little about children and offer few well-developed teachings on the nature of children or why we should care about and for them.

Fund (www.childrensdefense.org); and the *State of the World's Children* published annually by UNICEF (www.unicef.org).

- National churches and agencies have also not been consistent public advocates for children.

Lurking behind the lack of commitment to children in our countries and churches are several simplistic views of children and ethical obligations to them. In the United States, for example, scholars have argued that in a consumer culture a “market mentality” influences attitudes toward children. Thus, instead of seeing children as having inherent worth, people in a consumer culture tend to view children as being commodities, consumers, or even economic burdens. We spoil our own children and neglect to help children in need. We fail to see the ways our own life-styles and companies exploit children and families in other parts of the world. Other scholars note that, the media in our country tends to depict children as either all good or all bad. For example, popular magazines or newspapers tend to depict infants and young children as pure and innocent beings to be adored and teenagers as hidden and dark creatures to be feared. One can notice, too, in the church that conservative Christians in the United States tend to speak of children as “sinful” and in need of “discipline” while mainline and more liberal church tend to see them as “cute,” innocent, or insignificant. In our public and academic discourse, we tend to speak of children as either “victims” or “agents.”

These kinds of simplistic views diminish children’s complexity and intrinsic value, and thereby undermine a commitment and sense of obligation to them. These are just a few examples, but they reflect common one-dimensional perspectives of children we can find in all of our countries and all of our churches. Over the course of the consultation, perhaps we can all reflect further on the questions: What particular challenges do children face in our specific contexts? What kinds of simplistic conceptions of children do we hold in our own countries or our own churches and places of responsibility?

Part Two: Biblical Resources

Much can be done to overcome these simplistic views of children and thereby strengthen the church’s commitment to them by

retrieving a broader, richer, and more complex picture of children from the Bible.

Although Christians today and in the past have often viewed children in narrow and even destructive ways, the Bible expresses six insightful and central perspectives on children; and by holding these six perspectives in tension (rather than in isolation), we can broaden our conception of children and strengthen our commitment to them in all areas of the Church. Of course, the Bible is teeming with references to children, and no one can summarize “the” biblical understanding of the nature and status of children. Nevertheless, Christians today and in the past have emphasized some of the following six themes when reflecting on central questions about children and our obligations to them.⁵ These themes are not exhaustive but do help illustrate the complexity of biblical understandings of children.

1. Gifts of God and Sources of Joy

The Bible and the Christian tradition often depict children as gifts of God and sources of joy who ultimately come from God and belong to God. Many passages in the Bible speak of children as gifts of God or signs of God’s blessing and emphasize the joy that children bring to families and communities. For example, Leah, Jacob’s first wife, speaks of her sixth son as a dowry, or wedding gift, presented by God (Genesis 30:20). Several biblical passages indicate that parents who receive these precious gifts are being “remembered” by God (Genesis 30:22; 1 Samuel 1:11, 19) and given “good fortune” (Genesis 30:11). To be “fruitful”—have many children—is to receive God’s blessing. The Psalmist says children are a “heritage” from the Lord and a “reward” (Psalm 127:3). Sarah rejoiced at the birth of her son, Isaac (Genesis 21:6-7). Even in his terror and anguish, Jeremiah recalls the story that news of his own birth once made his father, Hilkiah, “very glad” (Jeremiah 20:15). An angel promises Zechariah and Elizabeth

⁵ These six central themes built on previously published work in Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood,” 549-578.

that their child will bring them “joy and gladness” (Luke 1:14). In the gospel of John, Jesus says, “When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world” (John 16:20-21).

Many Christian theologians have emphasized this biblical theme. For example, the 17th century Moravian bishop, theologian, and educator, Johannes Amos Comenius, who emphasized a holistic and innovative approach to education, said children are dearer than “gold and silver, than pearls and gems.”⁶ Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, also wrote about the joy and blessing of children.

2. *Sinful Creatures and Moral Agents*

Many, but certainly not all, forms of Christianity express the notion that children, in some sense, are sinful creatures and moral agents. The view of children as sinful is based on interpretations of several biblical texts. For example, Genesis states that every inclination of the human heart is “evil from youth” (Genesis 8:21), and Proverbs claim that folly is “bound up in the heart” of children (Proverbs 22:15). The Psalms declare that “the wicked go astray from the womb; they err from their birth” (Psalms 58:3; cf. 51:5). Paul writes that all people are “under the power of sin,” and “there is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Romans 3: 9-10; cf. 5:12).

On the surface, this way of thinking about children can seem negative and destructive, and as some historical studies have shown, viewing children exclusively as sinful has often warped Christian approaches to children and led in some cases to child abuse and even death. However, for many Christians, the notion that children are sinful corrects an equally simplistic and dangerous view of children as primarily pure and innocent beings who automatically love God and

⁶ The ideas of J. A. Comenius (1592-1670 C.E.) are influential far beyond the Church, and he is often called the “father of modern education.” His popular book, *The School of Infancy* (1633), points out the complex sensibilities and development of infants and young children and the need to nurture them at a very young age.

their neighbors. Such a view leaves no room for appreciating a child's own growing autonomy and accountability.

Those Christian theologians who have viewed children as sinful generally underscore two related points. On the one hand, they often claim children are "born in a state of sin"; they live in a world that is not what it ought to be. Their parents are not perfectly loving and just; social institutions that support them, such as schools and governments, are not free from corruption; and the communities in which they live, no matter how safe, have elements of injustice and violence.

On the other hand, theologians who speak of children as sinful also claim that as children develop they carry out "actual sins" and are moral agents who bear some degree of responsibility for their actions. They can act in ways that are self-centered, unjust, and harmful to themselves and others. This view of "actual sins" of children becomes distorted if theologians mistakenly equate a child's physical and emotional needs or early developmental stages with sin. However, when used cautiously and with attention to psychological insights into child development, it has also strengthened the awareness of a child's growing moral capacities and levels of accountability.

It is also important to note that Christian theologians who have spoken of children as sinful have often emphasized that infants and young children are not as sinful as adults; they should be treated tenderly. Furthermore, some of the Christian today and in the past who have viewed children as sinful also radically viewed them as equals and thereby shattered barriers of gender, race, and class. The 18th century German Lutheran pietist, August Hermann Francke, for example, attended to poor children in his community by building hospitals, schools, and orphanages to serve them and their families. He emphasized the breaking of a child's will and religious conversion, yet these notions, set within the context of his broader theological framework, fostered his humane and compassionate treatment of children. Although he lived in a highly class-conscious period, his theology led him to possess a deeper concern for the education and

well-being of poor children than many of his “enlightened” contemporaries, including John Locke.⁷

3. Developing Beings Who Need Instruction and Guidance

A third central perspective on children that is expressed in the Bible and Christian traditions is that children are developing beings who need instruction and guidance. Adults are to nurture, teach, and guide children, passing on the faith to them and helping them to love God and their neighbors as themselves. Several biblical passages in the Hebrew Scriptures speak about these responsibilities. For example, Christians, like Jews, refer to the famous lines from Deuteronomy 6:5-7: “You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” Adults are to “train children in the right way” (Proverbs 22:6) and to tell children about God’s faithfulness (Isaiah 38:19) and “the glorious deeds of the Lord” (Psalm 78:4b). They are to teach children the words of the law (Deuteronomy 11:18-19; 31:12-13) and what is right, just, and fair (Genesis 18:19; Proverbs 2:9).

Other New Testament texts often cited by Christians regarding the teaching of children use the terms “discipline” and “obedience”: adults are commanded to bring up children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4) and children are commanded to “obey” their parents (Ephesians 6:1 and Colossians 3:20).

There are also many examples in the Christian tradition of theologians who took seriously the spiritual formation and education of children. They encouraged adults to pass on the faith to the next generation and to help children reflect on their faith and to take up particular religious practices that would strengthen their faith and

⁷ Marcia J. Bunge, “Education and the Child in Eighteenth-Century German Pietism: Perspectives from the Work of A. H. Francke,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 247-278.

enable them love and serve others. For example, John Chrysostom, the fourth century theologian who is still highly influential in Eastern Orthodox communities of faith today, wrote sermons on parenting and the duties of parents to nurture the faith of their children.⁸ He viewed the home itself as “a little church” and ranked parental neglect of children’s needs and their spiritual formation among the gravest injustices.⁹ Comenius also pointed out the complex sensibilities and development of infants and young children and the need to nurture them at a very young age.¹⁰ Luther and John Calvin also wrote catechisms for use in the home to help parents teach their children.

4. Fully Human and Made in the Image of God

Although Christians have viewed children as developing, at the same time, they have often emphasized that children are also whole and complete human beings made in the image of God. Thus, they are worthy of human dignity and respect from the start. The basis of this claim is Genesis 1:27, which states that God made humankind, male and female, in God’s image. It follows that children, like adults, possess the fullness of humanity. Regardless of race, gender, or class, they have intrinsic value. Although parents nurture them, they are not made in the image of their parents but in the greater image of God. The sense of the integrity of each person, including children, is also grounded in a view of God who intimately knows the number of “even the hairs of your head” (Matthew 10:30), forms your “inward parts,” and “knit” you together in the womb (Psalm 139:13).

The notion that children are fully human and made in the image of God has sometimes been neglected in Christianity, and some Christians today and in the past have described children as “animals,” “beasts,” “pre-rational,” “pre-adults,” “almost human,” “not quite

⁸ See, for example, John Chrysostom, *On Marriage and Family Life*, trans. Catherine P. Roth and David Anderson (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986).

⁹ Vigen Guroian, “The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 64, 73.

¹⁰ Johannes Amos Comenius, *The School of Infancy*, ed. and intro. Ernest M. Eller (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1956).

human,” or “on their way to becoming human.” However, Christian theologians who have reflected seriously on children, generally recognize the full humanity of children, including infants. For example, Cyprian in the third century, depicts infants as complete human beings. All people, regardless of age or character, are “alike and equal since they have been made once by God.” All share a “divine and spiritual equality” and are able to receive God’s grace and gifts. “For what is lacking,” he wonders, to one who “has once been formed in the womb by the hands of God?”¹¹

The twentieth century Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, also asserts that children have the value and dignity in their own right and are fully human from the beginning. Thus, he believes that we are to respect children from the beginning of life. We need to see them as a “sacred trust” to be nurtured and protected at every stage of their existence.¹²

5. Models of Faith and Sources or Vehicles of Revelation

Several biblical passages depict children in striking and even radical ways as moral witnesses, prophets, models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation, and representatives of Jesus. The Hebrew Bible includes stories of children and young people, such as Samuel, who are called to be a prophets or messengers of God. Several gospel passages turn upside down common assumptions held in Jesus’ time and our own: that children are to be seen but not heard and that the primary role of children is to learn from and obey adults.

¹¹ Cyprian, Letter 64.3; in *Letters*, trans. by Sister Rose Bernard Donna (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 217-218. Although Cyprian is making strong claims for the spiritual and divine equality of children, he does not draw implications for their social equality.

¹² See Rahner’s “Gedanken zu einer theologie der Kindheit,” in *Schriften zur Theologie*, 8 (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1966), 313-329; trans. by David Bourke as “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” in *Theological Investigations*, 8 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 33-50. For an excellent discussion of Rahner’s views on children and childhood see Mary Ann Hinsdale, “‘Infinite Openness to the Infinite’: Karl Rahner’s Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 406-445.

In contrast, these New Testament passages remind us that children can teach and challenge adults. They can prophesy and praise God. They can be vehicles of revelation, models of faith, and even paradigms for entering the reign of God. Jesus identifies himself with children and equates welcoming a little child in his name to welcoming himself and the one who sent him. “Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven,” Jesus warns. “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:2-5). In Mark, the text states:

Then they came to Capernaum; and when [Jesus] was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” ... People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 9:33-37 and 10:13-16) [See also Luke 9:46-48 and 18:15-17].

Like the notion that children are fully human and made in the image of God, the idea that children can be teachers, bearers of revelation, or models of faith has not been emphasized and has often been neglected in the Christian tradition and among Christians today. However, throughout the tradition and today, we do find theologians who have grappled seriously with these New Testament passages, forcing them to rethink their assumptions about children and “childlike faith” and challenging adults to be receptive to the lessons and wisdom that children offer them, to honor children’s questions and insights, and to recognize that children can positively influence

the community and the moral and spiritual lives of adults. For example, German theologian Friederich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) emphasized that adults who want to enter the Kingdom of God need to recover a childlike spirit. For him, this childlike spirit has many components that we can learn from children, such as “living fully in the present moment,” being able to forgive others, or being flexible.¹³ Christian theologians have linked many other qualities to a “childlike” faith, such as dependence, purity, humility, trust, acceptance, innocence, openness, wonder, tenderness, an ability to forgive, or playfulness, and reflected on how adults might not only “become as little children” but also learn from children themselves.

6. Orphans, Neighbors, and Strangers in Need of Justice and Compassion

Finally, there are many biblical passages and examples in the Christian tradition that emphasize that children are also orphans, neighbors, and strangers who need to be treated with justice and compassion. The Bible depicts many ways that children suffer and are the victims of war, disease, or injustice. In addition, numerous biblical passages explicitly command us to help widows, orphans, and strangers—among the most vulnerable and voiceless people in society—and show God has compassion for them. We read in Deuteronomy, for example:

The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:17-19; see also Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

In the New Testament, Jesus also healed, embraced, and blessed children. And the author of James claims:

¹³ For an excellent discussion of Schleiermacher, see Dawn DeVries, “Be Converted and Become as Little Children”: Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, 300-328; and Dawn DeVries, “Toward a Theology of Childhood,” 165-166.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world... For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the Kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? (James 1:27 and 2:2-5).

These and other passages clearly show us that caring for children is part of seeking justice and loving the neighbor.

Dangers of Not Incorporating These Six Perspectives

Whenever we as Christians retreat from this rich, complex, and almost paradoxical view of children found in the Bible and Christian traditions and focus instead on only one or two biblical themes alone, we risk falling into deficient understandings of children and adult obligations to them, and we risk treating children in inadequate and harmful ways.

We can give many examples from the Church regarding such dangers. For example, on the one hand, if Christians view children primarily as gifts of God and as models of faith, then adults will enjoy children and be open to learning from them; however, these adults might also neglect the important role they should play in a child's moral and spiritual development, and they might minimize a child's own growing moral capacities. On the other hand, if Christians perceive children primarily as sinful and in need of instruction, then adults will emphasize the role of adults in guiding and instructing children; however, these adults might neglect to learn from children, delight in them, and be open to what God reveals through them.

Furthermore, the understanding of parenting and religious education may be restricted to instruction, discipline, and punishment. Focusing on children solely as sinful and in need of instruction also has real dangers, since it has often been easier for

Christians who regard children solely as sinful to brutally punish them or “beat the devil” out of them. Even when Christian parenting manuals today emphasize that children are to be treated kindly but continue to speak of children primarily as sinful, they neglect other important lessons of the Bible and church tradition of enjoying children, treating them as fully human, listening to their questions, and learning from them.

We can find other examples in the context of child advocacy work. On the one hand, if we perceive children as primarily victims, then we might strive to help and protect them yet perhaps neglect hearing their own voice or recognizing their own strengths and moral capacities. On the other hand, if we perceive children primarily as moral agents, then we might encourage them to use their gifts yet perhaps neglect to protect and guide them.

In order to avoid these and other dangers, any biblically informed approach to children must take into account at least all six perspectives. It must incorporate a complex view of the child that holds together the inherent paradoxes of being a child that are recognized in the Bible, such as:

- Fully human and made in the image of God yet also still developing and in need of instruction and guidance;
- Gifts of God and sources of joy yet also capable of selfish and sinful actions;
- Vulnerable and in need of protection yet also strong and insightful;
- Metaphors for immature faith and childish behavior and yet models of faith and sources of revelation.

Part Three: Implications for the Church, Its Mission, and Our Work Together

If we as Christians can appropriate and hold in tension all six biblical perspectives of children, then we will certainly broaden our conception of children, and we can strengthen our commitment to children in many areas of the Church.

For example, these six ways of speaking about children could strengthen a congregation's worship life as well as spiritual formation and religious education programs. If children are seen as gifts of God and sources of joy, then they will be included in worship services as true participants and welcomed as full members of the church. As a result, more joy and laughter will be incorporated into worship. Furthermore, when children are perceived as sinful and in need of instruction, then more substantial religious educational materials and programs for children will be developed in the church. Christian education programs that emphasize the importance of the family in spiritual formation and faith development are more likely to be created.

The growing moral capacities and responsibilities of children will be more readily cultivated in many other ways, such as by: introducing them to good examples, mentors, and stories of service and compassion; including children in service projects and teaching them financial responsibility; and helping them discern their vocations and explore how they can best use their gifts and talents to contribute to the common good. Finally, if one truly believes, as Jesus did, that children can teach adults and be moral witnesses, models of faith, and sources of revelation, then one will listen more attentively to children and learn from them; structure worship services and religious education programs in ways that honor their questions and insights; and recognize the importance of children in the faith journey and spiritual maturation of parents and other adults.

In these and many other ways, we would also strengthen specific child, youth, and family ministries. Congregations could help support parents by providing them with tools and ideas for helping to nurture the spiritual lives of children not only at church but also at home.

The six ways of speaking about children could help the church advance its child advocacy efforts nationally and internationally. If children are viewed as having been made in the image of God, as fully human, and as orphans, neighbors, and strangers in need of compassion and justice, then we will treat all children, regardless of age, race, class, nationality, or gender, with more dignity and respect. We will attend to the needs of poor children in our own communities

and around the world, and speak out more forcefully about the needs of children. Church leaders will also no longer tolerate the abuse or harsh treatment of children, and they will warn against equating “discipline” with physical punishment. Furthermore, churches will support local, federal, and international legislation that addresses the basic needs of all children and families, such as proper nutrition, health care, and strong educational programs. Church leaders will also become more engaged in public discussions and debates about child well-being, and they will speak out in favor implementing important and shared international goals outlined in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

For all of these reasons and more, the six ways of speaking about children could help churches support more fully faith-based organizations that work with children at risk.

The six ways of speaking about children could also strengthen theological education at seminaries and colleges around the world so that they include attention to children. There are many ways this could happen. For example, given these biblical perspectives, seminaries at the very least should ensure that all students know that children (not just adults) are fully human, full members of the body of Christ, and gifts to the whole Church. This simple recognition would do much to enliven and renew theological education. Furthermore, seminaries should also require and strengthen courses directly addressing children, such as courses on religious education, child and family ministries, child advocacy, and faith-based organizations that serve children in need. Finally, if church leaders took these six biblical perspectives seriously, then they would deepen theological and ethical reflection to include attention to both theologies of childhood and child theologies.

This distinction is just emerging among some Christian theologians and practitioners, many of them here at this conference. “Theologies of childhood,” on the one hand, primarily provide sophisticated understandings of children and childhood and our obligations to children themselves. On the other hand, “child theologies” reexamine not only conceptions of children and obligations to them but also rethink fundamental doctrines and

practices of the Church as a whole, using the “lens” of the child. Drawing on analogies to feminist, black, and liberation theologies, child theologies have as their task not only to strengthen the commitment to and understanding of a group that has often been voiceless, marginalized, or oppressed--children--but also to reinterpret Christian theology and practice as a whole.¹⁴

Both theologies of childhood and child theologies can help Christian theologians in a number of ways. They both help Christians understand not only the needs and vulnerabilities of children but also their gifts and strengths. Furthermore, they help the church express more clearly the roles of parents, the church, and the state in protecting and serving children. Strengthening both theologies of childhood and child theologies also helps theologians contribute to interdisciplinary discussions and Childhood Studies programs in Academia and participate more fully in policy-making debates and decisions about child well-being both nationally and internationally

There are many other implications of complex and biblically-informed theological understandings of children. Just these few examples show us that by appropriating a view of children that incorporates these six central perspectives on children found in the Bible and Christian thought, we can all take up more whole heartedly and responsibly the Christian call to love and care for all children in our diverse settings, whether in the areas of spiritual formation, religious education, children’s ministries, child protection and advocacy, faith-based organizations that work with children at risk, or theological education.

Conclusion: Working Together as Members of the Body of Christ

It is moving and inspiring to note, in conclusion, that all movements, educational institutions, and organization represented

¹⁴ The term, “Child Theology,” has been coined by Keith J. White, Haddon Willmer, and John Collier, leaders of the Child Theology Movement (see Part III for more information).

here at this consultation honor and respect children. Together our work reflects attention to the six primary biblical perspectives in the Bible regarding children. Together we are able to attend to the complex needs and gifts of children; to work on many levels, locally and globally; and to share our work in many forms and types of discourse. We can certainly honor and respect one another's efforts and gifts, and we can learn from one another here at this consultation, for although we work in various settings and contexts, we are all working together as members of the Body of Christ.

It is my hope that by appropriating a view of children that incorporates these six central perspectives on children found in the Bible, we can all take up more wholeheartedly and responsibly the Christian call to love and care for all children in our various countries and contexts.

THEME 1: CHILDREN AS SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD – A CHALLENGE TO US ALL

Plenary Paper: Keith J. White

The plenary paper is based on Matthew 18: 1-14, a key passage in the development of the Child Theology Movement, and the paper itself is an example of how Child Theology goes about its tasks. The Kingdom of God is a critically important and fundamental doctrine of Christian theology. It is also to be the ultimate priority of followers of Jesus: “Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven” was one of his commands, and Christians are to pray, “Your Kingdom come; Your will be done on earth...”

The meaning of the Kingdom of God is however elusive and challenging, and the first section of the paper gives a brief survey of some of the key theological understandings in the Jewish Scriptures and the life and teaching of Jesus. Fully aware of the Jewish expectations, Jesus chooses to gather a small group around him, with no possessions, and sharing the good news as they travel, deliberately avoiding political planning and power.

The second section considers how Christians are to prepare to receive the Kingdom of God. This is by repentance. And that is a challenge to all Christians and all Christian organizations without exception. Unless we repent it will not be true that our motivation and inspiration in all we do in the name of Jesus is God’s love in Christ the crucified.

The third section seeks to understand how and why signs are integral to the Kingdom of God. There is no place on earth where we can experience or see the Kingdom in its fullness: so the best that we will know on earth are signs. As followers of the Way we are to notice and read the signs that God provides for us on our journey. In His grace and generosity God has filled creation with signs. But to read them and to stay on route requires humility. This is the very same quality that characterized Jesus, and that we are implored to have by Paul in Philippians, Chapter 2. There is much to be humble about, both within the church, and as human beings.

We do well to acknowledge that all our efforts combined are rather like a drop in the ocean compared to the scale of the challenges that the children of the world pose for us.

This leads naturally to the final section in which the child placed by Jesus in the midst of his disciples is seen as a sign. There are four of the discoveries that have been made during a sustained study of this passage: (i) we know nothing of the character of this little child; (ii) although the child is silent, Jesus speaks, and it is Jesus, not the child who gives us the clue to the meaning of the sign; (iii) Jesus does not link this sign with his own birth or childhood; (iv) the child is a representative of Jesus, his nature, his way, his calling and the cross.

One meaning of the sign is that the disciples are on the wrong track as they try to make sense of the Kingdom of God in terms of human greatness: the little child contradicts their whole project. Another meaning is that the Kingdom and way of the cross are not solely about sacrifice, but also hope, promise, potential growth and a journey ahead. The child reiterates the message of the cross, as a positive sign, like a new shoot or the dawn of a new day.

A primary challenge of the sign of the little child placed by Jesus is the call to humility. We must stoop to receive the little child, and stoop to see and receive Jesus. Our God is the God of small things, and His Kingdom is signed by small things. We recall that the shepherds were given just such a sign of the Messiah: “a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.”

Response Synopsis: Bill Prevette

This paper homes in on the uncertainty and ambiguity of holistic mission with children in a world where God often seems to be weak, and where it is not to be taken for granted that followers of Jesus automatically know what the Kingdom of God means in practice. Holism lives with the mystery, uncertainty and messiness that characterise the lives and experience of those living on the margins. Christian projects and leaders use terms such as “transformation” and “community development” as if they lead to or embody in reality the Kingdom of God, rather than being signs of the Kingdom. This perspective underlines the appropriateness and necessity of humility and repentance.

There is the constant risk that we may, in our pride and ambition, be outside the Kingdom that Jesus came to reveal. “Managerial missiology” (a term used by Orlando Costas)

struggles with that which is surprising and disturbing, full of personal pain and puzzlement. Our vocation as followers of Jesus must involve the cross, and therefore fulfillment for Christians will not mean the same thing as fulfillment as defined by society. We are on a journey of discovery embracing tensions and complexities, not a linear trajectory that guarantees achievement or success.

Response Synopsis: Joshua Banda

This presentation was not based on a written paper, but accompanied by captions on Power Point. Joshua explained that he had intended to write a response but that then tragedy had struck. He had offered to withdraw his presentation, but the organizers encouraged him to come and speak from the heart. Their words were: “use your experiences as the basis of your response.” As he did, so the words of Michel Quoist quoted near the end of the plenary paper proved to have a whole new meaning:

“If we knew how to look at life through God’s eye, we should see it as innumerable tokens of the love of the Creator seeking the love of his creatures. The Father has put us into the world, not to walk through it with lowered eyes, but to search for him through things events, people. Everything must reveal God to us. All Life would become a sign.”

He explained how his woes began with a painful tooth extraction, which was followed by a computer crash. Then came the news that his close friend and colleague, Bob Hall, had died in a very cruel way. His toothache and the faulty computer now seemed as nothing. He had sought to comfort Bob’s wife and family, and had grieved with them.

And ringing in his mind were the words: “All life would become a sign.” For him in this maelstrom this included people, events, chaos, crises, and ordinary things.

Then he made a confession: “I must confess as the principal of a theological college that I have not seen the sign of the child.”

Now he realized something of what he had been missing: and his personal story and experiences prior to the conference had given the sign a whole new poignancy and meaning.

Response Synopsis: Genevieve James

Speaking from a South African perspective Genevieve sees the plenary contribution was more of a pleading than a paper. She therefore concentrates on three of the calls and cautions it contains.

The first is the call to humility. Many countries in Africa are littered with churches believe that the healing of the land will come through big and expensive programmes and celebrities. This could be seen as an understandable response to imperialism and oppression, but it could well be that the power of the Kingdom of God in Africa is its brokenness, scarcities and weakness.

The second is the call to little things and little people. Quoting Douglas Hall she confirmed that all the metaphors Jesus used to depict the community of witness are characterized by their smallness. Africa is a continent of children so there is no alternative but to focus mission, church and budgets on the little people!

The third is the call to realignment. The plenary paper is a warning about triumphalism. This recalls how in 1994 there was euphoria in South Africa following the election of Nelson Mandela. But at the very same time there was the genocide in Rwanda: brutal and hellish. Triumphalism does not allow us to see the bigger picture, and we must be careful about using words like transformation and development as if they were the real thing. Can we heed the call to abandon our appetites for power and title? As Christians we have succumbed to them. Servants of Jesus engaged in mission to hurting children are called executives and directors. Could we begin with a radical re-naming of the parts?

In summary, the plenary paper, like the call of John the Baptist and Jesus is to repentance: expressly of our desire for status, reward and praise. Genevieve was candid with the audience: she had been personally complicit in the distortion of the Kingdom of God as signed by Jesus. An urgent review of the Kingdom epistemology and praxis was required in Africa. And that begins fairly and squarely with us.

Response Synopsis: Bernard Boyo

This paper, like the two responses before it, affirms the importance of the call to repentance and humility. It focuses on three aspects of the plenary paper.

The first is the Kingdom of God. One of the challenges it presents is to all of us in different cultural contexts. Ultimately we must allow Christ to bring transformation and redemption not only in, but to our cultures. Jesus sought to revolutionise the mindset of his contemporaries and he challenges us to do the same today.

Second, there is the requirement for radical rebirth and conversion if we are to enter this Kingdom. This call is embedded in Christ's incarnational mission.

The third aspect concerns children as signs of the Kingdom. Bernard Boyo asks three important theological questions:

1. can children be signs of many things to do with the Kingdom, or only of what is meant by greatness?
2. is every aspect of what we understand by child involved, or only humility?
3. how universal are the meanings that children reflect as signs in different cultures?

We need to do careful work to ensure that the meaning of the child in contemporary cultures is consonant with that that Christ intended it to have in his. What we do know is that the call to humility is universal.

Group Response Synopsis

One group commented that every one of its members took to heart the call not to let hearts be hardened, but rather to repent. If we truly believe that children received in the name of Jesus are a sign of the Kingdom then it follows that there must be a rethink of priorities and resources.

A re-conceptualisation of a "child in the Kingdom" is needed. If God is a god of powerful humility, not simply power, then God's servants should be humble enough to drop pre-conditioned expectations, and formulations, in order to preach to children in their childishness. This will entail play and conversation rather than presenting them with the impression that our great big God is always strong in His world, and that being on His side means life without suffering or hard questions and choices.

Humility as signed by the child does need to be scrutinized, because there are different meanings. It is possible to read children as signs wrongly. Child Theology is a readjustment of the lens through which we read Scripture.

Starting small is a good principle. In Africa, and almost everywhere else, the tendency is to focus on caring for children, rather than seeing why Jesus placed them in our midst.

Churches need to rediscover the logic of the Kingdom: it is not about power, competitions and programmes.

We must not lose sight of the author: Jesus. Another group said: we agree that Christ is the centre and not the child.

Relationships are key to the whole process, not just the application. We learn in relationship, we find the Kingdom in relationships.

PLENARY

CHILDREN AS SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD – A CHALLENGE TO US ALL

Matthew 18: 1-14

BY KEITH J. WHITE

Child Theology Movement, UK

Introduction

How important is the Kingdom of God in Scripture? It is the very heart of the life and message of Jesus Christ. If you take the Gospel of Matthew you discover that this was the core message of John the Baptist: “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”¹ According to Matthew Jesus continued this message with exactly the same words: “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”² The whole Gospel is saturated with teaching about, and references to, this Kingdom.³ When we turn to the second part of Luke’s writings, called the Acts of the Apostles, we read that for the forty days between his resurrection and ascension Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God.⁴ The first chapter begins with the Kingdom of God, and the closing words record that when Paul reached Rome he lived for two years in a rented house where “he preached about the Kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵

This should be sufficient to convince us all of the importance of the Kingdom of God in Scripture: if not, what more evidence are we looking for?! But we can go further and say that the whole Bible

¹ Matthew 3: 2

² Matthew 4: 17

³ See for example Keith J. White, “He Placed a Little Child in the Midst”, *The Child in the Bible*, ed. M. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 354: “one of the central and continuous themes in Matthew.”

⁴ Acts 1: 3

⁵ Acts 28: 30, 31

witnesses to God's Kingdom: now and not yet. It testifies to Jesus, the Son and the Father with the Spirit in their one history, within which is our creaturely history. The Kingdom of God is a way of coming to terms with this reality: our lives on earth, individually and corporately, lived within the reality of God.

What is more we are to pray ceaselessly for the coming of this Kingdom: "Your Kingdom come!"⁶ And however we choose to describe the calling and mission of an individual disciple of Jesus, and the body of believers that owns His name it will be a dynamic equivalent of the Kingdom of God. Kingdom implies historical obedience, mission on earth, towards "Your Kingdom come." Note well that we talk not of Kingdom, but Kingdom of God: in Christ, only in the crucified.

It is therefore no wonder that one of the great mission-theologians of the twentieth century, John V. Taylor wrote: "The Kingdom of God is the very keynote of the faith of Jesus himself and to understand what it meant to him is arguably the primary task of any who claim to be his followers."⁷

The words of Jesus ring out among us today, as through Christian history: "Seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and His righteousness!"⁸ And so now we strive afresh to do just that, singly and together.

The Kingdom of God Revisited

But we cannot simply take it for granted that because we seek to follow Jesus we all know what the Kingdom of God means. The Jewish Scriptures testify to the challenges of understanding it aright: let alone walking in the way of the Lord!

⁶ Matthew 6: 10

⁷ John V. Taylor, *Kingdom Come* (London: SCM, 1989), 16. He is also author of *The Primal Vision*.

⁸ Matthew 6: 33. Matthew uses the term Kingdom of Heaven where Mark and Luke refer to Kingdom of God.

Today we find in our conference people from around the world: some live in kingdoms with a monarch, others live in republics. We know that world history is littered with examples of human kingdoms and other forms of government from the sometimes satisfactory to the downright evil. But this is true not only of world history, but also current events occurring both on the great continent of Africa, and also on every other continent, East and West, North and South. We read the biblical message and teaching of Jesus through such lenses.

It is not possible to speak of the Kingdom of God in a major European language, for example, without bringing into play the history of the conquest of other peoples around the world: the words *reino*, *kingdom*, *royaume* and *reich* cannot be detached from their historical realities. And those who hear these words in the rest of the world are reminded of the insensitive and sometimes savage nature of colonialism, and the mixed legacies it has left.

When Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God, his disciples were hearing everything through lenses too. They knew all too well what the Roman Empire was all about and wanted to get rid of the infidel yoke! They also knew that their Scriptures taught that earthly kings of Israel were something of a contradiction in terms: there was only one King, Yahweh. Having a king was a compromise at best, and a rejection of God's authority at worst.⁹

In much of the history of Israel God does not appear as a ruler of conspicuous power and authority. Today our worship songs often resort to kingly language, and acclaim God's greatness, power and might; his miracle-working strength. But they cannot obscure the truth that God often seems to be weak in the world, a king looking for his kingdom: in disguise as it were in the enemy's camp. Where are the cries of anguish that erupt in some of the Psalms: "You are my King and my God...but now you have rejected us" (Psalm 44: 4, 9); "How long will the enemy mock you, O God? Why do you hold back your right hand?" (Psalm 74: 10-11) "O God the nations have

⁹ 1 Samuel 8-12.

invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple” (Psalm 79: 1)?

We cheerfully plunder the joyful psalms for images of God’s greatness, majesty, might, power, wonder, and yet are reluctant to hold on to such honest utterances rooted in genuine life and history of a fallen world: a world that is not fair; where justice does not “roll on like a river”, nor righteousness “like a never-failing stream.”¹⁰ Some Christians fear that this is a serious flaw in the legacy that we are handing to the next generation. Where are the new songs that will provide a real or firm enough foundation or rock in times of trial for tomorrow’s Christian leaders?

When we picture the Kingdom of David, which is common to the Jewish and Christian heritages, we have a visionary one: a reign that lasts forever, that stretches from shore to shore, and in which the earth is filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. It embodies all the promises of God, and His character realized in ways we can imagine. In historical reality David’s reign ended in a tawdry way, but it was still seen as a token of true Kingly rule that was yet to come in its fullness.

This led many to hope for the Messiah, great David’s greater son, who would usher in an era of pure shalom under his rule. But human history shows that the best we can manage on earth are periods in particular places, often very local, that approximate to the Kingdom of God.

The messages of the prophets, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel are all inspired by visionary understandings of this coming Kingdom. Jeremiah sees it as a place where Torah is warmly embraced, covenant written on the heart; Ezekiel as having a well-ordered holy precinct where God’s holiness re-orders and enlivens every part of society; Isaiah as a royal homecoming where a new reign represents unalloyed holistic good news. They wrestle with particular terms and concepts, both in Israel and neighbouring Kingdoms, when imagining how this

¹⁰ Amos 5: 24

new Kingdom will come in practice and what it will be like in daily life.¹¹

Jesus lived at a time when the Kingdom of Israel had been destroyed, and he did nothing to support attempts to realize it as a political reality. Yet at the same time he taught and modeled this Kingdom of God in everyday life in ways that made a difference. He taught that “the Kingdom of God is among you”¹², and to those with eyes of faith then and ever since it can be seen that God’s rule broke into human affairs like shafts of sunlight through the clouds, or starlight in the dark night sky. The Beatitudes are a perfect example of this: rooted in human experience with which can identify, yet revealing another dynamic, a way of living by faith, that turns normal assessments and rankings on their heads.¹³

With great care Jesus chooses to model this Kingdom (“God’s way of doing things”; or “where God has his way”) by gathering a small group of friends who are travelling (on the road; on the way), who own nothing between them, and who have no specific agenda other than listening to and following their servant leader, and sharing good news with those whom they meet on the journey. Where God has his way, there is no concern, to impress or oppress, to build or expand by human endeavour, economic, social or political planning and power. If there is growth it takes place in a spontaneously and naturally, like a mustard seed planted in a garden, or yeast kneaded into the dough.¹⁴

You might wonder why it is that despite his acute, prophetic understanding of the frailties and harsh realities of human Kingdoms Jesus still used the term. The fact that he did so constantly, means that what he meant by it is theologically significant. We must pay attention to it, and wrestle with its challenges and consequences. As

¹¹ See W. Brueggemann, *OT Theology: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 283-291.

¹² Luke 17: 21

¹³ Matthew 5: 3-10

¹⁴ Matthew 13: 31-33

we do we see that it points to God's engagement with creation, law, redemption. It is where heaven and earth meet; the Creator and His creatures; God and His world.

Without holding on to the Kingdom of God there is always the risk that we will be tempted to settle for a two-tier frame of reference: the sacred and the secular; grace and nature. God is in His heaven, and we are in the world. In this framework as believers encounter appalling suffering and injustice, they imagine themselves into another world where God rules supreme. In so doing they do not allow the struggles of the Psalms or any theologians worth their sort to detain or disturb them.¹⁵

Another way of coping is to focus on what we our doing in God's name, our work, our mission, our organisations, and to tell others of the success, the blessing we are having. Some have gone so far as to claim that their organisation, or church is the Kingdom of God: co-terminous with it! If they don't claim it openly, sometimes they live assuming it and conveying this message to others. Many of the European conquistadores really believed that they were bringing the Kingdom of God to South America! This sort of proud thinking shows that the message of the Kingdom of God has become seriously adulterated, or to change the metaphor, squeezed into other moulds.

The Kingdom of God brings together two realities, two dimensions. In doing so it creates tension and requires serious theological study and debate for all who live in the world, but who are not of it.¹⁶

The Kingdom and Repentance

So, assuming we will not seek to deny the tensions or avoid the challenges by such predictable and well-tried means, how do we begin to adjust to the demands and responsibilities of the Kingdom of God?

¹⁵ For example Miroslav Volf's remarkable book *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). This work wrestles with the meaning of the Gospel amidst the horrors of war in the Balkans.

¹⁶ John 17: 15-17

The Scriptures are clear: we prepare for it by repentance. Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand. What does this mean? That we must be on our guard lest we have accepted or compromised with an alternative or substitute, and lulled ourselves into thinking that we have arrived and are fully paid up members of the Kingdom, by our sacrifices and commitment to a Christian church and organisation.

The disciples had responded to the call of Jesus that the Kingdom of God was nearby leaving all to follow him.¹⁷ But there were two errors in their thinking. First, they had been seduced by the dream of a Kingdom of greatness with its grandeur, territory, great institutions, like a temple and palace and its other glories. Second, they were grasping for a notable place or rank in the supposed pecking order of that Kingdom, despite the fact that this involved competition with others.

Put simply: they expected special places and special rewards for following Jesus. In their heart of hearts they were no different from those who set their sights on earthly prizes and power.

Sadly it is all too possible to reject worldly power and then to recreate our desires in our quest for positions in church and Christian organisations. Full-time Christian service can become modelled on earthly Kingdoms: management theory, hierarchies, pay differentials, the rich serving the poor but remaining rich, and charity rather than justice being the norm. And giving to, and serving, the little ones actually make us feel rather good.

Now you may see this as rather stark, or unduly harsh. But whatever it says on the labels we wear, we gather here in Nairobi first and foremost as disciples of Jesus. As providence would have it this conference began on Ash Wednesday, the first day in Lent. As we recall the forty days that our Lord spent in the wilderness, let us hear the familiar words of Psalm 95 drawing our attention back to the wilderness years of the Hebrews: "Today if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts...where your fathers tested and tried me...for

¹⁷ For example, Matthew 19: 27

forty years I was angry with that generation: I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways."¹⁸

Surely we know that confession and repentance is always the starting point of a renewed relationship with God: that the Kingdom of God is not something that we can accommodate to the way we are living and thinking! That it's not a matter of a minor adjustment to the tuning of our car, but a major overhaul, or rebuild. And surely we know that it is pride alone that would convince us that our hearts never go astray, and that we have not known God's ways. So the call comes afresh to us today to follow God's way in Jesus: "Today if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts."

The history of Christianity and Christian mission is full of examples of people and organizations that have been attracted to big, mighty, impressive manifestations of the Kingdom. The disciples were among them: "Who is the greatest?" they asked. A while ago someone wrote to me after having been at a large conference I had encouraged him to attend and he said wistfully: "It was for the big people and large organizations: we are too small. None of the platform party was interested in us." Is this something that surprises you, shocks you, or leaves you indifferent? Knowing the quality of life of my brother in Christ and the way his Christian community among the poor operated I was profoundly sorry and disturbed. I still am. If that is how our Christian brothers feel in such settings, what about the little ones they are seeking to serve?

May it be that this gathering is characterised by a respect for each and everyone here, without rank or status; insider or outsider; them and us.

Brothers and sisters, I beseech you "in the bowels of Christ"¹⁹ to join me in admitting that our own understandings may need re-aligning. It was perhaps two books, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* by

¹⁸ Psalm 95: 7-10 (NIV)

¹⁹ This phrase is taken from the speech that Oliver Cromwell made on August 5th 1650 to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

Donald Kraybill,²⁰ and Philip Yancey's *What's so Amazing about Grace?*²¹ that opened my eyes to aspects of what the Scriptures had been saying about the Kingdom of God and to which I had previously been blind, and the need for change.²² The one thing we cannot do is to carry on as we are assuming there is no need for a revised course.

And we must allow ourselves to be drawn to and motivated by love: shaken and stirred, touched and moved by God's grace and mercy. Some of you know that I fell in love with mountains while I lived in Scotland. I had always dreamt of visiting the Himalayas, and when my son was in Nepal with UMN I finally realized my dream (not climbing Everest, I hasten to say) and saw them with my own eyes. I am still amazed at the sheer scale of these great ranges. And in my mind I always associate these great natural mountains with the greatest range of Christian theology: Paul's Letter to the Romans.

After eleven chapters describing God's love, grace and mercy, he turns to urge his readers to live life God's way (one of his ways of referring to the Kingdom of God). This is what he says: "I beseech you, in view of God's mercy, to present your bodies as living sacrifices holy and acceptable to God, for this is your logical service"²³. Why is such an unthinkable way of living logical?²⁴ Surely it goes against every human reflex, hope and ambition! It is logical "in view of God's mercy." One we have contemplated the sheer scale of God's love, grace and mercy, no sacrifice that we can make is "illogical" or

²⁰ Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978).

²¹ Philip Yancey, *What's so Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).

²² Matthew 18: 3. The word used by Jesus in Matthew 18 is to "change" (and become humble), also translated as "be converted" or "turn", and is close in meaning, though not the same word in Greek used for "repent."

²³ Romans 12: 1

²⁴ The Greek word, *logiken*, is translated in different ways, but its root meaning is indisputable.

misplaced. “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!”²⁵

We are motivated by, inspired by and drawn to God’s love in Christ the crucified, not by criticizing and rejecting the ways of others, nor by hope of reward save that of knowing that we do His will, that we live in a way that pleases Him.

The Kingdom as Signs

Hopefully we have arrived at the point where we glimpse the true reality, the bedrock on which the Kingdom of God is founded: there is a God who rules, and makes Kingdom. Human Kingdoms are lenses through which we glimpse this Kingdom, but they are never to be confused with, let alone identified with it.²⁶ Even as a concept, the Kingdom of God may not be identical with its true reality: the God who rules, and how things are when He has his way among us. The concept has a history and comes and goes; it proves useful, more in some contexts than in others and for various purposes. Jesus had to argue for a certain understanding of the Kingdom of God against other plausible readings. And that argument is perennially necessary. History moves on and the very nature of the Kingdom of God means that we must constantly take new bearings from the Rock of our Salvation: others who went before us, or who are in different locations cannot plot the course for us.

This is where we come to a crucial observation: the Kingdom of God is necessarily and only in signs now. We cannot, we dare not point to a person or a place and say: there is the Kingdom in full and practical reality. No church, organization or denomination; no Christian embodies the Kingdom of God in its fullness.

So our task as disciples of Jesus, followers of the Way, is to read signs, to make signs, to live with signs, by faith not sight, in frail little

²⁵ Charles Wesley: *When I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory died.*

²⁶ Matthew 20: 25-28

beginnings, and hints. It is now, but not yet. We see it reflected and refracted, but not face to face in its entirety and full reality. One day we believe and live in the hope that we will not only see, but experience God's presence, His way of doing things, and will then know what shalom is in all its fullness. Meanwhile we are on a journey and we are given signs.

Earthly kingdoms of whatever sort boast of their real greatness with cities, walls, conquests, armies and military power. They set out to establish institutions, impressive buildings like the Tower of Babel. Their centre, their metropole is static, a base for conquest and dominion. The world is covered with the remains of formerly great kingdoms and empires. God's Kingdom, by way of contrast, is represented by elusive examples and signs for those who are seeking to walk in God's way. One of the challenges that Jesus faced in his ministry was to do with His miraculous power. People were drawn to him because they delighted in seeing more of this astonishing power in action: to see real evidence, marvelous evidence that they could touch, even eat or drink. But Jesus constantly referred to such actions as signs. If they were seen merely as physical realities, then His actions had been misinterpreted: for they were given as a means of signing our journey of faith.

And what is the key that unlocks the door to the Kingdom of God? It is humility. In essence repentance is an act of humility. In baptism, for example, there is public humility, risking shame. But this is not just a key to entry: it is part of the very mode of being of the followers of Jesus. "By grace are we saved through faith, not of works lest anyone should boast: it is the gift of God."²⁷ "What does the Lord require: to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God."²⁸ "The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve..."²⁹ We are called servants or slaves of our Lord Jesus Christ.³⁰ We would rather

²⁷ Ephesians 2: 8, 9

²⁸ Micah 6: 8

²⁹ Matthew 20: 28

³⁰ Paul begins his "Himalayan theology" in Romans with the words: "Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ" Romans 1: 1.

be “a doorkeeper in the House of the Lord.”³¹ Humility is the hallmark of the life and character of Jesus. This is the very mind that we are to have.³²

If we want to be reminded of what to eschew: it is the hubris of earthly kingdoms. These are imbued with a spirit of pride, ambition, domination and status: the exact opposite of the Kingdom of God. This is why Jesus used them as examples of how not to live.³³

But on the other hand this world is God’s creation. And so it follows that everything on earth can be a sign of the Kingdom of God, although not that Kingdom in all its fullness. If we turn for a moment from nation-states and corporations, from communal and tribal struggles for power, we are surrounded by potential signs of the Kingdom: they will “flame out like shining from shook foil.”³⁴ Some of us have been blessed by the model of praying described by Michel Quoist: underlying it is a spiritual discipline that always looks on the world around us for, and as signs of the Kingdom of God. The signs include a banknote, a wire-fence, a tractor, a funeral, eyes, posters, a brick and so on. If we knew how to look at life through God’s eyes “all life would become a sign”!³⁵

It was by careful design and intention that Jesus taught in parables. They are completely consonant with the nature of the Kingdom of God, not just in their content but as a genre. They are elusive, and must be re-read, re-heard and understood afresh as we journey. They continue with us: they seem to grow up with us. Just as the parables are signs so our lives, our Christian groups can at best be signs: not the real thing in its perfection and infinite duration. The disciples seek certainties and always tend to ask for clarification and something more definite and concrete. If you re-read any Gospel in

³¹ Psalm 84: 10

³² Philippians 2: 5-8

³³ Matthew 20: 25

³⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *God’s Grandeur*.

³⁵ Michel Quoist, *Prayers of Life* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1963), 14-32.

this light you will see immediately that Jesus is signing the Kingdom of God in parables as one of the primary ways of revealing it.

How often have we talked as if, given sufficient resources we or others could create the Kingdom of God on earth? We use words like transformation and development, and we describe projects as if they were the real thing! We tend to revere individuals and groups: we seek to replicate their methods as a way to successful Christian living, but in the very process if we are not careful, we idolize them. And when an icon becomes an idol it ceases by definition to be a sign. It has attracted the attention and adoration that belongs alone to God. Notice how meticulous Jesus was in not accepting praise: why do you call me good: there is only one who is good, God. We are so willing to settle for lesser standards.

Why can't we be humble enough to admit that there are weaknesses and failings? Will it let our organization down? What government admits to weaknesses? "I thank you Lord that I am not like other organizations", we seem to imply. "God be merciful to me a sinner" is something we would never say in public. I recall a meeting when I was giving news about Mill Grove, the place where I live. I talked of ways in which we had come short of the very best that God's nature and character demand and inspire through Jesus Christ. Someone wrote to me afterwards saying he was taken aback at my comments. He had never heard the leader of a Christian organization admit to failings! How come?

And humility is not something that requires us to gaze at our own navels and to look only within to admit the fault-lines in our own personalities and groups. If we lift up our eyes and try to take in what is going on in the world, and in the heavens above we will find ourselves reminded of our relative insignificance. The Psalmist³⁶ and Job³⁷ both discovered this from contemplating, or being confronted by, the scale and grandeur of the universe and creation and the Creator. But we also find it if we are taking in the scale of human

³⁶ Psalm 8: 3, 4

³⁷ Job 38-40: 6

suffering. Say we work for the good of children in the world. What is the comparison between what we are all doing together and the scale of the total problem of children poverty and suffering? Could I offer you the metaphor of a drop in a bucket for starters?

The biggest of our organizations are like pebbles on a vast seashore, while the ocean of undiscovered suffering lays before and beyond us. How many cries of children in the world go unheard? How much of their suffering goes on in lingering and frightening isolation? What have we to say about the Kingdom of God when arising from every part of the earth are the unheard cries of little children, rich and poor? What is there to boast about? Recently in our parish in the UK we had one of the Chilean miners speaking. It was a great and uplifting event. There had been a miraculous rescue: God was vindicated. We rejoiced with exceeding joy. But the unheard cries of the families of the miners in New Zealand went unremarked.³⁸

If we take in human history, there is much to be humble about. Can we not see that Jesus did not attempt to eradicate human suffering and poverty with a programme of economic, social and political action? In fact he specifically resisted such ideas as temptations.³⁹ He chose instead to bring comfort, healing and forgiveness to individuals and local groups. They were signs of God's Kingdom.

The best that we can offer are not final solutions to human suffering, injustice, oppression and sin, but signs of hope, intimations of a better way. A sign of the Kingdom is a precious gift from God.

We look to a coming Kingdom and a coming King, not to the creation of heaven on earth by our own plans: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"⁴⁰. Meanwhile our coming King has given us rich signs and revealed himself in so many ways,

³⁸ 29 miners lost their lives in November 2010 after a series of explosions at the Pike River Mine in Atarau in New Zealand's South Island. A month earlier 33 Chilean miners had been rescued.

³⁹ Matthew 4: 1-10

⁴⁰ Matthew 6: 10

most fully of all in Jesus his beloved son, our Lord and Saviour, and it is to Him that we turn for the final part of our exploration this morning.

The Child Placed by Jesus as Sign

Everything we have considered so far serves as a preparation for, or background to, this moment. Given all this, and in this context we return to Matthew, Chapter 18. The disciples were arguing about relative greatness in their idea of the Kingdom of God. If we think we can understand it better than them, then those who are without sin can cast the first stone in their direction!

What does Jesus do? How does he counter their mistaken ideas? Does he point to his miracles, to himself either as a man, or a baby? No, Jesus offers his followers a little child as a sign of the Kingdom of God.

At this point, and having spent ten years seeking to understand and communicate what this passage is about, could I draw attention to four things? Although this is, as it were, in parenthesis, it is vital that we do not overlook these details.

First we know nothing of the character of this child: we don't even know if the child was male or female. So let us dismiss any interpretation of the sign that assumes the child is dependent, trusting, vulnerable and so on. We do not know, so "whereof one cannot speak, one must pass over in silence..."⁴¹

Second, although the child is silent, the sign is not simply the child in the midst, standing in splendid isolation. The child has been placed by Jesus, and Jesus speaks about the child and explains how this little child is a sign of the Kingdom. We have no mandate from this passage to look at children and see in them qua children a sign of the Kingdom of God per se. There are of course very precious insights that we can gain from genuinely receiving children, accepting them

⁴¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein's final words, proposition seven, in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

with sensitivity, listening to them, being attuned to their way of thinking and so on. But paying attention to children alone is not the sign that we are offered.

Third, Jesus does not, either here or at any other time in his ministry, refer to his own childhood. Theologically we will want to do so, and we will find signs: there are deliberate signs in the Gospel records, but that is not what Jesus does here.⁴²

Fourth the whole event is emptied of its power as a sign unless we see the child as a sign of Jesus: Jesus has placed a representative of himself, of his nature, his way, his calling, and the cross in the midst of the disciples.

To see and experience the Kingdom of God as the way of the cross means we walk in a pilgrimage of signs, and no more than signs: but we do not like that, and we prefer to see world as real and final, and our achievements as solid. We grasp at that greatness, and are not content to live in signs, not content to walk with Jesus, and so it is highly possible that we will overlook the true nature of the sign of the child placed by Jesus in our determination to find what we are looking for, to see the sign through unreconstructed lenses, and to find that which is definite and clear.

This said, and as we draw to a close, what then does this action sign?

It signs first and perhaps foremost that the disciples are on the wrong track for the reasons that we have already noted. And this is where the surprise, even scandal comes in: the little child is a sign or model of entry into the Kingdom of God! But how can this be: surely if anyone is in this Kingdom then they are?! What a sobering, if not ridiculous thought. If the travelling band of twelve is not in the Kingdom of God, then surely there is no hope: there is no point in continuing the journey with Jesus.

⁴² I have attempted to deal with this point in "He Placed a Little Child in the Midst," in *The Child in the Bible*, ed M. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 358-9 (and footnotes).

I have tried this message out in various places, most memorably a Christian seminary and a strict Baptist Church. Reading the passage and looking people in the eye, (they included the principal of the seminary and the elders of the church), I challenged them to repent and become humble in order to enter the Kingdom of God. The reactions were the same: not spoken, but if I understood them aright, in eloquent and indignant, if not dismissive, body language: you do not know who we are, for if you did you would realize that we are right at the heart of the Kingdom of God. You should take the message to other seminaries (I have been given names!) and other denominations (even more names!): you are wasting your time preaching to the converted.

Do you get the point? Is it the same this morning? Why are we all being challenged with that which would be far more relevant spoken elsewhere and to others (whom we know very well)? The very moment we think like that, we have betrayed the truth of the situation: we may be inside our own idea of the Kingdom of God, but we are not inside the Kingdom that Jesus has come to reveal! I continue to be moved by the way Christians who are farther along the spiritual journey with Jesus than me convey without ever speaking about it directly, the quality of humility that Jesus exemplified. Pandita Ramabai, as some of you know is one; Lesslie Newbigin another.

You could add to the list. Karl Barth once preached a sermon on the subject: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief." He was preaching it in a prison and to convicted criminals. Yet what did he say? "I am the chief of sinners this morning!" Just what the Apostle Paul knew to be his own situation. If you and I were preaching the sermon, what might we have thought, even if we did not say it? Once we even think for a passing moment that we are more deserving (better) than others we have shown ourselves to be at that very moment outside the Kingdom. It has no rank or status, except that its Lord serves and gave his life a ransom for many. There is no competition in this Kingdom.

But there is a second aspect to the message conveyed by the sign. It not only deconstructs errant understandings of the Kingdom of

God, it also gives a clearer picture of the Kingdom of God. We do not have an old rugged cross placed by Jesus and standing in the midst; we do not have the Law revealing how far we have fallen short; we do not find ourselves being offered a hair shirt, or a programme of denial and fasting. No we are given the sign of a little child. This unknown child is placed by Jesus and is a sign of hope, of promise, of a journey ahead, of potential growth, of discoveries and learning.

All children, with the exception of those who are dying, embody these things. In place of the sacrifice and denial that the disciples have in the forefront of their minds as they think about rewards, Jesus offers a sign of life, and of encouragement. The disciples are to continue to dream, to long, to hope to experiment (and no doubt to fall over and have to start again) on their journey of faith. This is a positive sign, like the new shoot on a branch, a newborn lamb, the dawn of a new day.

A Challenge to Us All

This brings us to our gathering today: we are followers of Jesus, disciples, and we have left certain things to follow him, and we must also admit that there have been some rewards. But do we need to repent? Are we outside the Kingdom? Do we need the little child as a model of how to enter?

The single clue that Jesus gives about the meaning of the sign of the child is the word humility. This word comes from the same root as humus: that is soil, or compost. It is a call to get right back to our roots: we are from dust. We are creatures, frail children as dust and feeble as frail. The Kingdom of God reminds us that God is God; we are his creation. The Greek word for humble in Matthew's Gospel is the very same one that Paul uses to describe the nature and action of Jesus: "He who thought it not robbery to be equal with God, became obedient and humble." He calls us in the little child to follow him.

And that requires stooping low. I pray that each one of us here uses well and values highly that shortest and perhaps greatest of prayers so beloved by my mentors in the Orthodox Churches: "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy." If you have not

welcomed and embraced this prayer now may be the time to do so, the kairos moment.

The Kingdom of God is always a call to repent: we will always tend to be off-beam, off-line; off-song. On the walk with Jesus we are prone to wander off track, to stumble, to become proud, and to look with pity on others: always the prayer is waiting for us. Lord have mercy. Or of course: “Father forgive us...as we forgive those who sin against us”⁴³: we “know not what we do”⁴⁴.

One of my discoveries in life is that there are general temptations and particular temptations. A version of the latter that we may have in common in such a gathering as this is that we are respected, even admired by others because of the work that we do. We are working alongside little children, we seek to love them, to nourish them in the name of Jesus: we are their faithful advocates. (There are variations on this temptation in other fields of Christian service.) If we are not careful we will accept some of the praise ourselves that belongs only to our God and Father: the giver of all good gifts.

But there is another temptation: we can so focus on children and their needs, potential, even spirituality, that we see them as solely as objects of care or respect, rather than as signs of the Kingdom. And we get so bound up in our work, our organisation and our programme that we tend to mistake our vision and achievements for God’s Kingdom. If so, people including children, may look to us rather than to Jesus and the One who sent Him.

Yet God is always calling us with those visionary signs that we recognize as Christ-like, and true. We are citizens of that Kingdom, and this world is not our true home. We love it, and seek to care for it, to improve it, but our calling is from and to beyond.

This is a sign and challenge not only to us all who are gathered here, but also the whole church: ministers, leaders, seminarians, missionaries, evangelists. Over the course of our time together we will be exploring the child placed by Jesus as a sign to church, seminaries

⁴³ Matthew 6: 12

⁴⁴ Luke 23: 34

and Christian organizations engaged in mission and ministry. One of the challenges we will face, as we always do, is to remain focused on the theological framework for our lives and service. At other times and in other places we do and must engage with other discourses and perspectives, but here our purpose is to ask above all else what God reveals to us by signs that provide a clue to how we should change in order to be in tune with His Kingdom, and therefore fit partners in His mission.

Because we are privileged to be alongside children (those who Jesus has placed in the middle of our lives) we are uniquely situated to receive little children as signs and models of the Kingdom of God, and to communicate something of this revelation to others. It is unlikely that this message is best conveyed by shouting from the rooftops, but by living lives inspired by God's revelation of His Kingdom, and modeling a new way of living in the tensions and messiness of life, political, economic, social and emotional: a sign of the Kingdom, if not the Kingdom in all its fullness. Better to light a candle in the darkness.

People will be inspired by different Christians who they see as embodying the Kingdom of God in ways and contexts that they can understand. I have already mentioned Pandita Ramabai. Let me just say this about her this morning: everything she did and said was in tune with this teaching of Jesus. You may say no one can achieve this. And I must admit that she would be shocked to hear me talking of her in the same breath as her Lord and Master!⁴⁵ Yet she was refined and purified beyond human understanding until she was like a diamond, able to reflect God's ways and His Kingdom first in her "sadan" in Pune, and then at Mukti on a piece of waste land.

In both places she welcomed rejected girl children and created a place for them where all were welcomed irrespective of merit, and where everything she did was a sign. It is still there for us all too read, but many, if not most, find it hard to stoop so low as to visit such a

⁴⁵ She did not want her name to be associated formally with her work at Mukti, for example.

small place and to learn by sitting on the ground with children, the blind and the least and lowest. Perhaps it is given to others to see that our God is “The God of small things”⁴⁶, while we are still attracted by delusions of greatness and grandeur!

Are we ready for the Kingdom in all its fullness? A lamb upon the throne? With little ones always beholding the face of the Father? Perhaps we still need to hear the words of Michel Quoist: “If we knew how to look at life through God’s eye, we should see it as innumerable tokens of the love of the Creator seeking the love of his creatures. The Father has put us into the world, not to walk through it with lowered eyes, but to search for him through things events, people. Everything must reveal God to us. All Life would become a sign.”⁴⁷

Strange that followers of Jesus who accept that the sign given to the shepherds that the Messiah had come was “a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger”, should still overlook little children, little people and little things: some of the chosen signs of their Lord and Master!

⁴⁶ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (Delhi: IndiaInk, 1997).

⁴⁷ M. Quoist, *Prayers of Life*, 14.

RESPONSE 1

READING THE SIGNS – KINGDOM AND CHILD THEOLOGY FOR PRACTITIONERS

BY BILL PREVETTE

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It might be a bit unfair for me to respond to Keith's paper as I have some 'vested interest' in the reception of his presentation. I first met Keith at a *Viva Cutting Edge* in the UK in 1999 and remember his presentation at the *Cutting Edge* of 2001 titled "A Little Child Shall Lead Them: Rediscovering Children at the Heart of Mission." As Keith points out in today's paper, he has spent much of the last ten years seeking to 'understand and communicate' what it means to think about Child Theology. When Keith and Dr. Haddon Willmer introduced me to 'Child Theology' I had never heard the term. Now I find myself serving with Keith as a trustee of the Child Theology Movement (UK) and also trying to communicate what we are learning as we journey towards the Kingdom. I appreciate Keith's fine treatment of 'God's way of doing things'; I want to offer some feedback as an 'operative theologian' and mission practitioner. I reflect on a few of the ways Child Theology can help us embrace uncertainty and ambiguity in mission with children, especially when we speak of 'holistic' mission.

Recently, I was asked to present a paper at a conference in the Republic of Moldova for organizational leaders ministering to children and women caught in human trafficking. The organizers sent me a theme that reflects much personal experience in ministry:

We hear repeatedly, from the practitioners, that the messiness and chaos of what we've "signed up for" can do us in, unless we have a clear understanding of who we are in the midst of it all, know how to balance out our lives—and ultimately leave the outcomes up to God.

I agree with Keith that 'God often seems to be weak in the world, a king looking for his Kingdom: in disguise as it were in the enemy's

camp ...’, we work and live in ‘a world that is not fair, where justice does not [always] roll on like a river.’ I think this statement is important: ‘we cannot simply take it for granted that because we seek to follow Jesus we all know what the Kingdom of God means.’

In over 29 years of working with people living on the margins, responding to people caught in trafficking, street children, crime, gangs, living in Thailand, Cambodia and Romania, I have learned that both ministry and life at the margins are often unpredictable. Organizations, practitioners, churches, missionaries, and theologians have to accept limits. It seems there is no escape from living with mystery, uncertainty, and precariousness where we are cast upon God and looking for the coming of His Kingdom. Opposed to, as Keith suggests, *being sure that we ‘have it’ or are ‘in’ it*. In this context, holistic mission takes on a deeper meaning. Holism lives close to the reality of the Kingdom of God, works in the freedom of the Spirit, and holds to responsible relationships between persons where word, faith and life are closely, intimately and messily intertwined. We are encouraged to see the ‘action of Jesus in placing the child in the midst of the disciples as a hopeful sign.’

Can this theological move help us make better sense of the unpredictability and uncertainties of ministry and practice?

White states, ‘the best we can manage on earth are periods in particular places, ... that approximate the Kingdom of God.’ This implies that we accept limits. Willmer puts it this way, ‘the already in the Kingdom of God and in Jesus is not the holistic transformation of the world or humanity ... the already Christ includes much pain, and suffering.’¹ Christian organizations and practitioners should acknowledge dependence on God’s grace: the transformation the Bible speaks of is dependent on the mercy and action of God.

I too have found that many practitioners and leaders of organizations use terms as ‘transformation’ and ‘community development’ to describe their projects, models or interventions as if

¹ Haddon Willmer, “Review: Mission as Transformation,” in *Transformation*, vol. 16(1):13-17.

they were the ‘real thing.’ We need to be careful that our work, models, and methods do not become idols – they are better understood as signs and pointers to the Kingdom. The temptation is to believe our own press, that is, what others might say about us, what we have, what we do is actually a measure of our worth (Nouwen). No, we are all children of God and must not mistake our vision and achievements for God’s Kingdom. We must continue to wrestle theologically and practically with how we use these concepts; Child Theology offers us one way to do so.

Jesus’ action (Matt. 18) is to *place* the child; this serves as a ‘theological clue.’ The child seems to point to something the disciples have yet to understand and grasp about the Kingdom. Like the disciples, we assume we have certain truths and assurances in God. Could it be that those we serve - the lowly, the broken, the abused, those that we see as recipients of our ministry – could they be pointers to something we *have yet* to understand in the Kingdom of God? The passage points to humility and repentance: that is a ‘radical turning.’ Humility is not generated or given to us by being *brought down*, but rather by standing before the future, and recognizing that the amazing generous grace of God *comes to us*.

In other translations ‘unless you change’ is translated as ‘be converted’, ‘turn around’, ‘return to square one’, and ‘begin again.’ As we begin each day, we do well to remind ourselves that we are at the mercy of the living God. ‘There is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account’ (Heb. 4:13).

Much of our language, speech, practice and action for God assumes that we know the Kingdom of God and are *in line* with it. Activist practitioners and organizations claim to represent and present a confident Biblical Christianity; references to the Kingdom of God are frequent. Whether seminary leaders or activist missionaries, many find it hard to imagine that have ‘yet to enter.’ Indeed, it may be that many of us are inside our ‘own ideas of the Kingdom of God, not inside what Jesus came to reveal.’ So we ask, are our seminary or denominational versions ‘confident enough to imagine the massive and rich contemporary Christian world as a circle of disciples who

struggle with what exactly the Kingdom of God is and so argue about who will be greatest in it?² Are we confident enough to imagine ourselves as longing to bring the goodness of the Kingdom, while at the same time acknowledging our tendency to miss the target? God help us so that our pride, ambition, domination and status do not become ‘pointers in the wrong direction.’

Keith suggests that ‘fulltime Christian service can become modelled on earthly Kingdoms: management theory, hierarchies, pay differentials’ or what Orlando Costas called ‘managerial missiology.’ The action of Christ in placing a child should remind us that mission is not always a strategic and linear endeavour, but more times than not, it is both surprising and disturbing.³

We grasp at realities, strive for greatness and achievements, but we are reminded that many of these ‘realities’ can masquerade as illusions. We are asked not to focus on the individual child in the midst, but to see the ‘child as sign’, to think of Jesus placing ‘a representative of Himself, His nature and His way.’ In this sense, the child might be more acceptable to us than Jesus placing a cross in the midst of the disciples. But much of our work with exploited or ‘at risk children’ leads to personal pain and puzzlement.

Shortly after ten aid workers were killed in Afghanistan on August 6, 2010, Ajith Fernando wrote *To Serve is to Suffer*.⁴ I link his

² From a personal email exchange with White and Willmer, referring to the scope and scale of global movements that aspire to ‘reach all the children of the world’ with the Gospel (March, 2010).

³ God surprises and disturbs; this is one of Barth’s points in his exposition of Romans 12:1-2: ‘Once again we are confronted with this sidedness of the whole course of our human existence.... our life and will and acts are brought into question. For the freedom of God, the ‘Other sidedness’ of His mercies, means that there is a relationship between God and man, that there is a dissolution of human ‘this sidedness’ and that a radical assault is being made upon every contrasted, second, other thing.’ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Tr. E. C. Hoskyns. 6th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 427.

⁴ See Fernando’s article in *Christianity Today*, (www.christianitytoday.com/globalconversation/august2010/index.html accessed September 20, 2010).

thoughts with those that Keith has given us about signs and pointers in the Kingdom:

Vocational fulfillment in the Kingdom of God has a distinct character, different from vocational fulfillment in society. Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). If we are doing God’s will, we assume we will be happy and fulfilled. But for Jesus, and for us, doing God’s will includes the cross. The cross must be an essential element in our definition of vocational fulfillment. Paul’s theology emphasized the need to endure frustration patiently as we live in a fallen world awaiting redemption. Paul said that we groan in this frustration (Rom 8: 18-27).

When we have a faulty understanding of fulfillment in our practice we can become deeply frustrated. This is seen in projects and with caregivers who experience ‘unrealized horizons of expectation.’ In these situations frenetic activity can act as a ‘cover’ for unresolved anxiety. The NGO/FBO⁵ emphasis on efficiency and measurable results makes frustration even harder to endure.

Biblical fulfillment includes both joy and pain; the cross is both vertical and horizontal. In this way, I have learned to see children (especially those in crisis) as ‘pointers’ to God in the midst of pain and suffering. We are to read and discern the signs, one day we will see and experience God’s manifest presence, and there will be no more pain and sorrow. But for now, we are on a *journey* that sometimes requires we embrace suffering and pain without offering certitudes and platitudes. This means interrogating our theological assumptions to learn if they are adequate for the day. Theologically we must be open to learning what best expresses comfort, healing, and forgiveness – signs of hope while not denying the pain and frustration.

Practitioners are like the disciples, we long for ‘certainties and tend to ask for clarification and something more definite and concrete.’ We face a dilemma in ministry because we have a hunger

⁵ Non-government Organization (NGO) and Faith-based Organization (FBO) here I am speaking of Christian FBOs.

for certitude! But the gospel is not so much about certitude as it is about fidelity, that is, the faithfulness of God towards us. In our effort to control, we try to translate fidelity into certitude because fidelity is an open, relational category and certitude is a flat, mechanical category. 'We must acknowledge our thirst for certitude and recognize that if we had all certitudes in the world, it would not make the quality of our life any better. Fidelity is like having a teenager in the house, we never get it settled for more than three minutes, and we have to keep negotiating.'⁶

Practitioners need God's revelation of His Kingdom, they work embedded in the tensions and messiness of ministry, their work is 'lighting candles' or learning to sing in the darkness. Child Theology, as suggested by this paper, offers an invitation to learning, imagining, discovering, and embracing tensions and complexity in mission and ministry.

⁶ These notes came from a conference for emerging leaders by Walter Brueggemann in 2005. He argues that the categories of the enlightenment tempted theologians and Christians to 'out-science' science and they built systems concerned with establishing 'proof' and 'evidence that demands a verdict' and left little room for 'uncertainty.'

RESPONSE 2

BY JOSHUA H. K. BANDA

Northmead Assembly of God

This presentation was not based on a written paper, but accompanied by captions on Power Point. Joshua explained that he had intended to write a response but that then tragedy had struck. He had offered to withdraw his presentation, but the organizers encouraged him to come and speak from the heart. Their words were: “use your experiences as the basis of your response.” As he did, so the words of Michel Quoist quoted near the end of the plenary paper proved to have a whole new meaning:

“If we knew how to look at life through God’s eye, we should see it as innumerable tokens of the love of the Creator seeking the love of his creatures. The Father has put us into the world, not to walk through it with lowered eyes, but to search for him through things events, people. Everything must reveal God to us. All Life would become a sign.”

He explained how his woes began with a painful tooth extraction, which was followed by a computer crash. Then came the news that his close friend and colleague, Bob Hall, had died in a very cruel way. His toothache and the faulty computer now seemed as nothing. He had sought to comfort Bob’s wife and family, and had grieved with them.

And ringing in his mind were the words: “All life would become a sign.” For him in this maelstrom this included people, events, chaos, crises, and ordinary things.

Then he made a confession: “I must confess as the principal of a theological college that I have not seen the sign of the child.”

Now he realized something of what he had been missing: and his personal story and experiences prior to the conference had given the sign a whole new poignancy and meaning.

RESPONSE 3

BY GENEVIEVE JAMES

University of South Africa

Introduction

Keith White's article *Children as signs of the Kingdom of God* offers a pertinent exploration of the signs of the Kingdom of God, in the light of our 21st century presence as the disciples of Christ. I read the article as a powerful and compelling critique of a prevailing status quo in the Christian world. I realized that our smug self-importance belies an allegiance to a Kingdom other than God's. White's submission is more than a paper, it is a pleading. The "we" in the paper refers to us and the "you" in the paper refers to me and you. Reading this pleading I was stretched, uncomfortable, perturbed, and, eventually repentant.

In my response I will focus on significant calls and cautions which I have drawn from White's paper. The points listed below are necessary considerations in our service to God and the children of the world.

The Call to Humility

White (2011:7) expressly advocates humility as "the very mind that we are to have" since it is the "hallmark of the life and character of Jesus", the one we are supposedly following. Humility as Bosch (2000:484-485) suggested is a crucial characteristic in the mission of the church. Humbling ourselves is the condition for the healing of our land and our children. For White (:7) it is the key that unlocks the door to the Kingdom of God.

In South Africa, and many other countries in Africa, the landscape is littered with churches that are convinced that the healing of the land will come through the western inspired size-fixation, fancy programmes, Christian celebrities and big budgets. It is indeed time

to re-vision the practice and presence of the Church and mission in Africa.

On the other hand, in Africa one could argue that after years of imperialism, oppression, poverty and pain that some Christian pride would do well to mend the wrecked and deflated image of African people. But, to what extent is pride a soothing balm to subjugation and woundedness? Perhaps White is right. Perhaps the wonder of the Kingdom of God in Africa is not that it has contributed to the shift of the centre of gravity of Christianity¹, or its impressive masses, or mighty presence, perhaps, the power of the Kingdom of God in Africa is in its brokenness, scarcities and weakness.

The Call to Little Things and Little People

White reminds us that “our God is ‘the God of the small things’” (:13). Instead of our grand gestures he calls us to light a candle in the darkness (:13). Further to this he carefully explains:

Where God has his way, there is no concern, to impress or oppress, to build or expand by human endeavour, economic, social or political planning and power. If there is growth it takes place in a spontaneously and naturally, like a mustard seed planted in a garden or yeast kneaded into the dough (:4).

Hall² (2003:189) carefully points out that all the metaphors Jesus used “to depict the community of witness are metaphors of smallness.”

Little things that perform some essential service for bigger things- salt, yeast, a candle, a little town on a hill in a dark night, a pearl, a mustard seed. He speaks of his “little flock”, which he sends out “as sheep into the midst of wolves” (Matt.10:16). He assumes that the missionary vocation of this *koinonia* will

¹ See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

² Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

involve excruciating isolation, rejection, and suffering – should not the disciple follow the master? (Hall 2003:189).

The imagery contained in these metaphors of smallness point to the power and possibility contained in the small, less obvious, or seemingly insignificant.

On to the little people – we now know that Africa is a continent of children. We therefore have no alternative but to reconsider our ambitious mission and church plans and budgets in order to focus on the little people who make up the vast majority of the continent. White (:14) finds it “(s)trange that followers of Jesus ...should still overlook little children, little people and little things: some of the chosen signs of their Lord and Master!” The call to acknowledge the little people of our continent is imperative, pressing and compelling.

The Call to Realignment

In our call to realignment we would do well to heed to what I perceive as White’s warning about triumphalism. I remember how in 1994 many South African Christians were triumphant that the Kingdom of God had come and vanquished its foes. The glorious new presidency of Nelson Mandela and the first democratic election after years of cruel apartheid atrocities was surely God’s people ushering in the New Jerusalem to South Africa and Africa at large. At the very same time, elsewhere on the continent the people of God, in a far from triumphant Rwanda, were in the grips of a hellish, brutal and sadistic genocide. Triumphalism does not allow us to see the bigger picture!

Hall (:17) describes triumphalism as;

The tendency in all strongly held world-views, whether religious or secular, to present themselves as full and complete accounts of reality, leaving little if any room for debate or difference of opinion and expecting of their adherents unflinching belief and loyalty...

White’s article warns about the danger that lies in the susceptibility to triumphalism which creates a distortion of reality. He

explains, “(w)e use words like transformation and development, and we describe projects as if they were the real thing!” (: 8)

Further to the warning about triumphalism we are also cautioned about Christian power, ambition and the corporatization of Christian witness. I wonder do we have the nerve to relinquish our ambition to do “grand” things? Do we have the moral and spiritual fiber to abandon our appetite for titles, adulation, pomp and pageantry? Do we dare as I heard urban theologian John Vincent once call for the followers of Christ “to submit to becoming vile?” Keith White reminds us that we have indeed succumbed to the great seduction of power, title and ambition. Unlike the one whose nail scarred hands bear testament to the experience of the ultimate condescension, we, like Lady Macbeth, may soon look at our hands and see the dammed spots of our ambition.

White explains that “Christian service can become modeled on earthly Kingdoms” (2011:5). In our mission with and to the hurting and broken children of the world, how can we still adopt our designations from the world of commerce? How can it be that the servants of Jesus now see themselves as mission “executives”, and “directors” sitting on mission “boards” engaging in “strategic planning sessions”? Could obedience to the call to humility begin with a radical re-naming of the parts? We insist on being called by our titles as though those titles define who we are. Does what we do really define who we are?

Conclusion: A Call to Repentance

White’s paper begins by reminding us about the call of John the Baptist and Jesus to repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand (:1). Further to this White specifically dedicates a portion of his message to us on the subject of the Kingdom and Repentance (:4-6). We are expressly required to repent for our thinking, and believing, that great, powerful, big and rich is equal, to the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God makes no concession for our delusions of grandeur. Every human desire for status, reward, praise, power and strength cannot be satisfied in the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus. As I

read this article it seemed as though White kept saying to me: apply this to you. The more I read White's article the more I realized my personal complicity in the distortion of the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus. The more I recalled that the cross draws attention to the suffering servant, the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. At the cross strength is manifest in weakness.

White's call for a major overhaul is urgent (:5). The 21st century Christian presence in many places is in contrast to the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus. A review of our Kingdom epistemology and praxis is in order. Can we read the signs? The sign that the church in Africa is growing in leaps and bounds cannot be read as a triumph, not just yet. This growth, in some cases, is just a sign of the Kingdom of God.

White does not permit us to pass the significance of his message to anyone else. We are explicitly warned against this (:11). I don't know if the body of Christ is ready to take White's pleas seriously, if it did, we could witness a drastically different Christian presence in the world in the 21st century.

RESPONSE 4

BY BERNARD BOYO

Daystar University, Kenya

Introduction

The paper by Keith White brings out quite succinctly a very significant theological subject that, as far as I am aware, has not been addressed in any significant way within the framework of theological discussions and conferences. The centrality of children as signs of the Kingdom in the teaching of Jesus is indeed a challenge to us all. The motif of the Kingdom of God is not only the central focus of Christ's teaching but indeed the epitome of messianic expectation drawn from the Old Testament. Keith is right in drawing the focus of Christ and the Christian faith as a whole to the Kingdom of God through the lenses of a child. Children as "signs of the Kingdom" brings about a sobering call to reflect on our individual Christian pilgrimage, even to demand that we all go down on our knees in humility before the king, our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom of God Revisited

The centrality of the Kingdom of God in the life and ministry of Jesus cannot be overstated as Keith has brought it out. Jesus' teaching focused on the parables of the Kingdom which were authenticated by miracles. We deduce from the New Testament teaching that the task of Jesus entails among other aspects the fulfillment of Old Testament anticipations of predictive utterances. The gospel of Matthew for instance uses the term "fulfillment" more as a concept that places Jesus squarely within the Old Testament Jewish Messianic prophetic expectations. It is in this light that Jesus, as the embodiment of the Messianic-king personae, extrapolates the truth about the Kingdom in culturally relevant images yet in a paradoxically radical manner.

In his teaching on the Kingdom, Jesus utilizes the available "illustrative sample" to elucidate his teaching regarding entry into the Kingdom when he says in Matthew 18:3, "Truly, I say to you, unless

you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven.” In the book of Mark, he does the same while bringing out another lesson where “He sat down and called the twelve. . . .And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”” (Mark 9:34-37). The child it can be argued becomes, to the disciples, the pointer to their understanding of the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus. The Kingdom, Jesus argues, belongs to the children and those like them. Consequently then, children are intrinsically intertwined with the Kingdom.

Keith also brings out a very significant issue regarding the manner in which the disciples heard and possibly interpreted the teaching of Jesus. He says, “When Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God, his disciples were hearing everything through lenses” (:2). This aspect is critical as it helps us be cognizance of the presuppositions exemplified by the disciples and thereby the validity of Jesus’ signage while at the same time placing Jesus above their cognitive level. It might be necessary for us to note that Jesus himself is a byproduct of the same milieu as a Jew-the Davidic king and therefore well-versed with their cultural values and structures. We need however to underscore the fact of Christ’s nature in which he transcends culture and thereby brings transformation and redemption.¹

Significantly also we see Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom revolutionizing the mindset of his contemporaries who anticipated his messianic claim to fulfill their anticipations in accordance with their thoughts and structures. Jesus however brings in an upside-down perspective of the Kingdom that by and large adopts their

¹ The subject of Christ and Culture is covered by Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture* where he looks at five key aspects which place Jesus at the center of the Cultural framework within the human sphere. There are a number of critics to Niebuhr’s approach which include John Howard Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture” In Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, John Howard Yoder (co-authors), *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

narrow scope of thinking in a radically different manner. In the passage discussed by Keith, Jesus does not deny the fact that there is greatness in the Kingdom neither does he fault the disciple's concern with greatness in the Kingdom but he turns around and points their quest to the humility exemplified by children. In essence then the way to ascend the ladder of greatness in the Kingdom is by coming down, according to Jesus, which as brought out by Donald Kraybill in *The Upside down Kingdom*. A closer look at the demands of the Kingdom beckons us today to read and re-read the biblical text for ourselves so that we can be able to re-think our faith and thereby re-evaluate our theology accordingly.

The Kingdom and Repentance

This revolutionary thinking and engagement with the Kingdom is such that it calls for action on the part of the subjects. Keith brings this out clearly when he looks at the Kingdom and repentance. The Kingdom call to repentance and faith should not be seen as a timeless, self-evident summon but should be grounded on the efficacy of what has taken place - "the time has come" and what is still impending - "the Kingdom of God is near." The now and the not yet dimensions of the Kingdom are critical pointers to our understanding of Christ's call to enter the Kingdom.

The transformation demanded by the Kingdom call to repentance is embedded within Christ's incarnational mission. This is the Kingdom transfer, from the dominion of darkness to the Kingdom of light, wrought by the new birth that Jesus demands of Nicodemus in John 3.² This new birth is effected through repentance of sin and dependence on self to submitting fully to Christ's lordship. Entering the Kingdom of God is not done by the standards of the world. It

² Cranfield points out on this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus that: "Nicodemus has to learn that he cannot enter the Kingdom of God as a learned theologian and highly respected religious leader; if he has to enter at all, it must be the one who is helpless and small, without claim or merit." C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1966), 324.

comes only through a radical new birth which we know of as “Conversion.”

The Kingdom as Signs and the Child as Sign

Keith engages with what the Kingdom entails and how we are to relate with it. He juxtaposes the idea of “children as signs of the Kingdom” and “the Kingdom as signs.” The disciples are to become like children but in contrast they are not to take after the patterns of earthly Kingdoms. He argues that “Human Kingdoms are lenses through which we glimpse this Kingdom, but they are never to be confused with, let alone identified with it” (:6). The pattern of life and leadership in human Kingdoms is anthropocentric rather than Christocentric in nature. Personal interest and gain dominate the corridors of governments all over the world. This is contrast with the Kingdom of God which is characterized by humility exemplified in the character of children.

It is in this context of discussion that Keith embarks on the focal point of his paper on Children as signs of the Kingdom where he brings out the point that “the Kingdom of God is necessarily and only in signs now” (:7). He also demonstrates the significance of signs as pointers to the Kingdom by relating the Kingdom as taught by Jesus and the co-terminus earthly Kingdoms which as he argues are in contradistinction from the lowliness that the parables depict of the Kingdom.

One aspect that Keith does not clearly discuss is the definition or meaning and significance of “signs.” This is critical first because of the hermeneutical implication that one may be tempted to arrive at which might impact on the total implication of the text in discussion. To what extent should the reader stretch the usage by Jesus of children as referents to the Kingdom? Should the reader employ any or every conceivable understanding of what a child entails or should it be limited only to Jesus’ response of the disciples’ question on greatness? For instance does the use of children as a pointer to the Kingdom necessarily entail every aspect of who a child is? In other words is it the children who are the focus here or is it their characteristics of

humility and lowliness or even their innocence?³ Other related hermeneutical issues would include our understanding of children only as signs beyond which their existence as children is depersonalized. Keith captures this well in saying: “We have no mandate from this passage to look at children and see in them *qua* children a sign of the Kingdom of God *per se*” (:10).

The cultural perspectives that we have about children and how we look at them, as novices from whom we can learn nothing, need to be re-evaluated. Most African cultures tend to think of children only as immature and thus contributing less to society until they grow up. Often children are regarded to be leaders of tomorrow. What Jesus does is rather challenging in that the child becomes the example of leadership in Jesus’ economy of the Kingdom.

The other implication that the meaning of sign would bring out is more cultural in nature. It would be difficult to assume a universal usage and understanding of the referent of children as signs. Does the deduced implication of humility and lowliness by the use of a child reflect a universal understanding? Could there be instances where the usage of child may have an alternative or even negative connotation? The diversity of our cultural views, especially with regard to how we read and draw meaning out of objects of reference, would also be a crucial area of consideration. We also may not want to think of children existing only as signs and thereby lose the essence of Jesus’ message.

³ I have a Pastor friend who loves to associate with children. He met one young boy with whom he struck a friendship. The boy was so excited that he took it upon himself to let his parents know that he has a friend who needs prayer. During the family evening prayers, the boy always reminded his parents to pray for his friend without giving details. This happened for a couple months. One day the pastor found the boy sitting by the stairs with a gloomy face. The boy readily told the pastor: “you are not my friend anymore.” The pastor prodded the boy and after some time the boy opened up and told him: “We have been praying for you as we did my auntie when she had a big stomach and she soon came home with a baby. As for you, you have not brought the baby and your stomach has not gone.”

In his analysis of the child placed by Jesus as a sign, Keith isolates four things that shed light on our identification with the use of the child. The character of this child is unknown, the child is silent, Jesus' childhood is not in focus, the child is only a sign by Jesus. In this sense then we can deduce that the child is a teaching material from which the disciples are to draw out the intended lesson of humility. In this regard, Jesus points to the aspect of humility which Keith clearly analyses as denoting the characteristic quality of Kingdom life.

As we consider the foregoing discussion, we are challenged to reflect on how we often fail to identify with Christ in his call for us to be humble. The lessons drawn by Keith in this paper are indeed a challenge to us all as we seek to reflect the character of Christ and become like children.

THEME 2: THE CHURCH AND THE CHILD – A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCHES

Plenary Paper: Vinay Samuel

Sadly Vinay was not able to deliver his paper: one of his relatives had died suddenly and he had to return home. His paper was therefore read to the conference by Corneliu Constanteanu.

Vinay seeks to reassert the “high view of the church in the New Testament.” In his view this is inadequately represented in much Evangelical activity and thinking because it assumes the primacy of the Kingdom of God over church. His paper is in three parts.

First he outlines a theological understanding of church drawing from the people of God in the Old Testament, and the confessing community which is the family of God in the New Testament.

Second he then moves on to explore how he sees the relation between the church and the Kingdom of God. Countering understandings that see the church as interim, he believes that it has an eternal existence, and groans for heaven. The Kingdom by way of contrast is not a future reality for heaven: it operates in its fullness in heaven now. The church is a sign of the Kingdom of God on earth.

In the third section of his paper he focuses on the well-being of the child. The child, who is naturally turned to the Kingdom, is a fully representative symbol of Jesus and God, particularly in relation to love and grace. Vinay argues that the significance of the child as a sign of the Kingdom is not apparent in the teaching of the rest of the New Testament. Rather it focuses on the place of a child in the Christian family or church. Yet the child’s subject-hood should be shaped by church living out the life and order of the Kingdom.

In this section he raises the important and interesting question of how churches can make space to children to explore the gifts of the Spirit. The child is not just an object of nurture in the church, but a person with spiritual subject-hood which is an asset to the community of faith.

Response Synopsis: David Ramirez

This paper affirms the main themes of the plenary paper, with an emphasis on seeing children and young people included in “the poor” for whom God has a preferential option. David Ramirez notes that the Lucan (mission) and Pauline (salvation) understandings of the role of the Spirit are complementary. He stresses the importance of the small, local, communitarian, polycentric, church as against mega-churches. He sees the church that is “comfortable with its marginality” (M. Volf) called to provide an alternative micro-model of community for the societies of the world. The community of faith is to live out Kingdom values.

In the final section of his response, mirroring the plenary paper’s shape, David says that while there is evidence in the New Testament that the church placed a value on children in general, this is at risk in today’s churches (including those in Latin America). Here the influence of consumer culture means that little value is attached to those who are seen as contributing nothing to church or society.

By way of contrast children should be seen as subjects, and the true stockholders of mission.

Response Synopsis: Dietrich Werner

Rather than continue to debate the relationship between church and Kingdom of God (important though it is), Dietrich Werner seeks to concentrate on the place of children in mission and church. Jesus does not speak of the transformation of child to adult, but rather calls adults to the perspectives and values of childhood. He stressed the importance of holding together the mental process of getting converted, with the physical process of having an actual child in the centre.

Children have been put in the centre of church from earliest times (for example baptism and catechisms); churches made the care and education of children a priority in mission; and this has influenced the development of a general transformation of attitudes to children in society. On the other hand the acknowledgement of children as full human beings came relatively late in Protestant Christianity, and pioneers in pedagogy have only relatively recently been welcomed into the shaping of children’s work in churches.

Another historical insight is the way in which churches combined to work together in something as significant as the worldwide Sunday School movement. There seems to be some evidence that where there is commitment to this movement, there is also commitment to mission.

The paper summarises the role of children and children's issues in the WCC, and concludes with an invitation to design a new curriculum on Child Theology, perhaps in the form of a resource book, and to make contribution to the WCC Assembly in Busan, Korea in 2013.

Response Synopsis: Rosalee Velloso Ewell

This response concentrates on three themes: Israel as the chosen child of God; the church as the family of God; and children as a challenge to the churches. The context and overriding concern is to consider how Christians do church and mission in a broken world where children suffer.

Rosalee sees the concept of childhood as providing insights into what it means for Israel to be a chosen people. Hosea 11: 1-11 can be seen as a description of what it means from God's perspective to have a child like Israel. The focus here, significantly, is on God's story and his feelings as the parent of a wayward child.

Jesus is the link between the children of Israel and the church as the family of God. As children of God how can Christians live in such a way that the world sees their parent (their Heavenly Father) as the one true parent? One key dimension is hospitality: how do children (and "strangers") experience the life of the church? Are they received and welcomed? Do children who experience violence in their families find the family of God a caring and respectful safe space?

The challenge of children (and young people) to churches can be seen as similar to the challenge of mission and missionaries to the life and witness of church. The leadership is made up typically of men who struggle with the idea of letting go of power. What would church look like if the leaders listened more closely to children, and concentrated on being present with them and part of their world rather than trying to make them more like us? Children in the Scriptures are not only signs of the Kingdom: they are also often bearers of God's word to us. This is not in an instrumentalised manner, but because God gives them an

importance that we have often forgotten. Thus they challenge us to live once again as children and as disciples of Jesus.

Group Response Synopsis

Theology cannot be separated from doing and doing can only occur in context. This will involve more than statistics and terminology: it must be done with real, live children. The plenary paper was left hanging and needed practical, useful insights. Children are part of families and communities and so care must be taken to avoid a dichotomy between children and adults that minimizes the role of adults in the nurture of “children of faith” in the Bible.

Children are inheritors of the Kingdom of God, and are complete human beings with “full personhood.” Recognising the tension between Kingdom and church it was still necessary to explore the context: where is the child in all this? We need to hold in balance the place for children within the family of God and the child’s place in mission within the family of God. Children are a challenge not only to church, but also to families.

There was a welcome of the way the Sunday School movement brought some churches together. The invitation of WCC should be accepted. The influence of Robert Raikes on social change in Europe reminds us that this could happen today. If we are looking for great change we need to be alongside children not adults.

The thought that children are recipients of the Holy Spirit merits more discussion, and we must bear in mind that the spiritual rights of children are not stressed in the UNCRC.

Children merit trained teachers in the church on a par with those who teach the adults, and they should be included in church life and worship (for example Holy Communion) in such a way that they experience the fullness of the grace of God. This will mean “unlearning some things.” The message is not for others but for us.

The church must be a loving community where children feel part of the whole. A proper knowledge of Scripture is lacking in the 17-35 age group: discipleship in the Bible is therefore necessary. There is a need for more men in children’s ministry.

Unless we influence children in the period of character formation we will not have model Christians. Adults have already been shaped by the world.

A distinction was made between age-appropriate biblical teaching, and shared worship and ritual in which there was learning about God together. Children's presence, and their questions, is perhaps the most precious gifts they bring to the church.

What does hospitality mean for children in churches? There were concerns, for example in N. America, that churches were affected by the fear of abuse and being sued, so that safe space where children are nurtured and encouraged as adults interact with them is at risk.

There is teaching in the New Testament that insists pastors should be good husbands and parents: is this something we have neglected? What if we focused all of our pastors' teaching and preaching to adults (whether parents, aunts, uncles, football coaches, mentors, grandparents) equipping them, empowering them to raise our children? What would we get? Maybe:

- 1) adults who weren't so self-obsessed, and more servant hearted;
- 2) children who are more engaged in the life of faith and the church, nurtured and mentored by adult disciples who are also disciples by them.

To bring today's children into the centre/midst of church is to engage with cyber internet, with challenges to marriage, gay lifestyles, because this is where young people are. Facebook is alive in Kenya, and will be a factor in change, as young people reconfigure the way politics (and church) are done. Some criticize Facebook because it communicates in little chunks and comments: but don't adults read the Bible in the same way?

The "church" is a very broad category and concept. When broken down into real, tangible expressions, it is sometimes an obscuring sign of the Kingdom (for example priests who abuse children).

The third section of the plenary paper presented problems for some. What is the theological basis for well-being? How does this section relate theologically to the child placed by Jesus in the midst? For some "well-being" is a common default position for activists, consonant with prevailing *nostra*, but theologically uncritiqued.

Gifts of the Spirit are seen here conventionally as special out of the ordinary spiritual things, which are given in and to church to

distinguish it from ordinary humanity. This is the Pentecostalist, charismatic, supernaturalistic model. We need to think about natural-supernatural categories and how they relate to child, especially child as placed by Jesus. Child there, as converting sign of Kingdom of God, is just child, not at all gifted by Spirit, in the post-Lukan, post-Pauline conceptualities.

This way of argument treats child as 'asset' to church, and thus prevents child being sign of the call to church to stop trying to make something of itself, and to seek the Kingdom of God.

There was discussion of how far children in today's world are valued. This is a complicated matter: consumer cultures see children as very significant now (and future). Care is needed when using terms such "asset" and "stockholders" to describe children.

PLENARY

THE CHURCH AND THE CHILD – A CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCHES

BY VINAY SAMUEL

Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life, UK

Introduction

Much has been said about the “ecclesial deficit” among evangelical, bible believing Christians. Evangelical commitment to evangelism, to leading individuals including children to a personal faith in the Lord Jesus is paramount. In the past forty years, there is also the focus among many committed to evangelism to move ahead and plant churches, that is, worshipping and fellowshiping congregations. However, the main goal of church planting is often described as reproducing more churches like themselves through evangelism. The planted churches are to be primarily evangelistic action groups drawing on a theological conviction that the more unbelievers are made believers the closer the parousia gets.

A recent doctoral dissertation at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies identified how the literature evangelism agency “Every Home Crusade” (EHC) was embarrassed by the spontaneous formation of believers’ worshipping groups through individuals and families accepting Christ by reading the literature given to them. EHC for a number of years made no provision to support these groups, as they did not feel called to church planting. One must pay tribute to the church planting movements that made church planting, at least, as important and even more significant than leading individuals and groups to Christ.

However, biblically exploring and understanding what this entity planted is did not get priority. The planted church may worship, fellowship, teach the bible but its main goal is to replicate itself. This missed the high view of the church in the New Testament.

Jesus promised that the Church would be something that the gates of hell cannot overcome (Matthew 16:18). For Paul, it is the entity “built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone . . . And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his spirit (Ephesians 2: 20-22). The New Testament ends with the ringing affirmation of the church’s eschatological destiny. “The Saints will dwell in God and the Lamb, just as God and the Lamb will dwell in them.” Revelation 21:22.

Much of evangelicalism has an instrumental view of the church. I believe this is due to its focus on the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel of the Kingdom, the church has only a supporting role and is not at the centre of our mission engagement. Such a stress on ‘*basileia*’ over ‘*ecclesia*’ leads to a much weaker understanding of the church in God’s plans of salvation, in the Kingdom of God and the New Creation. Unless that is addressed, we will not be able recognize the place of the child in the church properly.

In this paper, I will address the following questions. First, what is the Church? Second, what is the relationship between the church and the Kingdom of God, and third, what is the place of the child in the church?

What is the Church?

From its beginning in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Christ’s disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2), the Church is seen as that gathering of believers of Christ where Christ is present. Moroslav Volf in his seminal work on ecclesiology *After our Likeness: the Church as the Image of the Trinity*, writes “the Spirit unites the gathered congregation with the triune God and integrates it into a history extending from Christ, indeed, from the Old Testament saints, to the eschatological new creation.”¹

¹ Volf Miroslav, *After Our Likeness: the Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 129.

The reaction to the Protestant Reformation led the Roman Catholic Church to stress that the true church is a fully visible society comprising of three elements: profession of the true faith, communion in the sacraments, and the submission to the legitimate pastors². Scholars have noted that the focus of Vatican II was on what it means to be church in the contemporary world. Vatican II recovered and highlighted the description of the church as the People of God. A common understanding of the church today considers it as a people called by God to be his people and in communion with one another in Christ and by his grace. Among churches in the catholic and orthodox traditions, the communion and life of the church is primarily expressed in “sacramental and juridical structures.” Among those of the protestant and Free Church traditions it is expressed in the praise and worship of Christ, listening to God’s word and ordering one’s life according to the Bible (Volf op cit page 130).

The people of God in the Old Testament

The people of God in the Old Testament are identified by their call and by their covenant with God.

God’s call constituting a people to him begins with his call to Abraham (Genesis 12). In Abraham and his descendants God promises to bless all nations. That promise is the basis of his unique covenant with Abraham and his descendants who become the People of Israel. The people of God in the Old Testament are a called and covenanted people. This is clearly laid out in Deuteronomy 4 & 7 where the people of God are reminded that freely and in love God called and chose Israel as his people. The distinction between Israel and other peoples is expressed in the use of “laos” for Israel and “ethnos” for others in the Greek translation. God also institutes the covenant at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4: 7) that constitutes Israel as his people.

Embedded in the idea of peoplehood are the concepts of a parental relationship between God and his people, the eternal future

² Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 2002), 9.

of this people in relation to the Day of the Lord and their particularity as the objects of God's election and choice.

In the Major Prophets the covenant with Israel becomes a key theme. The Psalms affirm that God remembers and guarantees the Covenant (Psalm 105: 8; Deuteronomy 26: 17-18). The prophets stress the promise of the everlasting covenant God enters with his people. Recognizing the dismal failure of Israel to keep the covenant they look forward to a new and everlasting covenant (Jeremiah 3: 3; Isaiah 61:8). Embedded in the idea of covenant are the themes of shalom – peace and wholeness (Ezekiel. 37:26) and the theme of God's order – law and obedience to it. Covenants are to be kept not just enjoyed (Hosea 6:7; Malachi 1-3).

The New Testament view of the church

At the end of the New Testament we find this affirmation “The Saints will dwell in God and the Lamb as God and the Lamb will dwell in them.” (Revelation 21: 22). We have a very high view of the church in Revelation 21: 1 to Rev. 2: 5.

In the Gospels, the church is the community that gathers in Christ's name. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in their midst” Matthew 18:20. It is a gathered community, an assembly gathered for a specific purpose in a specific place. This is also seen in Paul's usage in 1 Corinthians. 16: 1, 2 Corinthians 8:1, Galatians 1: 2.

It's a called and gathered community in the Gospels. The Gospels also see the church as a confessing community. It confesses the messiah ship and lordship of Christ. It is *communio fidelium* – a community of faith gathered by Christ, called by him, chosen by him and confessing him. These marks describe the church in the Gospels.

In the teaching of Paul, the key metaphor is the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). This identifies the relation between Christ, the Spirit of Christ and Christians (1 Corinthians 12: 12-30). It is a non-organic understanding of the body of Christ. This relationship is further stressed in the metaphor of the Church as the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5: 22-33).

In the Body of Christ, men and women relate in a covenant relationship that stresses the spiritual communion of Christians with Christ but also with one another. This communion reflects the communion in the Godhead and is a foretaste of the communion in heaven. While it is a communion through the Spirit of Christ it is also a communion in common submission to Christ. Law and love are integrally connected in the covenant relationship of the Body of Christ.

Paul also describes the church as a structure, a building built on a foundation of normative truth witnessed to by the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2: 22-23) and built by the Holy Spirit into a holy temple, the dwelling place of God the Spirit. The presence of God in Christ through His spirit in the church lifts the church from a mere historical institution to one formed in history but existing eternally.

In 1 Corinthians 10: 1-11, Paul describes the judgments that befell of the Old Testament people of God. He concludes in verse 11 by saying on the present church the fulfillment has come. The church is the new people of God. While Paul continues to affirm in Romans 9: 11 that God has not rejected the Jews, he is clear that there is now a new people of God, a new Israel (Romans 9:25 and Galatians 6: 16). The church as the people of God is the description in 1 Peter 1: 1, 2: 9, 10). 1 Peter 2:5 also describes the church as a spiritual household, the household of God. In 1 Peter, the use of the church as the people of God is the recognition that the church is the promised eschatological people of God of the Old Testament prophets.

The description of the people of God focuses on the unique calling of the church to come out of darkness into light and declare the praise of God, to live distinctly as a holy people, as a spiritual household and be a community of priests to the world.

Paul's teaching on the Charismata of the Spirit and the Church identifies the church as a polycentric community. Miroslav Volf writes "It's a model of life with a polycentric participative structure (1 Corinthians 14:33). All in the church are called and all are endowed with gifts by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7, Romans 13:3, Ephesians 4:7, 1 Peter 4:10)." There is no mention of children endowed with gifts but gifts are not limited to adults. The interdependence of the

charismata in the church goes with the mutual subordination of its members (Ephesians 5:21). The work of the Spirit in the church ensures a distribution of power. The church's unity is maintained not by coercion but by freedom in the Spirit.

In summary the New Testament describes the church as a community of God's people, a family of God. It is a love shaped community, a faith confessing community, a rule based community and a mission driven community.

What is the Relation between the Church and the Kingdom of God?

The Kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future hope in the teaching of Jesus. The recovery of Jesus' teaching of Kingdom of God in the church and particularly in the evangelical movement in the past 50 years has in some instances saw the church as provisional in contrast to the eternal nature of the Kingdom, Karl Rahner wrote "the church is living always on the proclamation of our own provisional status and her historically advancing elimination in the coming Kingdom of God towards which she is expectantly traveling as a pilgrim."³ Hans Kung sees the church as finite and of the present and the Kingdom as of the future and end time. For him and those who see the church as existing for the Kingdom and till the Kingdom's consummation Ecclesia is the work of man and Basileia is the work of God.

It is my contention that much of contemporary evangelicalism has this Kingdom understanding and so suffers from an ecclesial deficit. As mission shaped communities evangelicals understandably draw on the Kingdom framework and see the church essentially as the agency that witnesses to the Kingdom. In his excellent paper "The Kingdom Master Plan: The Ecclesia" Bambang Budijanto appears to recover the significance of the church but so defines it by Kingdom

³ Quoted in Dulles, op cit.: 95

language and terms that suggest the church's provisional and temporary status till its dissolution in the Kingdom.

I wish to contend that the New Testament teaching on the church, while showing an integral relationship between the Kingdom and the church, views the church as not only existing in history but beyond history is heaven.

Avery Dulles quotes the Swedish biblical scholar Harold Reisenfeld to affirm that the term *Ecclesia* is an eschatological term. The idea of "the People of the Saints of the most high God, upon whom, according to Daniel 7: 27, power and glory are to be restored, lies at root of the thinking of Paul, the Synoptics and presumably even Jesus concerning the church."⁴

In 1 Corinthians 6: 1-3, Christian's share in God's judgment, even over the angels. Jesus taught that the little flock of his disciples, the proto ecclesia would share in the messianic supper in heaven and sit on thrones. Jesus prepares a place for his disciples in his Father's house in heaven. In Paul the church is the temple completed and consecrated at the end of history (2 Corinthians 6: 16, Ephesians 2: 22) the church is the bride perfected and presented in heaven (2 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 5: 22, Revelation 19: 7, 21: 2, 22:17).

While the Kingdoms of the world will become the Kingdom of our Lord and King at Christ's return, the Church that is the bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem, the holy temple, will also reign with him.

So we cannot collapse the church into the Kingdom. She has an eternal existence. And it is this church we are part of on earth and in history.

What then is the relationship between the church and the Kingdom?

The church reflects the reality of the Kingdom in history, in the lives of its members, as a community in the world and through the way it orders its life in the world. The Kingdom is beyond the church. Its boundaries are not coterminous with the church. Yet, the church

⁴ Dulles op. cit 96

has a distinct existence within the reality of the Kingdom and has a particular place and life in history and an eschatological future.

The Holy Spirit, as the eschatological gift is particularly poured on the church and the spirit's gifts for the church are unique and not available beyond the church.

The church orders its life as a divine institution in human society. It is the body of Christ in institutional form. Its members have certain callings and gifts that go with them. Its relationships reflect equality, mutual submission and support. It has defined functions and orders and codes of behavior and discipline. All these are part of its faith, life and order and distinct to its life. In the biblical teaching on the Kingdom of God, there is very little of such order laid out and authorized. The talk of Kingdom ethics and values tends to displace the distinct calling of the church to follow the pattern given to it as the Body of Christ and as the People of God.

The above and below nature of the Kingdom is evident in the Lord's Prayer. "Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." The Kingdom is not a future reality for heaven. It operates in its fullness in heaven now. Its operation in history is to draw history to its fulfillment. It is real and not an imperfect Kingdom. On earth it is anticipatory and not complete. On earth it is provisional as to our understanding of it and even our expression of it, for we see in a mirror shadowed by history. But even its provisional expression strives and strains for its perfect fulfillment. The church meanwhile, is endowed with the Holy Spirit and the deposit of the faith given to the Apostles and the Holy Scriptures as the norm by which it lives as a source of the truth that leads to salvation and transformation.

The church recognizes its incompleteness and sin and groans for heaven. Yet it is called to witness to truth that is not provisional, live by the confidence of the truth if not complete is certainly adequate and bear witness to it boldly in the world. While conscious of its frailty and sinfulness, the church is still called in history to live by the confidence of the truth given to it.

The pre-eschatological life of the church makes it a sign of the Kingdom of God and the New Creation. It lives out its life as the sign

empowered by the love that the Holy Spirit pours into its life. This love will enable it to develop a mode of conduct and character that conforms to God's moral law. God's moral law must shape the church's life as much as God's love.

The pre-eschatological life of the church makes it a space for the expression of the life of the new creation deeply conscious that it is far from its full realization. The space shaped by the love poured into the church by the spirit is the space for the spiritual formation of its members.

What is the Place of the Child in the Church?

Child well-being is at the centre of child policies of governments today. The discourse in child well-being shapes education, social care, family life, and the work of development agencies in developing countries.

We will first examine the different conceptions of well-being that shape public life today and secondly present biblical perspectives on child well-being.

Conceptions of well being

Professor Nicholas Wolterstorf in his recent book *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*⁵ – suggests that there are three different ways of conceptualizing well-being.

- a) One conception focuses on an “experientially satisfying life.” Its home is in the modern utilitarian tradition. Most economists, social scientists and social planners employ it. James Griffin presents this position in his work on well-being. Well-being is good for a particular person, is seen as valuable by the person who lives it. Another influential scholar, Robert Adams describes human well being as that which is good for a person. What that good is not explained except to say that it is good as long as one enjoys the

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorf, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: University Press, 2007).

excellent. Enjoyment is the key aspect of well-being, the central good.

- b) The Aristotelian “Eudaimonist” tradition has shaped contemporary conceptions of well-being particularly through the work of secular philosophers like Martha Nussbaum. It sees well being as the good life that is well lived. Happiness characterizes the good life and it consists mainly of activities that together make a well lived life. Not wealth but what do you do with wealth. So it is not about the greatest desire satisfaction. It is agent oriented, I must choose from an array of options.
- c) Wolterstorff himself suggests a third approach to understanding well-being and calls it the life that goes well. It includes living well and flourishing. He draws it from the biblical teaching of shalom – wholeness.

In applying the concept of well-being to children the models of well-being focus on the physical, psychological, cognitive, social and economic dimensions, the moral and spiritual dimensions are pushed to the margins. Character development, where it is brought in, focuses on child deficits rather than child strengths. It focuses on emotional and choice deprivations with the resulting depressions and anxiety.

This is changing slowly with the development of child strength based models that identify the strengths the child needs to thrive.

The heart of any ethical life that is commended to the child is about rights and choices. It is an orientation to Nature, rather than Natural Law. From a Christian point of view, the natural has the capacity for the supernatural. In excluding the supernatural in relation to the natural, the unnatural is created which is actively against the supernatural.

Child well-being policies and programmes tend to exclude the supernatural with the assumption they are actually privileging the natural.

Again child well-being is embedded in the world of rights. This is considered as the world of justice. The world of moral norms is also

excluded as oppressive and a world of permissiveness masquerading as love is set up. Moral order and institutions that promote such an order are suspects.

Biblical perspectives on well-being

It is against such views of child well-being we must explore the biblical teaching of the child.

At the heart of Jesus teaching on children is the affirmation that a child is a fully representative symbol of Jesus and God. The child represents the love that flows and unites the three persons of Trinity. The child also represents the grace that is at the centre of the Kingdom of God Mark 9: 36, “and he took a child and put him in the midst of them and said whoever receives me such child in my name, receives me and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” The child is an envoy of Jesus and his Kingdom.

Mark 10:15 “Anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it” Jesus teaches that God’s designed way of recognizing and receiving his Kingdom is that of the child. The child opens up to gratuitous gifts, is turned naturally to the Kingdom. The adult has to turn, repent, change and turn around, so Jesus’ anger is particularly directed at those who take a child turned to God and turn her away from God; an evil act.

Jesus is not only describing the place of the child in the Kingdom of God but also the child’s role as a metaphor/parable. A metaphor opens up new visions of reality by making ordinary things and events in nature and everyday life reflect the ultimate reality of God’s Kingdom. What is real in God’s creation can best be recognized and identified through the reality of the Kingdom. In a world where all reality is constructed a Kingdom sight is essential to view God’s reality. The child according to the teaching of Jesus is endowed with such sight.

This significance of the child as a sign, metaphor and envoy of the Kingdom of God in Jesus’ teaching does not appear to have entered the teaching on the child’s place in church in the rest of the New Testament.

In Pauline teaching the stress is on the relationship between the children and parents. Children are asked to obey and honour their parents. And parents are to relate reasonably with children while providing instruction to them and bringing them up in the way of the Lord (Ephesians 6: 1-3, Colossians 3: 20)

There's evidence to affirm that early church Christians differed in relationship to their children from the prevailing attitude of the cultures in which they lived. They valued all children not just their own.

The dominant view of the family in New Testament times considered children as owned by the parents or at best their wards. The relationship between parents and children was asymmetrical; the children obeyed and honored parents. The child did not occupy a central place in the family though she was the object of love. The child was an extension of the parent and not a personal centre of being and communication. The special place of the child in the Kingdom did not translate to a special place in the Christian family and the larger family of the Christian church. It appears that the understanding of the church as the household of God, as God's family enabled the traditional view of the child's place in the family to continue in the church. Children were objects of care and discipline. There is no evidence of an understanding that sees them as spiritual signs or resources in the church.

Jesus takes a child and places him in the middle of adults and so highlights the child as a person. Personhood is to have a personal centre for being and communication that makes self-direction and agency possible. A person takes responsibility for oneself, one's actions, interventions and interactions. The person begins to develop as a subject in God's creation. Jesus' act is placing the child in the midst recognizes him as a subject and not just a sign.

The sense of subject-hood of a person is socially shaped and acquired. That is why it is essential that the larger family contexts in which the child's subject-hood is shaped be the church as the community that lives out the life and order of the Kingdom.

It's in the church with its Kingdom life the child's identity, security and selfhood are best shaped and nurtured. It is a larger family where the child sees how God is central to all of life. If divine hospitality is at the heart of the Triune God, the child must experience that in the life of the family of God.

The church is a community in which one's love of God is best expressed and through which love of neighbor is best carried out. It's the community where love and law reinforce and strengthen each other. The church witnesses to and lives out God's moral order and that are the best space for the child's moral nurture and development.

The church is the bulwark against evil in the world. The child learns to identify and resist evil through the church.

I am intrigued not to see gifts of the spirit in the church described as if they are for adults only. While the Bible does not indicate clearly that spiritual gifts are also for children, it does not limit them to adults. Can churches provide space and encouragement for children to explore the gifts of the Spirit?

It is in the church both the creation order and the Kingdom order relate to one another prior to the parousia. The creation order is the human society as God designed it in creation. The Kingdom order reflects the Lordship of the Risen Lord Jesus and the presence of His Holy Spirit. The child needs to recover his rightful place in the church.

Does the above suggest that the child outside the church is excluded from the energy and order of the Kingdom that should shape every child? It is obvious that the community of faith, the body of Christ will offer the best environment for a child's growth as God intends. It is the calling of the church to make possible through its mission engagement that children outside the church experience as much as possible the nurture of the Kingdom order. Inviting children to recognize the reality of the love of Christ for them is a good start.

Conclusion

Children's ministry organizations increasingly hold a high view of the Child particularly in relation to God's purposes for the human community. Churches have ministries to children and invest much in plans, strategies, training and resources. But the view of the child and her place in the church still sees her as the object of nurture and not a subject whose spiritual subject hood is a gift that God has endowed her with and which is also an asset to the community of faith.

Church ministries must continue to nurture children in a space where they are built up in the truth of God, recognize their calling as envoys of God's Kingdom and submit to the moral order that God has ordained for his people and all humanity. The child understands the covenant nature of relationships in the context of the church and also the relationship with human communities that are outside the church. It is in the Church the child learns to recognize not just sin but evil and learns how to respond.

I do not think the image of Jesus placing the child in the midst translates into the child having a central place in the Church. The Bible does not view the child that way. In the New Testament the child's parents have the key responsibility for his development, but it is Church that is his eternal family.

RESPONSE 1

BY DAVID E. RAMÍREZ

Church of God Latin America

Dr. Vinay Samuel offers an excellent panorama, both biblically and theologically, of what the church, as we understand it, should be, and what its relationship to the Kingdom of God should be, as well as what the place of the child in the church should be.

I appreciate the initiative of the author in high lighting the “ecclesial deficit” among evangelicals today and for pointing out that we fail to understand the fullness of what the *ecclesia* should be in relationship to its primary task on earth. He also pointed out that our efforts to plant churches too often represents our need to reproduce what we are for the purpose of assuring denomination permanence or ecclesiastical structure rather than seeing the planting of churches as a renewal of hope for people who have no hope and are unable to see their evil deeds and their need for reconciliation with God and with other human beings, especially, the children. At the same time one observes the sad reality in the western countries that the protestant/evangelical churches have been losing members and closing church buildings at an extremely alarming rate. The phenomenon of the so-called mega-churches and the desire to become one have also affected the historical practice of mother churches, which in time past established new congregations in other parts of the city and the surrounding areas. And all of this is because of the fact that the original congregation hopes, one day, to become a “big” church.

The fundamental thesis of the author is that evangelicalism has developed an “instrumental view of the church,” due to its focus on the Kingdom of God. Then one sees the church only with a secondary, supporting role and not as the center of our missional obligation.

The missional aspect of the People of God in the OT is presented, even though the author does not go into detail about their social ethic and mission, and it is clear that God desires to bless all the peoples of

earth, but there are special provisions for three classes of subjects: orphans, widows and foreigners---the poor of the earth. This “preferential option for the poor”¹ is made palpable and visible in the legal and historical framework of the on-going life of the people of God in relationship to their neighbors.

Then, with vicissitudes of ethical behavior and the moral and spiritual decadence of the people, which resulted in the indifference of Israel toward the purposes of God, the prophetic movement is raised up to proclaim judgment on the people, to denounce their rebellion, and to call them again to the renewal of the covenant.² For example, on repeated occasions the prophet Isaiah³ reminded Israel of God’s missionary purpose that she was to be a “light to the nations.” The prophetic calling always came accompanied with a component of social justice that is expected from the people of God in their behavior towards the poor and the oppressed (Amos), the hungry and the naked (Isaiah 58), and the brokenhearted and the captives (Isaiah 61), making this, over and over again, the ideal posed by God for “the acceptable year of the Lord’s favor” (Levíticas 25; Isaías 61:2; Lucas 4:19).

It is clear that, for Vinay Samuel, the New Testament understanding of the church is captured in Rev. 21:22, because he summarizes the meaning of that verse as: “The saints will dwell in God and the Lamb, just as God and the Lamb dwell in them.” It is a community that meets together in the name of Christ with a specific purpose in a specific place. This local emphasis, which is also the communitarian, contextual and missional emphasis of the church of the Gospels is, today, challenged by a cybernetic/ electronic church that eludes intimate encounter, transcends space and reveals itself as irrelevant to the context. Often the church is reduced to its instrumental, operative, functional and temporal aspect, thus diminishing its cosmic and eternal aspect.

¹ G. Gutiérrez, *Teología de la liberación: Perspectivas*, (Salamanca, 1980), 363-386.

² W. Bruggemann, *La imaginación profética*, (Salamanca, 1982).

³ Isaías 42:6; 49:6; 60:2-3

According to Samuel's exposition, the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the church is weak, especially in its role of transforming human life and of projecting the life and ministry of the church history according to the divine will. But the Holy Spirit is given to the church for the equipping/enabling the believers for mission, so that, through holistic witnessing, it may experience the power of suffering. This is a paradox that is actualized in the ability to suffer and to subjugate the will, which desires power and personal fulfillment. This is the power of self-denial that has power to transform society. This apostolic calling is also clearly seen from the beginning of the New Testament to the end. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the church is sent to search out the other sheep and to bring them into the fold. The church is made to be the salt of the earth and, therefore, is meant to give it flavor and to preserve it. The church is an agent of reconciliation; it is a priestly and prophetic community, called to be a living testimony of the power of God and to commit itself to those who suffer, especially the most vulnerable, the children, the widows and the poor.

I am happy for the emphasis of Vinay Samuel in mentioning the Pauline perspective in relation to the church as a polycentric community (1 Cor. 14:33), where everyone in the church is called and invested with gifts by the Spirit. This includes, of course, all of God's people on earth, men and women, boys and girls. It would also be helpful to point out that, although the Lucan pneumatology is different from that of Paul, it is not opposed to it. It would appear that the traditional reading that we have presented of the Holy Spirit has been more through the eyes of Paul, who understands the Spirit basically from the viewpoint of soteriology and that we have not considered seriously the clear intention of Luke to describe for us the Spirit with a missional mandate; to inspire and to equip for testimony. It seems that Luke's objective is not salvation; but the power or the spiritual resources that the Spirit gives us to fulfill the mission.

It is an interesting process to trace the historic route of the People of God that has brought us to where we are today. But I would prefer that we look forward, towards the future, that we try to imagine again the church of the future, and that we explore the nature of Christian

presence in our societies of today. We must generate a new hope for the church that must, of necessity, exist in this New Century,---a church with a hope that is more modest but also more robust than what we have seen in the western churches in recent history, or to say it in the very words of Miroslav Volf himself, a church that feels more comfortable with its marginality, so that from there, we may be able to influence and to make a difference in the many centers of our societies, and a church that is more comfortable with our irrelevance, so that from there, we may be able to gain more assurance of our relevance.⁴

Something has to happen to us as a Christian community if we are going to be seen by the societies of this world as an alternative type of community. At present, as far as I can observe, we are not seen as a model to be duplicated by the societies of our world. Look at our fragmentation, our animosities, our jealousy, our lack of love, our theological authoritarianism, our ecclesiastical parochialism, our intolerance, our capricious absolutisms, our ecclesiastical pornography (religious pleasure without responsibility or commitment), our sick clericalisms, our lack of communitarian solidarity (within our Christian ranks), our neglect of our widows, children, youth and elders around us and in our own community; our indifference to our brothers and sisters, and to the pastor of the other church in the next block, to mention but a few. This does not represent an ideal model that would create a desire in other people and societies to question us about possible solutions to their problems. It is utopian to think that we have the power to change large, socio-economic and political structures if we do not have the power to be the micro-model of the community that functions according to the principles of the Kingdom of God.⁵

We need to become a community of worship, of truth, of love, of service, and above all, we must become a community of hope for an

⁴ Wonsuk Ma and Robert P. Menzies, *Pentecostalism in Context*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1997), 224-225.

⁵ CLADE IV., David E. Ramírez, *Palabra, Espíritu y Misión* (Quito, Ecuador: 2000).

emerging generation. If our intention is to preach and to achieve a new social order in our societies, it is imperative that we develop, by the power of the Word and of the Spirit, a new social order inside of our community of faith that will be, in the end, according to the principles of the Kingdom of God.

Samuel shows us that we cannot collapse the church into the Kingdom, since the church has an eternal existence. But on the other hand, we must insist that if the church does not live, nurturing itself by the values of the Kingdom and living out those values both in life and in testimony, it is not eternal and is not, at all, what the church was meant to be. Part of the DNA of the Church as the Body of Christ is its responsibility to give testimony to the weakest among us. Today there are communities called “Christian” that do not represent the values of the Kingdom of God and no longer have the ability to maintain, communicate and share the dynamic of the Gospel.

I am in complete agreement with Samuel, in that the significance of children as a sign, or a metaphor or an instrument of the mission of the Kingdom of God in Jesus does not appear in the later teaching of the New Testament, as it relates to the place that the child occupies in the church. But there are evidences that the church places a value on the children in general, something that in our day does not appear in a large majority of our churches in Latin America and even less so in the general population. In the consumer cultures no value is placed on the person who does not contribute to the society, the state, or the church. The children and the older retired people do not add value because they “produce” and “contribute” nothing to the society. We should not be surprised at the high rate of suicides, of drug addiction and of alcoholism that is to be found in those age groups, to which society assigns no value and no significance.

The church should model before the society in general the good treatment, the significance and the value that the church gives to children. The church is responsible to the children, not only to exercise care and discipline, but also it is responsible to assign value to them.

If Jesus placed a child in the midst of adults (Matt. 18) and drew attention to the child as a person, and as a subject, he also placed him

as an instrument of mission, as a bearer of the truth, as a witness and a hope of the Kingdom. The church of today should fix its eyes on the children if it desires to participate in the work of God in the world, for they are not only persons that need to relate themselves to God, but are the true stockholders of the mission.

I am ending by recalling a defining moment in my own life in Ecuador. I was in the car with my ten-year-old son, Fernando, while we were going home from church. When we stopped at a traffic light, several children came up on my left side to wash the windshield and to sell me candy. So I looked away in the opposite direction to indicate that I was not interested and thus to discourage them. My son Fernando looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Papa, the children are on the other side.”

“Let the children come to me and do not hinder them: for to such belongs the Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:4).

RESPONSE 2

THE CHURCH AND THE CHILD – ECUMENICAL HERITAGE AND PERSPECTIVES FOR A JOINT COMMITMENT FOR THE FUTURE

BY DIETRICH WERNER¹

World Council of Churches, Geneva

Evangelicals and Ecumenicals United in a Common Theological Endeavor

On behalf of WCC we would congratulate this theological conference on new perspectives of the missiological and ecclesiological significance of children for taking up an extremely relevant and important theme which belongs to the heart of the task of churches in the beginning 21st century. Children should be at the center of the churches concern for evangelism. Our attitude towards children is a test-case and indicator for our understanding of the Gospel and for authentic discipleship and integral Christian mission – these convictions are shared in WCC. Therefore it is good that this conference brings together Christian representatives from a broad spectrum of churches, contexts and different organizations.

We should move beyond traditional stereotypes in depicting ‘ecumenicals’ and ‘evangelicals’ as mutually exclusive. There are so many stereotypes which are outmoded in content and outdated in their function today. For instance it would be far from reality still to depict ‘ecumenicals’ as being more Kingdom-oriented and ‘evangelicals’ as more church-oriented in their theological approach. There is a long history of dialogue on the relationship between the

¹ The author is International Programme Coordinator of the Programme on Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) of WCC Geneva, a Missiologist and Ordained Pastor of the Lutheran Churches in the North of Germany, living in Switzerland.

Kingdom of God and the church in both traditions and many have learned that a Kingdom approach is necessary and helpful in order to protect any ecclesiology from becoming too self-centered or self-preoccupied, while at the same time a church-centered theological perspective is also very important and helpful in order to avoid a one-sided activist utopianism and loss of ecclesial identity. Thus to keep both in critical and complementary tension is the key task today.

Vinay Samuel has reflected substantially on this understanding of the relation between the church and the Kingdom of God in the perspective of a missionary understanding of the church as he fears that in some circles of the evangelical movement there is as deficit of a proper and broad understanding of the church. While we affirm this basic intention and feel tempted to deepen this fundamental reflection on the relation between the church and the Kingdom of God which for decades has been one of the focal points of the work of the WCC related Faith and Order Commission (for instance in the important Faith and Order Study on “The Nature and Mission of the Church”²) in the context of this paper we want to refrain from a continuation of this debate in order not to get lost in very fundamental ecclesiological reflections. Instead we intend to provide a much more humble service by providing some short complementary reflections on the relevance of the debate on church, mission and children as a whole – as it unfolds itself from ecumenical³

² See Faith and Order Paper No. 198, (www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO2005_198_en.pdf)

³ Knowing that the term “ecumenical” is not always positively connotated or easily understood in some evangelical circles it should be clarified that by the reference to “ecumenical” we refer to the organized ecumenical movement which grew out of the 1910 World Mission Conference in Edinburgh 1910 and has led to the formation of the WCC in 1948 which with its 348 member churches from all parts of the world aims at strengthening Christian unity, common mission and evangelism and common witness for justice and peace between and in all Christian churches. The term “ecumenical” does not connote any attempt to create one monolithic super-church and also by no means connotes the attempt to create a syncretism of all world-religions. For more information see: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we.html>

perspectives: The Church and the Child – Ecumenical Heritage and Perspectives for a Joint Commitment for the Future. That is the subject in this context and it is encouraging that this reflection is extremely relevant and happens both within Evangelical and Ecumenical circles.

Placing Children in the Midst – a constant transformation of values and hermeneutical perspectives

Churches from the very beginning of Christianity have understood themselves as agents and advocates of children reflecting their crucial role in the processes of transformation which belong to the essence of becoming disciples of Jesus Christ and witnessing for the Kingdom of God. Including children as a primary partners and target group in church ministries from ancient times in church history is a reflection of the reorientation on children which can be seen as a fundamental missiological priority principle as laid out in the famous statement of Jesus.

Children are a fundamental missiological priority principle. This for centuries is affirmed in the famous story of Mark 9: 36 which narrates the encounter of Jesus and the children and affirmed his drawing of the children into the center of the church in his ministry as an indispensable mark of his own ministry: “and he took a child and put him in the midst of them and said whoever receives such child in my name, receives me and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” A constant reversal of values is indicated here.

Vinay Samuel has rightly indicated that early church Christians differed in relationship to their children from the prevailing attitude of the cultures in which they lived. Jesus does not speak of the child’s transformation to adulthood and all the values and rule children have to adapt to in order to mature, on the contrary he speaks of the transformation of adults to the perspectives and values of childhood. This is a constant reminder to be transformed to the perspectives of the vulnerable, the weak, the gifts of spontaneity and sense of presence and unprotectedness which are lived out by children and

point to attitudes relevant for the Kingdom of God. “The child, weak and helpless and the most insignificant member of the community, is brought to the center, so that adults can recognize the new order...To receive the Kingdom of God as a child,...or to become as a child in order to enter into the Kingdom of heaven (Mt. 18,1-5) does not mean that the child possesses certain subjective qualities, such as particular feelings or childlike experiences of a pure conscience, and that an adult should take on these qualities. The child is used as an example for a believing existence, because it is objectively weak and helpless and yet at the same time full of hope and trust. The child takes the present time very seriously and yet at the same time awaits the future and is prepared to accept that the improbable can become reality. Not the child’s transformation to adulthood, but the adults’ transformation to childhood determines Jesus’ words about the child.”⁴ Placing the children in the midst, thus can be seen as an essential working dynamic within the churches’ mission.

Remember that two aspects are involved in this process of transformation: Jesus did not take just a picture of an idea of a child into the midst, but a concrete, physically present child. Thus the physical process of placing children in the midst and the mental process of getting converted to the perspectives of children are two aspects related to each other in the same process, the one not without the other. No mental transformation in the church is possible without a physical process of transformation which is connected to actually placing children into the center. Both processes are interrelated within the life of Christian churches. This process demands a continued reordering of our priorities in Christian mission, in church budgets, in the styles of worship and in the forms of ecumenism. Probably it is also a new kind of grassroots’ ecumenism, of an ecumenism which is communicable with children which is implied here.

⁴ Ulrich Becker, “The Child in Theology and Church,” in *Ecumenical Review* Vol. 31, July 1979, 239.

Historical Reminder – Christian churches as pioneers of children’s ministries

The very fact that Christian churches from earliest beginnings have put children into the center through such activities like infant baptism, children’s catechism, children’s communion, confirmation classes and institutions taking care for the nurture, guidance and welfare of children, can be seen as a contrast towards the predominant trends in both antique societies as well as many societies today. These latter have tend(ed) to view children only as property of parents or their wards, as cheap work labor force or even as slaves for adult’s pleasures, with children themselves having no rights on their own. Historically it should be remembered that churches and Christian mission organizations were often the first to take care of orphans, of destitute children, of poor and uneducated children and became pioneers in setting up institutions designed to answer to the special needs of children in contexts of widespread poverty, malnutrition and diseases.⁵ It was the transformation of churches in their attitude towards children which paved the way to a gradual transformation of attitudes towards children in society.

The concern for children in mission history – examples are there also from recent Christian mission history in Asia and Africa – was a key to missionary advance and outreach. Others were impressed by Christian attitudes to children – the Christian attitude and concern for children served as incentive for getting to know what is behind the Christian faith. Therefore Christian churches also today should belong to the first institutions to stand up for the rights of children, to be in solidarity with children and to articulate critical perspectives on the plight and future of children in this world.

At the same time we also need to acknowledge that even within the church and its history two trends and streams of thought for long have been struggling and were in tension with each other (reflecting that in the church also current values and ideologies of societies left

⁵ Ulrich Becker, “The Child in Theology and Church,” in *Ecumenical Review* Vol. 31, July 1979, 234ff.

their mark): “For some people childhood is a state of imperfection which education must transform as quickly as possible into the state of adulthood, for others childhood has a value and dignity of its own which an educator is obliged to take into consideration if he is to succeed in producing mature human beings.”⁶ The explicit acknowledgement and recognition of the child as a full human being and the emergence of a reflected form of Christian pedagogy and educational reform is a comparatively late stage in the history of Protestant Christianity.

It would deserve a an interesting research chapter of its own to review why names like Comenius, Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Froebel and Montessori, which are landmarks in the history of reform pedagogy, come comparatively late in the history of the Protestant churches in Europe. There were also trends before, which were summarized by historical experts as the “denial of the child” in protestant church tradition, before reform pedagogy was emerging.

Sunday School Movements as One of the Earliest Sources and Energies of the Ecumenical Movement

A second key historical insight which should not be forgotten in an international and multid denominational dialogue context is the fact that children’s ministries and the churches’ commitment to children was one of the first fields for pioneering attempts of Christians from different denominations to work together across denominational boundaries. Commitment to children’s ministries was the most important energy forming and leading the spirit of Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation in the 18th and 19th century in Britain and America. This becomes clear by studying the history of the so-called World Sunday School Movement.

The Sunday School Movement began around 1780 in Britain and soon led to the formation of independent and interdenominational

⁶ Werner Loch, *Die Verleugnung des Kindes in der evangelischen (Paedagogik, Essen 1964)*, cited in *Ulrich Becker, The Child in Theology and Church*, 235.

Societies for the Promotion of Christian Children's Education and Sunday School Programmes all around the world (London Sunday School Union 1803, Anglican Sunday School Institute 1843, American Sunday School Union 1843, Erster Hamburger Sonntagsschulverein 1821 etc.).⁷ Robert Raikes was the founder of the first Sunday school in England which was established in 1780 for factory children in Gloucester. Raikes was passionately concerned with the need for prison reform and believed that prisons were full of people who had endured deprived childhoods. He believed that education, especially religious instruction, would enable children to avoid the pitfalls of poverty and crime in adult life. Children between the ages of five and fourteen were encouraged to attend, no matter what the state of their clothes. The Sunday school curriculum largely consisted of simple lessons in reading and spelling in preparation for reading the Bible, memorizing Scripture passages and hymns.⁸

Being motivated in the first phase to create better school conditions for destitute and illiterate children who were victims of the industrial revolution in Western Europe the Sunday School movement later stimulated both day school education for children as well as a more comprehensive Christian education in Sunday School classes. Realizing that what children need for their lives and souls is not sophisticated distinctions between the complex dogmatic traditions of Christian denominational families, but essential spiritual food, real Christian fellowship, participatory worship and basic Christian education on Biblical principles and traditions, it was already in the early 19th century that the Sunday School Movement had become a worldwide movement. In 1907 the World Sunday

⁷ Erwin Fahlbusch, *Encyclopedia of Christianity, Vol. V*, Art. Sunday School, 229ff, accessed in internet:
http://books.google.ch/books?id=lZUBZlth2qgC&pg=PA230&lpg=PA230&dq=world+Sunday+School+Movement&source=bl&ots=RcFjK0XiHM&sig=ie db04sw9h2TkQrxMQ8bqitSWU&hl=de&ei=Eh1uTYDxKY3Iswa2xrHqDg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CHAQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=world%20Sunday%20School%20Movement&f=false

⁸ http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/history_nation/religion/schools/index.html

School Association was formed which in 1947 changed its name into World Council of Christian Education (WCCE) which was integrated into WCC only in 1972.⁹

Interrelation between Sunday School Work, Lay Participation and Evangelism

Historical evidence shows that there is a strong interrelation and interconnectedness between Sunday School work, lay participation and holistic evangelism, and missionary commitment in Christian churches. Where there is a strong commitment to Children's ministries and Sunday School work there also is a strong support for mission and evangelism and often vice versa. Where commitment to Children's ministries and Sunday schools is dwindling, the support for mission and evangelism is also moving backwards. It might be pointed out as an example that in West European Churches there was a strong upswing in Sunday School Movements and Children's Ministries in the years following the Second World War, an historical period which was marked by the increase in birth rate, a strong commitment of lay people's participation in the church and the reconstruction and reinforcement of church work after the catastrophe of the Second World War.¹⁰

In the last decades, while interest and commitment for Sunday School Work is still strong in many Churches in the South, it has declined in many Western churches, due to declining birth rates, growing competition with media entertainment and processes of dechristianization of family lives within urbanized centers of this world. It might be an important task of this emerging network for children's evangelization to look into the root causes of the strength or weakness of church related children ministries today: Which factors can strengthen and which can hinder joint commitment of

⁹ See Ulrich Becker, "Art Children," in: *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, 2nd edition* (WCC Publications, 2002), 168ff.

¹⁰ Erwin Fahlbusch, a.a.O., 230.

Christian churches to Sunday School and Children's ministries in today's world?

Integration of the World's Sunday School Movement into the WCC in 1972

It is interesting to pose some critical questions about what happened to the common Christian concern for Children's ministries and Sunday School Movement in the past century. In the first World Sunday School Conference which took place in London in 1889, there were some 845 delegates and some 15 reports on children's ministries were read from different mission fields. Between 1889 and 1958 there were some 14 World Sunday School Convention Conferences, each bringing together a major group of worldwide representatives of Sunday School Movements.¹¹ In 1971 during its last meeting in Lima, Peru, the World Council for Christian Education voted to become a member of WCC and – after its formal integration into WCC in 1972 - had a major impact with its programmes on Education and Renewal in later years. But the only World Conference which took place since then, which included Sunday School or Christian Education was the 1980 World Conference of Sunday School in Evian, France, at the occasion of the 200 anniversary of the Sunday School. The financial crisis of WCC in the later 90's and in the first decade of the 21st century did not allow any department of Christian education., The only programme which is left is the programme on Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) which is rooted in the TEF history and the concern of the International Missionary Council for the Training of Missionaries and Ministerial Formation.

¹¹ See Ulrich Becker and Perti Luumi, "Sunday School – Ecumenical Engagement," in: *Fahlbusch*, 230f; see also Gerald E. Knoff, *The World Sunday School Movement – the story of a broadening mission* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 283; Johannes Thomas Hoerning, *Mission und Einheit: Geschichte und Theologie der amerikanischen Sonntagsschulbewegung im 19. Jahrhundert unter besonderer Beruecksichtigung ihrer oekumenischen Relevanz und ihres Verhaeltnisses zur Erweckungsbewegung*, Maulbronn, Verlag an der Klostertor, 1991.

It is therefore timely and more than appropriate that this conference reminds the ecumenical movement of this precious part of its own history and hopefully is envisaging promising new levels and forms of cooperation to nurture and enrich the churches' commitment to children's ministries and the Sunday School Movement which, historically as well as missiologically, cannot be dissociated from the very essence of the church being the sign of the Kingdom of God.

Initiatives for Children's Concerns Shifting to Political Institutions after the 80ies

More detailed study on the involvement of WCC member churches in the rediscovery of a theology of childhood and the missiological relevance of children would be required to develop a more comprehensive picture of what exactly happened to children's concerns in the churches in the last decades. It is not that nothing has happened, as many member churches have been deeply involved in children's ministries and also in children's evangelism. The WCC published an International Report on the International Year of the Child in 1979 which reflected on Biblical Principles for Churches Ministries with Children¹². The WCC also jointly organized an international consultation with LWF on "Children as active partners in the congregation" in 1980, and undertook a major ecumenical inquiry into the status, and reevaluated role of children with regard to the understanding of the Eucharist¹³. In 1983 it invited children from all over the world for Bible Studies in Vancouver Assembly, and established an international forum on the dignity of children during the Harare Assembly in 1998.

But the overall impression for the decades following the enormous processes of transformation in the 70's and 80's is that the major initiative for putting children's concerns and issues of

¹² Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children* (WCC, 1979).

¹³ G. Mueller-Fahrenheit (ed.), *...and Do Not hinder them: An Ecumenical Plea for the Admission of Children to the Eucharist* (WCC, 1982).

children's living condition on the public discourse agenda was to some extent "lost" to secular and political bodies. In 1999, after a long process, the United Nations member states signed and ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* which led to dramatic changes in global awareness of children's situations, particularly of children who were victims of war, physical or sexual abuse and any other form of violence. Since then annually a "Report on the State of the World's Children" has been published, which always contains a wealth of materials on economic, cultural and social plight and rights of children.¹⁴ Interestingly enough, there was the occasion to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 20 November 2009, -- the same occasion at which a Global World Day of Prayer and Action for Children was launched by UNICEF (in 2008) together with key representatives of faith based organizations.¹⁵ The World Day of Prayer and Action for Children brings together resources of faith-based organizations and focuses on basic rights of children in the area of education, health and social security.¹⁶ But for sure, the united voices of Christian churches on issues of children, children's mission, children's rights in this world has become less visible and less heard in the general public and in the socio-political discourse in the past decades.

The Unique Added Value of Christian Faith and the Need for a Prophetic Witness and Public Voice of Christian Churches on Concepts of Children's Development

If the church, as Vinay Samuel has rightly stated, is "a community in which one's love of God is best expressed and through which love of neighbor is best carried out...and is the best space for the child's moral nurture and development", then the common concern for children's ministries and a holistic concept for children's

¹⁴ <http://www.unicef.org/sowc/>

¹⁵ http://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/index_51802.html

¹⁶ <http://www.dayofprayerandaction.org/who-we-are/world-day-of-prayer>

development needs to find a more common and explicit voice by all Christian churches today. As much of the debate on the state of children in today's world seems to be dominated or initiated only by secular values and secular concepts of well-being, the key question is, "What is the unique added value which Christian faith can bring into the arena of the global discourse on the future and development of children?"

Vinay Samuel has pointed to an important dimension which we would call the predominant reductionism of modern concepts of children's well-being which tend to be influenced by economist's world views: He stated that, "In applying the concept of well-being to children the models of well-being focus on the physical, psychological, cognitive, social and economic dimensions, the moral and spiritual dimensions are pushed to the margins.." If we analyze the extent to which children are viewed and perceived as market customers from the earliest stage onwards, and are targeted by the most sophisticated technologies and psychologies of advertising, consumerist propaganda and sales promotion, accompanied by all the subtleties of transforming them into obedient consumers of the products of modern entertainment and seduction industries, there is reason enough to demand for the distinct voice of Christian churches to stand up for spiritual rights of the children. There is sufficient need to raise a common voice for the spiritual rights of children and children's development today.

These spiritual rights of children are not spelled out in detail in the UN Convention of Children's Rights from 1999, although they are also not explicitly denied there: It needs to be stated explicitly that children have the right *not* be defined only and simply as future market entities, as economic beings, as future subjects of purchasing power. Children have spiritual rights which are beyond the fundamental rights as codified in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

The UN Convention rightly spells out the children's right to life, for well-being and development (art. 6 CRC), for having its own name, nationality, family relations and personal identity (art. 7 and 8 CRC), the right to express its own views freely in issues affecting the

child (art 12 CRC) and the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art 14 CRC). The UN Convention of the Rights of Children is a remarkable and unique universal standard for making state governments accountable for all what is within their capacity to support and enhance a comprehensive well-being of children. While affirming all what is stated in this UN Convention and giving praise to all those leaders, including many religious leaders who worked for this Convention, it should be the distinct role and unique added value of Christian churches to go beyond the CRC current framework and to speak up for the spiritual dimensions of holistic child development. Without this, the widespread anthropological or economical reductionism in the understanding of children at work in many free market economies, can soon determine policies and guiding principles of children's educational and developmental programmes in schools and society.

Children have the right to learn about God! Children have the right to get to know Christ! Children need spiritual resources, symbols and narratives which provide some spiritual rooting and provide an inner space for fundamental human expressions of hope, of love and of trust which cannot grow just within a purely materialistic or economic conceptualization of life and child development!¹⁷

“Man does not live from bread alone.” This famous saying from Matt.4:4 should regain special significance for the understanding of children's development and children's ministries. It should equally be remembered that the original version of this Jewish saying continues in Dt. 8:3: “But on every word that comes out of the mouth of the Lord.” – emphasizing the relevance of a relational existence and the

¹⁷ In Art 30. The UNCRC touches on the right for a religious identity in the framework of minority rights without spelling out in content the basic rights of children for a spiritual dimension in their development: “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language.”

communicative element of listening to and hearing the word of God. Christian churches should not shy away, but should learn today to articulate a common and public voice on these rights of children for spiritual (and social and political) development, and bring them into the discourse of the future of education, media justice, steps towards achieving the MDGs, the role of the family and the social care systems for children.

Children, Church and Mission as Core Topic to be Developed on the Way Towards the Next WCC Assembly

It might be appropriate for someone speaking on behalf of the WCC Programme, which relates to some 3000 theological schools and some 30-40 regional; associations of theological schools in World Christianity, to close this short response with an urgent request, Even according to a superficial survey one cannot but state that in curriculum development for theological education and ministerial formation in many churches there is widespread neglect of children's concerns; sometimes deliberate omission or ignorance about this vital stream of discourse within World Christianity. On the whole, there is an urgent need to keep up and to increase efforts for a new curriculum on Children, Church and Mission.

A new curriculum on child theology, as it is called by some, would need to cover the whole range of issues like 'Children in Jesus ministry, concepts of childhood in Ancient Antiquity and Early Christianity, children in the mission history of the church, children's evangelism, children's rights, children's counseling, protection of children against abuse and drug trafficking, children's liturgies and children's spirituality.' The face of many churches and the shape of worship occasions would probably change as soon as children would play the primary role in perceiving and designing the church in its ministries to the marginalized and the role of families, both fathers and mothers, to be reemphasized over against current trends to diminish the fundamental value of family life. The theme children, church and mission has a profound significance, a potential for new coalitions and a promise for more interdenominational or ecumenical

cooperation and cross-fertilization which would be of benefit for all of us. If the newly formed coalition working on this theme would provide a foundational reference document on “Children, Church and Mission” to the forthcoming WCC Assembly in Busan, Korea in 2013, I am sure that this would be welcomed as well as a new resource book for institutions of theological education to teach courses interdenominationally on issues of Children, Church and Mission.

RESPONSE 3

BY C. ROSALEE VELLOSO EWELL

World Evangelical Alliance – Theological Commission

Introduction

Out of the many important themes that come up in Dr. Samuel’s paper “The Church and the Child”, there are three that will be highlighted in this response: first, Israel as the chosen child of God; second, the church as the family of God; and third, children and young people as a challenge to the churches. In particular, it is my hope that we can consider together how these themes might help us think about how we “do” church and especially what it means to live as witnesses of Christ in a broken and violent world, where children and young people often are at the receiving end of such violence and brokenness.

Israel as the Chosen Child of God

Dr. Samuel rightly notes the two primary categories for understanding peoplehood in the biblical narratives – there is the chosen nation and there are the *ethne* – Israel and the gentiles. Yet to understand the full weight of what it means to be the chosen people, the concept of childhood in all its multifaceted dimensions can be extremely helpful.

Israel, as the chosen child of God, is given a place of privilege among all the nations of the earth. But with this privilege there also comes great responsibility. Israel will inherit the blessings, but it must learn to share the blessings and to live in such a way that the nations will know that Israel’s God is the one true God. God gives much to this chosen child, but God also expects much of her. To be a child of God is a great honor, but also a great challenge. Israel is given a mission – it cannot live for itself, but must be light and hope for the world. Israel is to live as a missionary people, bearing witness to God, whether in captivity or in prosperity. The Bible tells us the stories of how this child grew – narratives of faithfulness and of disobedience;

narratives of God, the perfect parent, dispensing both mercy and judgment on his child.

In an excellent sermon that highlights what it means to be a child of God, the Revd. Dr. Sam Wells presents the text of the prophet Hosea 11:1-11 as “a letter from God saying to Israel, ‘This is what it’s been like over all these centuries to have a child like you.’”¹ The letter moves in four stages: first, it begins with God’s recollection of Israel’s childhood – the days when God spoon-fed his young child and taught her to walk. The second image is of Israel’s present state of disobedience and delinquency with their consequences of war and exile. The third picture is a “window into the heart of God” as Wells puts it. “How can I hand you over, o Israel... my heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger... for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath” (Hosea 11:8-9). Finally, Wells argues that the fourth image gives us a glimpse into the future: God will roar like a lion and Israel, the child, will tremble from all four corners to which they had been dispersed, and will be reunited with one another and with God.

Such reunion recalls the imagery of Revelation 21 that Dr. Samuel notes in his paper when talking about the church in the New Testament. As is the case in Hosea, the image of the people of God in Revelation 21 is again one of children: “I will be their God and they will be my children” (Rev. 21:8). Also parallel to Hosea’s text is the imagery of God dwelling with his people and the comfort and care that come from God being present in their midst (cf. Hosea 11:9 and Rev. 21:3-4).

As Wells explains, “what matters about Hosea 11 is precisely that it’s God’s story.”² God is the longsuffering parent who stays up during the night worrying about his wayward child. While many of us might often feel that we have been in the role of the parent and have

¹ Sam Wells, “Love to the Loveless Shown that They May Lovely Be,” Duke University Chapel sermon, 01 August 2010, Durham, North Carolina, USA, 1.

² Wells, “Sermon,” 3.

agonized over our children, in this story we must put ourselves in the role of the child. We must read the text as “a poem and a prayer and a promise from God that says ‘You’re my beloved child and you’ve wandered and strayed and I’m in pieces, but one day you’ll be reunited with God, although you’ll never know how much it cost me to make it so.’”³

The biblical narratives reach their climax in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, the perfect child, bears the weight of the disobedience of Israel, of the church and of the entire created order. It is only through Jesus that we are included into the stories of God with Israel and can count ourselves as part of God’s people. Without Jesus we would be aliens to Israel, strangers to the covenant and its promises, without hope and without God (cf. Ephesians 2:12). But just as is the case with Israel, our scandalous inclusion into the promises of God carries the responsibility to live as light and hope to the world, including its children and young people.

The Church as the Family of God

Dr. Samuel suggests that one New Testament vision of the church is as the community of God and the family of God. As such, we must consider the implications of these familial relationships in terms of how we relate to one another, how we treat our children and how we treat those who are strangers to this family. Just as Israel was called to be a missionary people, we too, are called to bear witness to Christ and to invite others to join their life stories with the story of Jesus. For the church rightly to live as the family of God means it is an evangelistic family – a family that bears the good news to a broken world.

Following the imagery of Hosea and Revelation – that we are children of God, we could then ask, How can a child learn to live in such a way so as to show the world that her parent is the one true parent? How do our relationships within the church reflect the

³ Wells, “Sermon,” 3.

character of God and invite others to take a closer look at this strange and wonderful family?

Dr. Samuel argued that hospitality is at the heart of the Triune God and that the child must experience such hospitality in the life of the church. One question we must then ask ourselves is how is the child (or the stranger) experiencing this in our churches? Is the church telling the story of Jesus in such a way as to make the story known and clear to children and young people? I am not asking about methods *per se*, but about the ways we live as church and how our life reflects God's hospitality and the love of Jesus.

Children and young people today are confused. Many adults are confused as well. There are competing narratives; there are various types of media that vie for affection and loyalty. In such a world, the church must be clear about the narrative we are telling our children and about the ways we live out this narrative so as to offer the world, old and young alike, a glimpse of what it means to be part of the family of God.

At the Lausanne III Congress in Cape Town, Ajith Fernando argued that Christians have been chosen to be a holy family and that we are in desperate need to live up to our predestination. To quote Fernando's words at Cape Town 2010:

“What if those who are tired of corruption find that Christians don't resort to corruption?...

What if those who are lonely find that Christians are the friends whom they can trust?...

What if those who are tired of injustice find that Christians uphold justice and stand up for those who are oppressed and are willing to suffer in order to help those who are oppressed?”⁴

And we can add: What if those who are tired of violence in families find that Christians are the family that offers hospitality, care and respect for children and young people?

⁴ Ajith Fernando, “Bible Exposition 1”, *Lausanne 3 Congress*: Cape Town, South Africa, 19 October 2010. Available at: <http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11327>.

Children and Young People as a Challenge to the Churches

Perhaps you have heard the saying that a 14 year old girl in Mumbai might have more in common with a 14 year old girl in New York than she does with her own parents or grandparents. We live in a globalized world with the consequence that when we say “cross cultural missions” or “contextualization” we might well be speaking of how to communicate with our children or those young people in our church, rather than with someone who lives on another continent.

Is the church open to the challenges children and young people might pose to it? When we look at churches and Christian organizations around the world, often the leadership is made up of men who are of about the same age or generation and who struggle with the idea of letting go of power and of the influence they have in their community. Discipleship, when it is discussed, functions in a top-down manner – “what have I to teach to you?” What might the church look like if its leadership learned to listen more closely to the young people in their midst? What if we focused more on being present with these children and becoming part of their world rather than creating programs that would help them grow to be just like us?

We are called to be disciples of Jesus. To be like him and to live out our calling to be a holy people means first to be present, as Jesus was, with the least of these. But beyond being present, we must learn to listen and to be open to being challenged and transformed. The Bible not only tells us stories of how Jesus welcomed the children and suggested they are signs of the Kingdom. It also gives us concrete examples that in God’s family, children are often the bearers of God’s word to us – words of judgment and words of comfort and hope.

It is through the girl, Miriam, that God provides a caregiver for the one who will deliver Israel from the Egyptians (Exodus 2); it is through the boy, Samuel, that Eli learns of God’s judgment upon his house (1 Samuel 3); it is through young David that God brings down the mighty king Saul (1 Samuel 16); God uses an unnamed slave girl to bring good news and healing to the house of Naaman, the Syrian general (2 Kings 5); God empowers a teenager named Mary to proclaim, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God

my Savior... He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:46-55).

If we are indeed to live as the family of God and to be the evangelistic people that God demands we must be, then listening to the challenges and blessings that the children in our midst have to say to us, is a necessary first step. Children are vehicles of God’s message, not in an instrumentalized manner, but because God gives them an importance that we have often forgotten. As Jesus reminds us, children display the characteristics of the Kingdom of God and thus challenge us to live once again as children and as disciples of Jesus. In so doing, we learn from children and young people, and we are given the opportunity to teach them and to carry out God’s mission with them, so that the world might come to know who is the one true God.

THEME 3: CHILD THEOLOGY – A CHALLENGE TO SEMINARIES

Plenary Paper: Victor Nakah and Johannes Malherbe

The paper was worked on in partnership, but at the conference it was given by Victor Nakah.

This paper was charged with dealing specifically with Child Theology: what is, how it works and is done, and what it implies for theological training. The departure point for Child Theology as understood by CTM is Matthew 18: 1-14 where Jesus places a child in the middle of a theological discussion as a way of revealing what to them seems like an upside-down way of living and relating to others. Child Theology is theology and must find its way into the mainstream discourse of seminaries. This has happened with contextual theologies and Victor thought it should not be too difficult with Child Theology. But before it can be included in the curriculum it must be set in the midst of the faculty. The faculty must model Child Theology.

But much traditional theology is done without reference to children; where it is done there is inevitably the risk of a serious gap between the teaching and the subject (the real lives of children and families). Child Theology addresses this challenge, for it is about real theology and real children. It will not let go of either.

The way Jesus sought to teach his disciples (students) and introduce them to the Kingdom of God was a model for seminaries (“the kind of teacher we want in our seminaries”). Receiving the child placed by Jesus in His name is a non-negotiable element of doing theology. Jesus did not place the child among his disciples as an object of admiration or care, but as a challenge to their existing theology (content and practice). It involves reformation and re-creation.

Seminaries exist to serve the church as part of God’s mission, and they do so in the ever-changing context of the signs of the times. These signs include contemporary Goliaths. The key task of seminaries is to train godly, spiritual leaders. The leadership, theology and godliness of those who teach in seminaries will be

mirrored by, and replicated in churches. The way seminaries are organized will affect the way churches and Christian organizations are organized. There is a general problem in the relationship between seminaries and churches: the former do not produce the leaders and pastors that the churches are looking for.

How might CT challenge seminaries to change? Following the work of Johannes Malherbie, the paper imagined an African child placed in the midst, resulting in the following six challenges:

1. *Numbers*: Seminaries cannot continue to be blind to children when there are 474 million children living on the continent.
2. *Need*: African children are commonly presented as identified with need. This is a huge pastoral challenge to the church and seminaries must help to equip the church to respond and provide working models based on a vision of the child enlightened by the message of Christ.
3. *History*: Children still bear much of the weight of the injustices of slavery and colonial history. The scars and wounds of the past must be addressed by the church informed and equipped by seminaries.
4. *Diversity*: The child in the midst will be a different one every time, and stereotypes must be avoided.
5. *Culture*: Children and young people live at the intersection of a number of competing cultures, traditional and modern, local and global, secular and religious.
6. *Marginalisation*: What does Jesus reveal to us about this through children?

Finally six assumptions about Child Theology that have implications for all theologians whether teachers or practitioners:

1. that Child Theology provides a strong and reliable clue for reading the whole of Scripture;
2. that Child Theology helps children directly and indirectly?
3. that Child Theology points us to clues about how Jesus would change behaviour and attitudes in church
4. that Child Theology is a way of bringing theory (the academy) and praxis (practitioners) together because it holds together theology and real children;

5. that Child Theology is a grass roots movement
6. that Child Theology builds on theologies of childhood, that is theological activity that takes children seriously.

Response Synopsis: Sunny Tan

This paper draws from the speaker's experience of both Child Theology, and also of the interface between Child Theology and Holistic Child Development. It reminds seminaries that their geographical and cultural contexts are highly significant in shaping their priorities and roles. The Malaysian Baptist Theological Seminary in Penang became involved in HCD as part of a strategic decision to become more engaged in global mission. That stage in the process came before Child Theology as a term was coined, and it is instructive to other seminaries that despite ten years of exposure, the faculty is still to be persuaded of the importance of "the lens of the child" in all its work.

Sunny points out that seminaries always have to juggle too much material into the limited space available in curricula. It is to be expected therefore that there will be resistance to the suggestion that they should take the new perspective, Child Theology on board.

Affirming the need for more research, he offers three suggestions that would encourage seminaries to embrace this new way of doing theology (that is with a child as a hermeneutical principle):

1. New texts. He commends particularly the two works edited by Marcia Bunge;
2. Models of teaching that include concrete encounters between adult learners and children under the supervision of those who see the God-children connection;
3. Language. Theology must be "life-centred", and it is necessary to develop an understanding through children of the big picture of how God is leading mankind to completeness in Christ.

Response Synopsis: Joe Simfukwe

Starting from the position that pastoral theology is about reflecting biblically on real life and activity, this paper explores several questions prompted by the desire to think biblically about

children. His experience in a Zambian context led him to conclude that the default position of many Christian pastors and leaders is to marginalize children to the point where they are sometimes invisible. Seminaries should be places where biblical reflection involves listening carefully to the ignored and suppressed voices of children as representing all who are marginalized. When eyes are opened, it becomes apparent how blind we have been to the suffering of children worldwide. Seminaries are not to put obstacles in the way of children coming to Jesus. Yet the default position in many African contexts is to see and relate to children primarily as investments: for example, as the future church, insurance for old age, and the proof of fertility. Children do represent the future, but they are to be valued now as they are, which includes what they will be. Seminaries should be “seedbeds of useful reflection” challenging this default position.

Response Synopsis: Corneliu Constantineanu

As a president of a theological seminary Corneliu took the message of the plenary paper to the very heart of his calling and professional work. The challenge of Child Theology is to do theology in a different way: led by the action of Jesus in placing the child in the midst. This includes of course appropriate reference to children, but the challenge is a much wider and deeper one. He focuses on two issues:

1. children are important and they need to be taken seriously in our theological reflection and praxis;
2. the logic of the Kingdom of God is radically different from the logic of our dominant culture. So we are constantly called to change and rethink the way we do theology, teach and relate to our students, colleagues and churches: all these from the perspective of God’s way of doing things.

The first means that children are to be taken seriously as persons, signs of the Kingdom of God, partners in God’s mission, and representatives of Jesus. Here the contribution of Marcia Bunge in her plenary paper is important: it offers warnings and correctives to some of the uncritical assumptions held by different individuals and churches about biblical teaching on children. More, and theologically informed courses, are necessary as a matter of urgency.

But the child placed in the midst by Jesus challenges seminaries to rethink their values and way of doing things in the light of the Kingdom of God as signed by the child placed by Jesus. How do seminaries equip leaders to handle profound differences, to have a nuanced experience and understanding of culture and society; to grapple with the puzzles and painful realities of the contemporary world?

This can only be done where the call to repentance and humility is modeled in seminaries by “believing scholars” whose faith in God enables and inspires them to embody and articulate the gospel in concrete contemporary reality. This cannot be done without a fresh vision of the Kingdom of God, as is given, for example, by the child Jesus placed in the midst. The provisionality of this Kingdom will not deter, but rather stir us into action, determined to play a part in God’s transforming actions in history that will see the final realization of this vision. Seminaries must comprise leaders who live and act as signs of the Kingdom of God, and who lead others in humility to do likewise.

Group Response Synopsis

There is a mistrust of seminaries in many churches, but there is much that is positive in seminaries around the world. Pastors should be trained in seminaries to equip them for children’s ministry. The ultimate responsibility for seminaries lies with the leadership of the church.

The Bible School programme in Uganda has children at its centre because there is such a need: there are about 8000 organisations that work with children. If church leaders were made aware of the importance that the Bible and God attach to children, they would change things in church. Children, ministry with children and children’s workers, are not valued appropriately in the churches. A key to that changing is for each of these three to be more valued in the seminaries, which train the future pastors who will greatly influence the values and ministry philosophy of the congregations they will pastor.

One group looked carefully at where Child Theology might feature in a regular seminary curriculum: either as part of pastoral, biblical, systematic and historical studies (that is as an integral part of all theological studies) or as an additional dimension. It concluded that Child Theology and HCD should be taught in seminaries not as electives, but as part of mainstream theological

training. To change things in this direction it was vital to influence accrediting associations and national and regional groupings of theological schools.

Could there be a universities coalition in Africa, for example? But there is the need of a faculty to teach courses on Child Theology with two curricula: faculty training and CT for the seminary students. Distance learning was possible given an international resource book for a CT curriculum. It would need to be more than a few academic books. CT needs to have an inter-faith, multi-religious dimension because this is the context in which many children are growing up. The experience of Sunny Tan, as an Academic Dean, was salutary: it would require long-term tenacity and commitment.

Theologians need to hear the questions being asked by children, but they rarely mingle or associate with them. So how can they understand Child Theology as signed by real children and inspired by the act of receiving them in the name of Jesus? Sometimes theologians seem to be answering questions not asked by practitioners. Theologians need to be really walking every day with students, as distinct from being in a classroom all the time. Students should be able to write in local language and context.

Life transformation, a gift of God, in relation both children and humility and other Kingdom values, is best accomplished through an ongoing interaction among conceptual learning, prayer/contemplation, and praxis/action. An early church Father (Evagrius) proclaimed, "The true theologian is the one who prays well." Seminary learning, which should be informed by both the Bible and contemporary concerns in a given context, should lead to prayer and reflection.

Christ placed the child in the midst to challenge their students, thinking and model/promote the Kingdom values of humility and being a lifelong learner. If we are truly interested in facilitating the development of Christ-like servant leaders, one suitable place for the incorporation of the insights/challenges from child theology is in the spiritual formation focus of the seminaries with their students. Leadership formation was a key role of seminaries.

PLENARY

CHILD THEOLOGY – A CHALLENGE TO SEMINARIES

BY VICTOR NAKAH

Overseas Council International

BY JOHANNES MALHERBE

Petra College, South Africa

Introduction

Right at centre of a lively theological discourse about power, authority and seniority, Jesus places the Child as a sign of the Kingdom. How did this help the discourse? What light did the child shed on the discourse and on God and his way of doing things? In very simple terms, this is the point of departure of Child Theology – Jesus Christ placing the child in our midst. In Matthew 18, the child in the midst immediately exposes the way the disciples are thinking and behaving, especially their fundamental misjudgment of Jesus and the Kingdom.¹ And Jesus takes this opportunity to expose not only their wrong theology but wrong theologizing, challenging them to theologize by stooping to the level of a little child placed by Him in their midst so that they could see, feel, understand and perhaps experience the Kingdom of God better and from a different perspective. He basically introduces humility into the discourse, and opens a small window as it were, inviting them to come see what they had never seen before, His upside Kingdom – a different worldview, a different way of living and relating.

¹ Keith White, *Introducing Child Theology – Holistic Foundations for Holistic Child Development* (Penang: Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, Compassion International and the Global Alliance for Advancing Holistic Child Development, 2010), 14.

The disciples were his students, twelve of them, and this was one of the lessons that Jesus taught not only in deed, but with accompanying words as he put in their hands vital clues to help them make sense of what he meant when he placed the child in their midst as a sign of the Kingdom. I think we should feel very envious of the disciples because Jesus is the kind of teacher we want in our churches and seminaries.

If seminaries are about helping Christian leaders theologize more thoughtfully and practically, then they too need to accept the Master's challenge to change and become humble, and to receive the child as a non-negotiable element of *doing* theology in the service of God and His Kingdom. Transformational education begins with the educator for seminaries have the responsibility to model what they do and how they do it as closely as possible to the way Jesus taught, and to what he taught. When he taught the twelve, what was his curriculum, when did he teach and how? Perhaps the impact would be further clarity of vision, understanding and experience of the Kingdom of God, just as it happened to the disciples. Child theology would argue that this is offered by Jesus as a starting point for all who teach at and who attend seminaries, including those whose ministry is particularly focused on children.

In this paper I'll attempt do an honest appraisal of seminaries, consider why they need to grapple with Child Theology and then conclude contextually by focusing on African Childhood as a challenge to seminaries as well as make a few critical remarks about Child Theology as a clue to doing theology.

Why Seminaries? An Honest Appraisal of Seminaries

We have already heard the challenges which Child theology poses to the church. The best way to critic seminaries is in the context of the mission of the church. I therefore would want assume that your eagerness to reflect on seminaries and Child theology is because you are committed not only to the church and her mission but also to the missiological agenda for theology. This is important because the church lies at the very center of the mission of God, and theology has

no reason to exist other than crucially to accompany the *missio Dei*. David Bosch was right when he said, “the church ceases to be the church if it is not missionary, and theology ceases to be theology if it loses its missionary character.”²

The church is therefore God’s primary means of carrying out His mission and seminaries (Bible colleges, Seminaries, Theological colleges)³ in their different shapes and sizes are sometimes seen as the church’s premier leadership training enterprise. They play a key formational role in shaping and informing the Church to carry out the mission of God. They exist to meet the training needs of the church.

According to Steve de Gruchy, theological educators assist the church in conceiving the agenda for missional practice. The assumption, de Gruchy continues, is that seminary professors have the time to read, reflect, undertake research and work in a context of other open and enquiring minds. The simple act of having to work with a constant stream of young people, year by year, asking questions and seeking answers, makes theological educators a vital resource for keeping the missional practice of the church attentive to the ever-changing signs of the times.”⁴

The context in which seminaries do this is one of ever-changing signs of the times. This presents immense challenges and opportunities. But what are these ever-changing signs of the times? While we celebrate the unprecedented numerical growth of the church in the majority world, we are still confronted by death and decay on all fronts – our economies, politics, culture, morality, education, the environment. For us in Africa, we keep wondering what it is about us and the times we live in that, in spite of our

² See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 494.

³ In this paper I will use the terms ‘seminary’ or ‘theological college’ interchangeably for all schools of higher education that train ministry leaders including university faculties of theology.

⁴ Steve de Gruchy, *Theological Education and the Mission of the Church – Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity*, 46.

incredible wealth in natural and human resources and diverse centers of learning, our state of well-being or Shalom remains far less than adequate. It is no longer news to read of failed economies or other forms of ‘failed realities’ -- failed homes, failed institutions and, on a more serious note, failed dreams and aspirations. A long list of ever-changing signs of the times would also include urban problems, racial/ethnic/tribal tension, refugees, HIV/AIDS, wars, injustice and corruption, climate change and poverty, to name a few.

**How do seminaries serve the Church in this difficult situation?
What does the Church want from the seminary?**

Seminaries serve the Church by training well equipped, well informed, and effective leaders. But what does this mean? It means not only servant leaders with humble, godly motives but also courageous, faith-oriented leaders who are biblically rooted, culturally alert, and proactively visionary men and women of God. These challenges also require dynamic change agents with Kingdom faith big enough to take on the contemporary Goliaths that continue to harass and intimidate us. The church further needs impassioned scholars, thought leaders who guard and clarify the teachings of the church, who wrestle with the questions of the day, and who move many by their writings.⁵

I would like to suggest that the primary reason that institutions and nations and cities decline and fail is often not the lack of abundant or sufficient resources but a lack of godly, spiritual leadership. Seminaries and Christian universities have the unenviable task to train leaders that can help the church respond biblically to all these opportunities and challenges. This, perhaps more than anything else, is why there is significant truth in the slogan ‘Theological education is at the center of Christianity – as the seminary goes, so

⁵ Steve Hobson, “Creative Leadership Development: Breaking Out of the Traditional Seminary Mold,” in *Educating For Tomorrow – Theological Leadership for the Asia Context* (2002), 2-3. Hobson writes in the context of the Asian church and theological renewal but this is no different from the rest of the majority world context where the church faces the same challenges.

goes the church and as the church goes, so goes the society.’ But how practically true is this slogan? Let’s put it to the test:

In a very deliberate way, seminaries determine the direction of the church of the future. The professors’ lectures, seminars, and textbooks are the foundation on which the leadership of our churches and Christian organizations is built. Pastors, missionaries, and evangelists put into practice what they are taught and pass on their knowledge and experience to people in their churches, mission work or outreach ministries. It follows, then, that the lives of church members and the ministries in which they are involved will reflect what is taught in seminaries. The direction in which a seminary is moving, any failure to communicate basic and essential elements of the faith or of ministry, any undue emphasis on particular formations or functions of ministry will be replicated in the ministries of students.⁶

In other words what is taught or not taught in seminaries affects not only the local churches that seminary graduates will lead, but also hundreds of people in the wider community and ultimately, the well-being of church agencies, and other organizations that employ theological school graduates. That’s the profound extent of seminary influence and explains why seminaries and what they teach, how they teach, when they teach and who they teach should be our business. There is just too much at stake. The way things are taught, and the way the seminary is structured is just as important. Is it modeled on secular organizations, or does it seek to align itself with God’s (Kingdom) way of doing things?

Having said this, I think we should be careful not to exaggerate what seminaries can do and cannot do. First, leadership development is the responsibility of the local church and seminaries can only play a part. Three years in seminary is just that, while leadership development is a lifelong process. Quality theological education in the local church is the best guarantee for quality theological education in

⁶ Manfred Waldemar Kohl, “Theological Education: What Needs to Be Changed,” in *Educating For Tomorrow – Theological Leadership for the Asian Context* (2002), 29.

the seminary. Second, you don't have to be a seminarian in order to do theology or be a theologian. Every Christian is a theologian. We are doing theology together at this conference. Every participant is welcome and respected as a disciple or follower of Jesus, and active in the work that you believe to be significant in God's Mission.

Why Child Theology and the Seminary?

It has been well said that whatever we may say about 'Child Theology', it is '*theology*.' And if what we have said about seminaries is true it means that for Child Theology to have any significant impact in the church and wider society, it must find its way into the mainstream discourse of the seminary, not only as a subject to be added to the curriculum, but as a deliberate and concentrated process of studying the Bible; doing theology that takes as its starting point the example of Jesus when he placed a little child in the midst of his disciples (Matthew 18).⁷ This shouldn't be too difficult to do because seminaries have all had to grapple in some way, with the challenges of various contextual theologies, Liberation theologies and Women's and Indigenous theologies. There are similarities and differences, but they have in common a desire to shed fresh light on the whole of theology, church and mission by using the lens of a particular group or perspective. In the case of Child Theology it is "receiving the child placed by Jesus in the midst" as a way into reading the Bible.⁸

When we talk about influencing seminaries, it is true that the way into the heart of any seminary is its faculty; they are the curriculum. Without them, moved by the words of Christ and what he meant, it would be almost impossible for any theology, let alone, Child Theology to find its space in the curriculum. And so before we can intentionally set the child in the middle of curricula revision or the seminary as a learning community, seminary professors need to explore and model Child theology as they come to grips with

⁷Keith White, "Insights into Child Theology through the Life and Work of Pandita Ramabai" (October, 2006), 2.

⁸ Keith White (2006), 3.

Scripture in their contemporary context, culture and situation. The curriculum will always reflect the theology of faculty. Second we need to ask what happens when the different theological disciplines pay attention to the child in the midst. The assumption here is that seminary professors are men and women of God, servants of God who are involved in the life and ministry of the church.

What could happen when the different theological disciplines pay attention to the child in the midst?

This child could be anything that reflects the reality of children in your context - a child soldier, a prostitute, an orphan, a beggar, abused child, perhaps a happy child, privileged child ... What do you see? What do you hear? What do you feel? From Matthew 18, it is clear that Jesus does not place the child in the midst of your theologizing in order to provide a comforting object of admiration and comfort, or as an object of care, but to challenge what you stand for: your understanding of God's mission, and your priorities, and to shed light on all that you're doing in His name. Put simply this is about reformation and re-creation, not simply assimilation or addition.

I think we can sympathize with the disciples when they were surprised and confused by what Jesus did. I don't think our own reaction would have been any different. It was not until Pentecost that they began to understand what He was trying to say to them. Here is how Haddon Willmer puts it: "God speaks himself, for himself, in all creation. The Word was God; the Word was made flesh.⁹ God speaks himself in Jesus Christ by the Spirit. Jesus the Word came proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near and inviting us to get ready to enter. And at a critical point in his argumentative and creation-renewing ministry, Jesus took a child and set him or her in the midst, a *pointer* to the Kingdom of God and a *point of entry* into the Kingdom. Jesus the Word makes the child one of God's languages, a theological language."¹⁰

⁹ John 1

¹⁰ Haddon Willmer (2004), 2.

What is the Problem with the Seminary?

The fact that this conference seeks to challenge seminaries to take what Jesus said and did seriously means that we have a problem with our seminaries, and the issues are many -- not only to do with Child Theology. But with regards to Child Theology, one of the problems is that Traditional theology in seminaries is usually done without serious or sustained reference to children. So if you have a theological component of any course relating to child, there is a serious gap between the theology and the subject.

Normally the lecturer, the textbooks, the journals and the content will have little connection with the real world in which children and families live and with which they wrestle. So how should we begin to bridge this gap? Child Theology is a serious response to this challenge.¹¹

But we need to understand this problem in the context of all the other issues that seminaries wrestle with. One of them is the perennial criticism of irrelevance to the church. Church leaders accuse the seminary of producing graduates that are of no use to the church. The counter accusation from theological educators is the lack of support and collaboration from the local church.

One expert has criticized both the church and seminary by saying 'there is no other professional organization in the world which allows its primary professional training institutions to produce graduates who are as generally functionally incompetent as the church permits her seminaries.'¹²

John Vawter puts this across more crudely when he says, "Seminary education in general has only four things wrong with it: it

¹¹ Chiang Mai, the Contribution of Child Theology to the HCD Course and Beyond, Paper to HCD Summit, May 2007.

¹² Tim Dearborn, "Preparing New Leaders for the Church of the Future: Transforming Theological Education through Multi-Institutional Partnerships", *Transformation* (December 1996)

is taught by the wrong people in the wrong place with the wrong curriculum and has the wrong oversight.”¹³

The bottom line is that there is a problem in our seminaries. Yes, we should be careful not to paint all seminaries with the same brush, but that does not nullify the fact that we have a major problem that needs to be attended to. We thank God for the growing number of seminaries that have had a paradigm shift and have found a way of responding to the needs of the church and in doing this have built a relationship of collaboration and partnership with the church. Such seminaries are characterized by a leadership and faculty that keep their ear on the ground – that serve with the Bible on one hand and the newspaper on the other – that take contextual realities seriously and therefore demonstrate transformational education and practice.

I would want to suggest that it is the same seminaries that have also taken seriously what Jesus said and did by placing the child in our midst. Such seminaries have allowed the child in their midst to challenge their faith and practice – their teaching and learning and have not only introduced courses to do with children into the curriculum but have also heard Jesus speak powerfully through the child. Our prayer is that this number will continue to grow, not only for the sake of Child Theology but the Kingdom of God.

Child Theology and Challenges to Seminaries

Let us assume for a moment that Child Theology in various ways finds its way from the margins of theological education to the mainstream. What contributions might it make to theological education and to the world of children? For the purpose of being true to the African context where we are meeting this week, let us also assume that the child in the midst is African and therefore brings to the process of theologizing all the realities to do with African childhood. How does this challenge African seminaries?

¹³ John Vawter, ‘Seminaries: Serving or Thriving?’ *Faculty Dialogue* 23 (1995), 41.

Dr Johannes Malherbe, the author of a book on African Childhood that is in the process of publishing highlights six challenges:¹⁴

1. The Challenge of NUMBERS

The huge number of African children and the fact that they form such a large proportion of African society (Contextualization). According to UNICEF, there are 474 million people under the age of 18 years living in Africa. This is 21.4% of the total number of children in the world, and 2.3 times as many as the children of all the industrialized nations of the world put together. Africa is also the continent where children form the highest proportion of the population. There are currently 20 nations in the world where children (under 18 years) form the majority of the population. Only four of these are outside Africa. If one adds to the equation the children of the millions of people of African descent living in other parts of the world, as well as the fact that the fertility rate in Africa is three times that of the industrialized world, it is clear that African children already are, and will increasingly become a major factor in our world.

The question is, can we honestly continue to do our theology without paying attention to this large number of our brothers and sisters who share our hearts and minds and space - children?

2. The Challenge of NEED

African children are generally portrayed (not without reason) as needy. (Pastoral Responsibility of the Church) They face more serious

¹⁴ In this book titled, '*Discovering Childhood in Africa*', Johannes uses two stories to articulate the challenges of African childhood. One story is of baby Rosita who was born in a tree in Mozambique during the floods of January 2001. The world "discovered" this baby and her mother on electronic media. This was a powerful tool to raise millions of dollars for the relief work in Mozambique. Upon closer inspection it is clear that Rosita was not really helped in the process. Johannes contrasts this story with that of another baby born the same night, less than 100 km inland, on the roof of the family's house. She was not discovered by the world outside, and grew up as part of a normal family, facing the normal challenges of life in Mozambique.

challenges than their counterparts in other parts of the world. They face severe health hazards like HIV/AIDS and malaria; natural disasters such as floods and famine; cultural practices like child labour, child marriages and violence against children; as well as poverty, crime, corruption and military conflict. This contributes to the fact that African nations take in the lowest positions in almost every child development index.

The other side of the coin is that to outsiders African childhood has become closely identified with need, a perception strengthened by pictures and stories from all over the continent suggesting that every African child is needy, vulnerable and a victim of various serious threats. The assumption is that Mama Africa cannot nourish, protect and raise her children. This becomes the basis for the multi-billion industry employing tens of thousands of expatriates committed to “save” Africa’s children.

This points to the pastoral responsibility of the Church. If Mama Africa cannot look after her children, what about the church? The church will not do it if seminaries are producing graduates who do not have a vision for the child and have not been taken captive by the message of Christ when he put the child in the midst.

3. The Challenge of HISTORY

African children have suffered terribly under slavery, colonization, racism ... (Issues of doctrine, ethics, ideology) There are numerous indications that up to the early Middle Ages, Africa and her people generally held their own in the worlds of international relations and cultural exchange. Egypt was an important civilising force in the Ancient World. Carthage helped to break the power of the mighty Roman Empire, theologians from North Africa helped to lay the foundations for world Christianity and various wealthy African Kingdoms provided gold and ivory to the rest of the world. This changed with the advance of Islam and Christianity. Africa was soon reduced to the status of barbarians and infidels. These “civilisations” plundered the continent for anything of value – minerals, slaves, soldiers and cheap labour. Children suffered terribly in the destruction of families, villages and empires.

Slavery and other forms of exploitation were justified by means of theories of race that argued – with the support of science, religion and philosophy – for the inferiority of African people. Though theoretically discredited, the legacy of racism lives on in the hearts of many and still influences attitudes to and treatment of African children. Attempts at redressing the imbalances of the past have usually not been very successful, because it often creates new inequalities without removing the deep scars of the past.

4. The Challenge of DIVERSITY

Africa is the continent with the biggest number of countries (53 out of 193 nations, with Southern Sudan soon to be added). This is largely a legacy of the colonial period when the continent was cut up among Western nations and continues to frustrate cooperation and unity on the continent. The continent is also home to over 30 per cent of the languages of the world (according to the Ethnologue 2110 out of 6909). Many scientists believe that humankind originated on the African continent. This would explain the amazing genetic and with that, cultural diversity among African people. Against this background one has to understand the statement of Kwame Appiah: “Whatever Africans share, we do not have a common traditional culture, common language, common religious or conceptual language ... we do not even belong to a common race.” The continent is home to an exciting variety of ethnicity and culture, beliefs and traditions, politics and industry, ancient and modern, poor and rich, rural and urban. Few outsiders adequately understand this diversity, as their easy generalisations and caricatures reveal. Yet within this diversity there is something that may be hard to define but which makes us Africans feel at home when we are, and homesick when we are away for too long.

5. The Challenge of CULTURE

African children are often torn between old and new. Many of them still have close links with traditional culture while modern technology and urban life introduces them to global influences. The confusion is even greater for young Christians because what is usually seen as ‘Christian culture’ is, in most cases, heavily shaped by the

culture of early European missionaries. The young generation that now grows up in African cities differs in many respects from those who went before them. Many of them have a solid education, they are digitally and globally connected, they are critical of traditional, religious and political authorities and values, and they are relatively mobile, even beyond the African continent. What makes this an even greater challenge is the problem of globalization. African children are drawn into a globally connected world that has little patience and respect for their unique assets and needs (Relevance and the future direction of the church)

6. The Challenge of MARGINALISATION

African children often have no say in their own societies, including churches and theological education. What does Jesus say to us about the marginalized?

Conclusion – Child Theology as a FRAMEWORK for Interpreting Scripture

In conclusion I would like to highlight some of the assumptions that undergird the Child Theology Movement as food for thought to both academics and practitioners.

First is the assumption that Child Theology is a credible conceptual clue to reading and interpreting Scripture. Is this a universal and distinctive approach? There are of course ways in which we read the text and all of them are like wineskins, always secondary but necessary and useful to the wine. The text that we seek to interpret and apply to all of life is the wine, always essential, primary and fresh. Wineskins would be superfluous without the wine they were meant to hold.¹⁵

Christopher Wright¹⁶ calls frameworks, maps of the territory of Scripture. The test of the map is in how faithfully it interprets the

¹⁵ Howard Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins – Church Structure in a Technological Age* (1977), 13.

¹⁶ Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (2006), 26.

territory for the traveler in terms of what he or she wants or needs to know to make sense of the journey.

Frameworks are therefore not intrinsically wrong since we all have to start somewhere. In the case of Child theology, we need to ask ourselves if this framework does justice to the thrust of the text in its biblical-theological context. Or does it distort the text? The question is more what sort of control the framework exercises over the text and whether the text is ever allowed to critique the framework at any point.

Can we demonstrate (as many others have done) that Child Theology is fully grounded in the Scripture, and that a strong Child Theology provides a fruitful hermeneutical clue of relevance to a reading of the whole Bible, and that this framework is both universal and particular? This is both a challenge and opportunity for the Child Theology Movement to engage academics in the fields of Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Missiology. This conference presents such an opportunity.

Second, is the assumption that by theologizing in this way we can actually directly and indirectly help the children and those who serve with and through them?

Third, will Child Theology point us to what Jesus meant when he placed the child in the midst, and will this help change practice and behavior in the body of Christ with regards to children?

Fourth, Child Theology takes the child and children's ministries seriously and will not become a theology without children. Keith White raises this concern when he says, "It cannot be denied that the way much theology is done in seminaries communicates to ordinary Christians that it is a discipline for the few, and that it tends to be more concerned with words and formulations than with action. We cannot allow it to be falsely defined in this way. It reflects western philosophical traditions and it is understandably a problem to ordinary Christians seeking faithfully to live out their faith in the real world. Part of what Child Theology does is to establish a process that

dispels the myths surrounding theology and the theological process and to model a fresh, but convincing and valid method.”¹⁷

In other words this is not just an academic exercise but something which brings theory (academicians) and praxis (practitioners) together as fellow servants and co-laborers in the vineyard. Before theology, let us take the children seriously and before praxis, let us have a theology that informs and shapes.

Fifth, Child Theology takes the grass roots seriously because that is where you will find most of the children and is therefore not an exclusive/elitist movement.

Sixth, Child Theology builds on Theologies of Childhood. Child Theologies have been compared and contrasted with other theologies concerned with children. Child Theology has been described as a theology that builds on theologies of childhood, looking at doctrine and practice as a whole. The objective is to re-examine fundamental doctrines and practices of the church using the “lens” of the child in order to provide new insights into central themes of the Christian faith, e.g. how would we redefine the doctrine of the church if we took children seriously?¹⁸ These are deep issues that need to be grappled with by both academics and practitioners but in a way that informs and shapes practice by providing content and meaning.

¹⁷ Keith White, *Introduction to Child Theology – Theological Foundations for Holistic Child Development*. Published by Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, Compassion International and the Global Alliance for Advancing Holistic Child Development (2010), 10.

¹⁸ Second African Consultation on Child Theology, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (21-24 November 2006)

RESPONSE 1

BY SUNNY B.S. TAN

Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, Penang

I thank the Steering Committee for the privilege of being one of the responders to a paper focusing on the challenge to seminaries. I guess the committee's decision is based on the fact that I can speak from my experiences with both sides: that of being part of the seminary leadership, and also being part of the Holistic Child Development Program and Child Theology Movement since their inception about 10 years ago. My response, therefore, is in part an interpretation of how the HCD program and Child Theology have been and remain a challenge to my seminary.

I am aware that not all seminaries are the same, and the location of a seminary does affect how it responds to the challenges posed by Child Theology. Nakah and Malherbe's paper points to the plight of children in Africa and questioned why the African seminaries are not taking the lead to help. I sense their frustration. Why are the seminaries in Africa not doing more for the suffering children in their continent? My seminary is located in Penang, Malaysia and not too far from the progressive city-state of Singapore. The program attracts students from Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and India (to name a few). But to date, we have not graduated a Singaporean with an M.A. in HCD except for a Canadian missionary serving there. I am sure there are many factors for the lack of response from Singapore. Perhaps, there are no children in poverty or are at risk in Singapore. So location does determine how the challenge is perceived.

Why did the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary willingly accept the invitation to host the HCD program some 10 years ago? Well for one thing, the proposal came with generous help by Compassion International. But the true reason has to do with the timing of the proposal. When Dr Bambang Budijanto and Dr Dan Brewster visited us with the proposal, our President, Dr John Ong, had already led the seminary to make Global Mission as a key focus of its training program. MBTS was and is a denominational seminary; and for a

large part of its history, a concern for doctrinal distinctiveness and ecclesiastical identity provided the direction for its ministry. The seminary's programs therefore, were mostly about developing the local Baptist churches and the training of God-called men and women to be pastors and church-workers. With a shift to Mission as another key concern of MBTS, it was not difficult to welcome an opportunity to demonstrate the seminary's vision for Global Mission. The mission perspective on the HCD program remains to this day.

I must also add that the theological foundation for the HCD program was still being worked out when MBTS agreed to host it. The term "Child Theology" was not yet coined, though from the start, it was clear that the HCD program must have a strong biblical and theological component. At that point in time, we did not use the language that we are using today. Dr Bambang and Dr Brewster were not talking about "children as a hermeneutical principle" or "children as a sign of God's Kingdom" or "children as God's way of reforming Church and Doctrines." Such talk would probably have slowed down the introduction of the HCD program at MBTS. In a way I am glad that doctrinal issues did not become a criterion for the offering of the HCD Program. We trusted Compassion International. To date, my seminary has not officially embraced Child Theology and the faculty members are still not fully persuaded to re-read their Bible with the lens of a child. Therefore, in a sense, my seminary is being challenged by Child Theology even though it offers the HCD program.

Now, I would like to make some comments on Nakah and Malherbe's observation that "there is a problem with seminaries." I believe recognition of the nature of the problem will better help us strategize in reaching seminaries with either the HCD program or Child Theology. The relevance of seminaries to the Church has been questioned by many and in various contexts.¹ It is beyond the scope of this response to deal with the criticisms, but there is a link between the failure of seminaries to produce church leaders who are biased for

¹ For a discussion on the debate over seminaries, see Linda Cannel, *Theological Education Matters: Leadership Education for the Church* (Newburgh, IN: Edcot Press, 2006).

children in need, and the criticisms directed towards seminaries for failing to serve the Church well.²

Theological education, when carried out in an institutional setting, has to select, systematize, and produce knowledgeable and skillful graduates within a time frame. Programs and courses are offered according to the requirements and needs of the sponsoring churches and according to academic standards set for them. Furthermore, seminaries are often asked to add programs and courses because of urgent needs. For example, in recent years seminaries have been asked to offer programs in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic and in the area of peacemaking. Seminaries therefore are often pressured to add to their already full curricula. Now for the sake of the children of the world, we are challenging them to add another program.

When we come to the area of Theology, we can expect resistance from seminaries. History has shown that “new” theological thinking usually occurs first outside the established institutions and only later is it permitted inside. For example, Reformational, Pentecostal and the various Liberational theologies, all had their beginnings outside established theological institutions and only later, were they taught in seminaries. Therefore, we should not be discouraged with seminaries not opening their doors immediately when we knock. We have to persist in our knocking; and at the same time work towards what is called a “tipping point.”³ Of course, we could try to hasten the “tipping” by starting a couple of seminaries dedicated to programs and courses based on the God-Children connection.

² Ted Ward, currently Professor Emeritus of Educational Ministries and Mission at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School has these strong words to say about institutionalized theological education in his Foreword for Cannel’s book: *The church has not been consistently well-served by the schools and the school-like institutions to which it has delegated the responsibility to prepare its own leaders* (Ibid., 11).

³ Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co., 2000).

To conclude my response, I want to suggest three actions we can consider if we want seminaries to embrace a new way of doing theology with the child as hermeneutical principle.

- 1) *Resources*: Seminaries are about teachers and texts. Our presenters mentioned the faculty as key to changing seminaries. We need to expose faculty members from the various disciplines to the new way of theologizing with the child-in-the-midst. We need more texts in various disciplines from the perspective of the God-Children connection. I believe every faculty member teaching Theology and Bible should be introduced to Marcia Bunge's *The Child in Christian Thought* and *The Child in the Bible*. I am constantly amazed that many professors of Theology and Bible are still not familiar with these two significant resources. I suspect that perhaps they do not see how children can be linked to their disciplines; hence, they do not bother to check them out.
- 2) *Model*: Seminaries are about knowledge and formation. The dilemma of seminaries is that the knowledge acquired by students does not necessarily lead to their transformation. "Knowledge puffs-up;" and so knowledge without the right attitude and right vision tends to contribute towards the distancing of the graduates from those they are supposed to serve. Seminaries need a model of forming students to "see" children as a sign of God's presence and a way of doing things. If we take the cue from Jesus, we will need a pedagogy that includes concrete encounters between adult learners and children under the supervision of teachers who "see" the God-children connection.
- 3) *Language*: Seminaries are about words that connect God and humankind. Each theology has its own language (i.e., concepts and key terms) that seeks to connect believers to God in a way that results in meaningful living on earth. Though theology, at its core, is about God, it is also about human existence on earth. Therefore, it is necessary to speak the language of "life-centeredness" when presenting the

reason and goal for a child-in-the-midst theology.⁴ When Mission is the focus, the need is for a language that directs the Church to act and rescue the suffering children of the world; but when Theology is the focus, the need is for a language that directs the Church to embrace children as an ordained way to cooperate with God for the development and transformation of humankind. Every infant born and every child alive is about the God-given potentiality present in each person. To focus on children is to have the big-picture of how God is leading humankind to completeness in Christ. Thus, a careful attention on the language will first provide us with an audience, and then a way to help seminaries see the link between children and the adult world which they are set aside to serve.

Nakah and Malherbe concluded their paper with a call for more research on the assumptions we are making. I agree! To what they have said, I add that we should also provide more resources, models and the use of the right language.

⁴ I owe this idea of *Life-centeredness* as a possible unifying theme in theology to Konrad Raiser. He argues that instead of Anthropocentrism we should think in terms of *Life-centeredness* if theology is to contribute towards the development and transformation of humankind. When we speak of *Life-centeredness*, we include the environment, the relationships, and all that are necessary for humans to fully live on earth. . . “The World in the Twenty-first Century: Challenges to the Churches” in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jurgen Moltmann*. Ed., Miroslav Volf and others (1996: 4).

RESPONSE 2

BY JOE SIMFUKWE

International Council of Evangelical Theological Education
Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa

Introduction

To me theology is thinking that is informed by a careful listening to God. Practically this means thinking biblically. Because this thinking is never done in a vacuum or without some particular purpose, we can have our theologizing qualified in a number of ways. So we may speak of systematic theology in which we are seeking to think in summary form about what God has said in his word the Bible.

When I teach pastoral theology I define it simply as ‘reflecting biblically on the task of shepherding.’ This way of thinking therefore leads me to think of Child Theology as simply thinking biblically about children. This leads to a number of questions:

What does God have to say about children?

What is their place in the family, in the church, in the community?

What are their special needs?

As soon as we start talking about people, any people, it is important to listen to them. It is a simple matter of respect.

What do children have to say about themselves?

What do they have to say about their place in the family, in the church, in the community?

What do they say their needs are?

Theologizing from our Default Position

As theologizers we have our default positions, often shaped by our culture, upbringing, education etc. It is important for us to ask ourselves similar questions:

What do we have to say about children according to our default cultural position?

What place have we given children in the family, in the church in the community?

I indicated that theologizing is purposeful. I want to suggest that how we think, how we theologize about children will determine what place we give them in family, church and community. How we think about them will determine how we treat them. Whether we place the child in the midst and present her as a model of the kind of human being to whom belongs the Kingdom will depend on what conclusions we have come to and what has informed those conclusions.

Let me illustrate:

Last year I felt burdened to raise awareness of the place of children in our thinking and behavior in our Zambian context as a prelude to putting in place a child protection policy for our seminary. As I made my presentation to some of our graduates, I started by asking the question: Who among us works with children? Only a few hands went up. Obviously my question was being interpreted in some specialized way. The reality was that virtually everybody in the room worked with children. They are everywhere except when we make special efforts to exclude them. They are in our homes, in our schools and churches. One of the couples attending that seminar had brought along their very lively toddler. When the father was asked how many people would be needing breakfast, he answered, "Two people." "What about my friend here", I interjected. In this simple illustration of very ordinary life we can see how easily children don't count and how we are dealing with them all the time and we don't think we are working with children.

You don't need a PhD to marginalize children. That is our default position. It is easy to find fault with the disciples who thought of them as, not only unimportant, but a positive nuisance.

The Challenge to the Seminary

I see the seminary as *seedbed of useful reflection*, a kind of Think Tank for the church. What we think, we are. What we think will also shape our responses. What we think of children or about children will determine the place we give them in our communities, how we listen to them, how we treat them.

The default position is what the mercy of God has saved us from (Rom 12:1f). The position of the world is not the one we are to operate from.

If theology is reflecting biblically on the realities we are confronted with, then we are confronted with One who speaks with a transformational agenda. God is not in the entertainment business, the ear tickling enterprise. We must not imagine that having engaged with the Word Who became flesh we can comfortably go away excited that we enjoyed debating with this unusual Rabbi. When he asks what we know, he tells us to do it, if it true (Luke 10:25-28,36-37). Just as he came to do (Luke 4:18), he expects us not only to know the truth, but to do it (John 13:17). As we watch him revealing his glory among us in his incarnate state, we cannot help seeing his bent towards the marginalized. He has a special concern for the poor, the shepherdless, the children. His first words, in the Sermon on the Mount, do not reflect our default position (Mt 5:3).

If our reflection is to be useful it must include opening our eyes to see what is going on around us. What needs transforming in our context? It will include pricking up our ears to hear (in regard to children) their ignored or suppressed voices. We must not be Victorian; tolerating their visible presence and rejecting their voice which may be crying out in pain inflicted by us or seeking to express their perspective. This reflection will include, as we have indicated, a careful listening to the Creator's authoritative voice, the voice that has the ultimate say on how things ought to be; the transforming voice to our status quo with its " ... you have heard...., but I say to you" (Mt. 5:21ff).

The Challenge of Our Context

What do we see when we open our eyes? We see children needlessly dying daily in their thousands. Rich Stearns from World Vision tells us of “26,575 children dying daily from preventable causes due to poverty.” Enough to get the world leaders’ attention if that was just one day’s toll in 100 jet liner crashes. We see unborn children dying as an expression of the human rights of those God gave the mechanism to cooperate with him in bringing life forth. We see the shameful scandal of abuse in its many forms, some of which we do not even recognise as such. We see the establishment of a phenomenon we have come to call ‘street kids.’ We see the horror of traumatized children supplied as cannon fodder in the battles they have no understanding of. We see the poisoning of their minds with easily accessible corruptions peddled on the Internet. We see the abandonment of children left in the care of electronic nannies as their parents sometimes are chasing the extra dollar to buy the extravagance that they see the neighbors enjoying. We see children playing the role of caregivers to one another as a result of the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

The Challenge of His Voice

As we see all this, we also hear the voice of one warning us not to put obstacles in their way (Mt. 18:6), but rather to facilitate their coming to him (Mark 10:14). He is interested in having a relationship with them. As we reflect on the value we place on children we discover that his interest in them starts while they are still in the womb, long before anyone recognizes them as great prophets or poets (Jer. 1:5; Ps. 139:13-14).

The Challenge to be Part of the Solution

The default position in many of our African contexts is to see children as important in wrong ways – as a proof of fertility, as status symbols, as forms of insurance in old age, yet as unimportant in other ways. Their feelings, let alone their opinions, are discounted. We tend

to think of them in future rather than the present terms when we say things like ‘children are the church of tomorrow.’ This makes us part of the problem. Jesus puts them in our midst right now. Moses wants them included in hearing the law of God (Deut. 6:1-7).

If we are to be part of the solution, we need a biblical view of children. God knows they are weak, defenseless, limited in experience and knowledge, but not less valued for all that. Rather, who they are places an obligation upon us: to protect them, to defend them, to nurture and guide them, to feed, clothe, educate, especially in the instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). This is to be done both through information sharing and modeling (Deut. 6).

Conclusion

It seems to me, that if the seminary is a *seedbed of useful reflection*, as I have called it, then it needs to take the lead in helping the church to think correctly, biblically about children. This will include challenging what I have described as our *default position*. The further challenge will involve the recognition that it’s not just about thinking correct thoughts, but doing what we know (Luke 10:26-28). It seems to me that the seminary has to be a community of praxis where our students are challenged, not only to come and learn and think, but also to start doing the truth, so that they can be models of what they teach in the world and so prove to be true agents of transforming our view and treatment of those to whom belongs the Kingdom of God.

RESPONSE 3

BY CORNELIU CONSTANTINEANU

Institutul Teologic Pentecostal, Bucharest, Romania

In their paper on “Child Theology: A challenge to seminaries,” Viktor Nakah and Johannes Malherbe offer important, clarifying statements about the nature, contribution and challenges that Child Theology brings particularly to the seminaries. They challenge all of us that if we want to take seriously the task and mission of the seminary we have to accept the challenge of Jesus, and place the child in the midst of our theologizing. Indeed, in the same way Jesus challenged the disciples in their thinking, attitude and behaviour vis-a-vis children, Child Theology challenges us today in our way of doing theology. In the same way Jesus challenged his disciples in the way they see, understand, envision and experience the Kingdom of God, we are challenged in our efforts for theological education to consider the radical nature of the Kingdom of God and its implications for the way we theologize and equip others for ministry.

The authors are right in pointing out that traditionally, seminaries have conducted their theological studies and training without much reference to children. Moreover, they show that traditional education in seminaries has several shortcomings and needs to be seriously reshaped and revised if they want to enable churches in their mission and response to the contemporary challenges.

Regarding the challenge child theology brings to seminaries, particularly to the African ones, the authors list five most important: the enormous *number* of African children representing a large proportion of contemporary societies; the tremendous *needs* of these children; a *history* of suffering under slavery, colonization and racism; the *marginalization* of children in society and also in churches and theological education; and lastly the challenge of *globalization* and the specific concerns that this particular development brings to the life of the church and theological education.

In this short paper I am not offering a response point by point to the issues raised in the paper of Nakah and Malherbe. Rather, I will attempt a few reflections on the challenges that child theology brings for theological training. I have to say from the very beginning that this is a relatively new endeavor for me in the theological field. I have previously neither reflected on nor interacted with child theology. However, as a person involved in theological education it did not take too long to realize that child theology, by highlighting the profound significance of Christ's action of placing the child in the centre of a theological conversation, brings significant insights and challenges for the life and mission of the church, in general, and for theological education in particular.

There are at least two major challenges that child theology makes for those involved in theological education: 1) children are important and they need to be taken seriously in our theological reflection and praxis, and 2) the logic of the Kingdom of God is radically different from the logic of our dominant culture and so we are constantly called to change and rethink the way we do theology, teach and relate to our students, colleagues and churches – all these from the perspective of God's way of doing things.

If these are true, then we have to raise awareness among the seminarians, professors and students alike of the great need to reflect theologically on the place of children in the life and mission of the church, to understand that children are important and that we need to take them seriously, as persons, as signs of God's Kingdom, as partners in God's mission, as representatives of Jesus. Indeed, we have to reverse the current situation in seminaries whereby “many theologians and ethicists consider reflection on children as ‘beneath’ the work of serious theologians and as fitting area of inquiry only for pastoral counselors and religious educators” (Bunge, 2011: 3).

We have to be careful, of course, that as we begin to reflect seriously on children and childhood, we avoid the narrow, simplistic and many times distorted and destructive views on children prevalent in many Christian circles today. Marcia Bunge correctly points out the fact that we should take into consideration and hold together, in proper tension, the six Biblical perspectives on children who present a

complex view of the child: fully human and made in the image of God yet also still developing beings who need instruction and guidance; gifts of God and sources of joy yet also capable of selfish and sinful actions; vulnerable and in need of protection yet also strong and insightful; with immature faith and childish behaviour and yet models of faith and sources or vehicles of revelation (Bunge, 2011, 5-9). Seminaries have to take very carefully into considerations these ways of understanding children so that students will have a proper, biblical understanding of the complex nature and reality of children in the church. It is very clear that seminaries have to add new courses addressing more directly children. This is a serious challenge that child theology brings to the seminary and it has to be considered urgently.

But child theology challenges the seminaries also to reflect, discuss, and imagine new ways of following and embodying the values of the Kingdom of God among the Kingdoms of this world. It calls us to realize that by placing a child in their midst Jesus calls the disciples and all of us, to repent and change the perception, understanding and way of life in the light of the nature and logic of the Kingdom of God (White: 2011). We are challenged to rethink the nature of Christian leadership from the perspective of the Kingdom of God which is radically different than the perspective found in the contemporary culture. The framework of the Kingdom of God represents the solid foundation for a much needed radical shift in our understanding of Christian leadership.

In our complex, pluralistic, global world, the churches around the world need leaders who are trained to cope with, handle and be able to live with the existing deep differences in all levels of our societies. Unfortunately, we have to admit with profound sadness that many evangelical schools around the world do not provide even that *minimum minimorum*. In addition, and more significantly, we need leaders who have a holistic understanding of reality, who are trained to engage deeply with God's world, with all aspects of cultures and societies; leaders who are able to offer Christian, biblically based, alternatives to the many puzzles of this world; leaders who instead of denying the painful realities of this world with an escapist kind of

mentality, rather agonize over these realities and struggle to contribute and give appropriate answers and solutions in the light of both the fallen state of creation and the subsequent social evil, and in the light of the present reality of the presence and power of the Kingdom of God among the Kingdoms of this world. The churches around the world need leaders who are caught by an irresistible vision of “making every thought captive to Christ.”

But such leaders can only be formed or modeled in seminaries that take seriously the call to repentance and humility that the Kingdom of God makes on all of us! Only such schools will have the ability, resources and the environment to produce adequate leaders for today’s world – something I call, “Believing and Practising Scholars!” I believe the future belongs to those leaders who maintain a strong *faith* in God as the only one who can finally bring the Kingdom of God; leaders who will have a passion for God, for the world and for people, and who will *embody* the gospel in concrete manifestations of love, truth, justice and reconciliation; and leaders who are able to *articulate* the gospel in contemporary, relevant language and categories. It will only be such leaders who are able to integrate their *beliefs*, their *praxis* and their *scholarship* into a holistic vision of the Kingdom of God that will be capable to proclaim the gospel for what it was, is and shall ever remain: a *public statement*.

The Gospel was never a matter of private interest; it is not and should never be reduced to a means of getting souls to heaven, or restricted to the individual inner soul! The gospel was always a public statement about the whole of reality, about God, about the world, about truth, about meaning, about life.

If there is any truth in the affirmation that “our conduct is shaped by the condition of our vision”, it follows from that, that in order for seminaries to build on the insights of child theology, they need a fresh vision of the Kingdom of God, a vision inspired by the action of Jesus placing a child into the centre of theological reflection and action. This is not just any vision but a vision of hope, of peace and reconciliation for this world; a vision for a culture of love and acceptance, of forgiveness and grace, of justice and mercy, a vision of

the Kingdom of God; a vision of the lordships of Christ over every aspect of reality.

While we are always painfully aware that we, ourselves, will never bring the Kingdom of God on earth, and so we will always bear with us, on this earth, at each little progress toward the final Kingdom of God, the condition of provisionality, this will not hinder us to struggle and pour our lives to spread the Kingdom of God until God will finally bring everything to a perfect completion. It is out of our passion for God, for His people and His world, and out of this vision for the transformation of the world and the anticipation of the Kingdom of God that we devoted our life to theological training.

And it is *this vision* that we hope to *inspire* in the young people committed to pursue theological training. What greater dream can there be than to help our students to find *themselves caught up in this vision!* It is to that end that, together, guided by this powerful vision and full of hope in the final triumph of God in history, we earnestly pray, study, live, work and rejoice.

Of course, much more could and should be said on the insights and challenges that child theology brings to seminaries. I have tried to highlight in this short reflection that to accept the challenge of child theology to our seminaries today, means we have to train a new generation of leaders who will ready to follow the logic of the Kingdom of God. This means people who are willing to show their vulnerability and failings, are humble and ready to admit their weaknesses; people who will be able to forgive and ask forgiveness; people who will follow Jesus and the logic of the Gospel – these will be leaders who live and act as signs of the Kingdom of God. I believe that as we will continue to reflect and engage child theology, our ministry through theological training will have many things to gain.

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THEME 4: CHILDREN IN MISSION – A CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Plenary Paper: Ruth Padilla De Borst

This paper takes as its starting point the story in Mark 10 where the disciples seek to stop (hinder) those bringing children to Jesus. The action and teaching of Jesus is a serious challenge to the prevailing assumptions and priorities of his disciples. She derives four pointers from this:

1. Indignation is a proper and necessary response to the exclusion of children;
2. Compassion toward children must be coupled with passion for justice;
3. There is a danger of instrumentalising children;

All these require a constant conversion to the logic of God's Kingdom.

Setting her thinking in a Latin American context she argued that there was an overwhelming case for calling the suffering of children "an infamy." The indignation and anger that result from encounters with the completely unacceptable treatment of children must raise questions about how far Christian movements and organizations are implicit in perpetuating the systems that maintain the status quo.

Christians are called by the teaching and example of their master to respond in compassion becoming involved in the repairing of broken relationships and drawing children into the circle of his love. But if this is detached from a passion for God's justice there is a risk that helping will serve to bolster the pride and sense of power of the privileged giver.

She points up the tension between children as signs, and at the same time as real human beings to be received, cared for and loved. Christian organizations must always be on their guard against "programmifying" or "objectifying" children to serve their

own purposes. If they fall into this trap then they neither receive real children as Jesus intended, nor receive their meaning as signs of the Kingdom.

This requires a continuous conversion process for all Christian organizations (including WVI, which Ruth had just joined) from the deadening logic of power and exclusion, to the embrace of the child-like logic of God's Kingdom.

Response Synopsis: D J Konz

There are three main points in this response paper¹:

1. *Theology Matters*. The disciples' theological understanding of the Kingdom of God was faulty. As a result that saw children, rather than themselves as hindering it. That is a serious mistake to make. It is sobering to realize that many Christian organizations working with children have flimsy theological foundations. There is an urgent need for intentional collective reflective practice that brings together practitioners and academics in a robust engagement with Scripture. He commends the methods and insights of the Child Theology Movement in this connection.
2. *Inclusion Matters*. Once the intention to include children takes hold, Christians and Christian organizations begin to encounter the reality of the power of social structures and values that have been instrumental in their exclusion. It is vital therefore that children are no longer excluded from the mainstream of theology and theological reflection on mission.
3. *How children are included Matters*. He adds to objectification and instrumentalisation, idealization and idolization. There is the need for examination of the subconscious adult ambitions and anxieties that can combine to "abuse a child's childness." This requires a delicate balance. Romanticising childhood does little to facilitate genuine encounters with real children rich and poor worldwide, and it only requires a short step to idolize them. We must take heed of the constant message of the

¹ This paper like the following one by Beth Barnett, though it was submitted in writing was not presented at the conference. The conference report therefore provides participants with the first opportunity to read it.

Child Theology Movement that theology of every sort is rightfully about God. So we must resist anything that detracts from God's central place.

The paper concludes with three further pointers in theological engagement with children and childhood: the need for theological thinking about inclusion and exclusion of children; in doing so the process must leave room for children to be free to be children; conversion to the logic of God's Kingdom will be aided as we see powerless children as prototypical citizens.

As we engage with children in a reflective manner, opening our lives to the Spirit of Christ, we will be challenged to change our attitudes, ambitions and assumptions. This is one thing for us as individuals, and another for our organizations and movements: both equally necessary.

Response Synopsis: Elizabeth Barnett

As a children and families ministry consultant, Beth is aware of the disconnect between church leaders (including pastors) and children. This "othering" perpetuates theological dissonance, and may help to account for polarisations including, for example, proclamation against activism. A clinical way of excluding children is to make them "special"! Mainstream theology to date has not provided the resources for countering such divisions.

Taking her lead from the plenary paper and starting with Mark 10, Beth reminds us that there is no separate "Child Theology": only theology in which children are amongst us, present and active. This is not theology for the sake of the child, but for the sake of all our theologies. We need to remind ourselves that children in church constantly experience the theology (good and bad) implied by, or even informing, our arguments and power struggles. The "self-dissection" of church (that is, by streaming people by ages, with the benefits that this affords) does not prevent children observing and experiencing how they are marginalized, as competition elevates methodology over humanity.

Two examples of the instrumentalisation of children given by Beth are the idea that seeks to "get the child to get the parent", and the concept of engaging with children to "build a better world." They both imply investment in the hope of a return. Grass roots engagement with children is not rewardable in such a sense.

To speak of the suffering of children is to seek to tell the whole story, the whole truth. Like Mark and Matthew we must be willing to implicate the disciples of Jesus in the process of exclusion. It is a story that must include the naming of adults and adult organisations inside and outside the church.

Children of Christians in affluent countries find themselves excluded from the Kingdom of God by minimalisation and trivialization: they do not experience ecclesial communities acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with their God. Much will have to be unlearned when they are adults if they are to recover the logic and nature of the Kingdom of God. Part of this will be the recovery of the biblical vision of Christ crucified: one who is more in solidarity with millions of children than with most Christian movements and organizations.

While resisting the instrumentalisation of children, it is vital to accept that the child placed by Jesus is reinstated by Jesus in community. Children are part of, agents of the Kingdom of God. This does not mean elevating children to positions of power within systems antithetical to the Kingdom paradigm, but stooping to adopt a new posture: listening, responding and “alongsiding.”

Response Synopsis: Peter Mageto

In our times, as in human history, others are silenced because of their lack of power, appearance, and connections. The child in the Gospels is a symbol of all those who are treated coldly by society.

This response took the four pointers of Ruth and sought to apply them in African contexts. Naming the evil that Christian organizations and movements engaged with children in Africa face, means providing alternatives. The fact is that mission from the beginning to the present did not model love and holiness, and was not informed by basic theories about children from the social sciences². So there is much work to be done to be relevant, sensitive and culturally aware.

The key location for this is the *oikos* (the household) of God. Here compassion and justice can be realized. The failure to see this is a massive failure in Christian theology and mission.

² These were assumed in the paper, not spelt out, and it is obviously one of the intentions of movements such as HCD to address this issue.

One of the sad ways in which children are instrumentalised in Africa is by portraying and exploiting them as poor and without dignity in films, newspapers and pictures as a means of soliciting money.

Peter ends with the touching story of a little child who said that there were five points to the compass, the last being “where I am.” The *Now and Next* conference seeks to start at this very place.

Response Synopsis: Catherine Stonehouse

Affirming the argument of the plenary paper, Cathy seeks to explore the subject through the lens of spiritual formation, with particular reference to the Scriptures. She starts with an intended outcome of WVI’s work summarized by Ruth: “that children should have opportunities to explore, experience and demonstrate God’s love in their lives”, and that this meant staff should undergo the same conversion process as the disciples.

She suggested three insights that should inform ministries with children:

1. God intends the biblical story to be formative
2. God intends that children meet God in THE (sic) Story
3. God intends that we make the biblical story our story.

The challenge to Christian organizations and the adults in them is to allow children to find their place in God’s story, by entering the story with them. The process is that as we get to know the heart of Jesus we find our place in the story alongside the first disciples, hearing the call and learning from children. This is modeled in Ruth’s paper.

In Haiti Cathy sought to help leaders respond to the crying needs of those who had suffered in the earthquake there in 2010. She was aware that spiritual damage can be done when our understanding of God is not adequate for the situation.

The call in the plenary paper for ongoing conversion led Cathy to conclude that “fully engaged, attentive respectful and tender love” embodied by Jesus in his relationships with children would foster continuing conversion for us. Another aspect is the need for theological conversion. Despite the work done thus far there is a long way to go before our practical, de facto theology equips us adequately for relating appropriately to children in the name of

Jesus. So this conference was an opportunity to enhance the process of continuing theological conversion.

Group Response Synopsis

We should not hinder children from exploring the picture of the whole revelation of God.

Activism can overtake theological reflection: it needs to be tempered with good theology.

It is imperative to integrate theological teaching and mission practice. Pastors, seminaries and NGOs/FBOs influencing students/pastors to think theologically about God/children.

Internship and practice-based learning would help pastors discover they are strong in some areas and weak in others.

Perhaps the hardest connect is with the professional NGOs and FBOs: here there is a lot of suspicion to overcome.

Following the stress on *oikos* it was recognised that there should be intentional mentoring of children both in family and church: churches might be seen as extended families of which smaller family units were a part.

The contrast between children in the here and now and children as investments can disguise the subtle interplay in practice. It is an adult desire to control the investment for our own ends, rather than to place it in the hands of Jesus and the service of the Kingdom of God that is at the root of the problem.

Is there a better way of saying “God intends” (Cathy Stonehouse paper)? What is needed is that God invites us all to explore an unending conversation and relationship with Him through life, and the many-textured stories in the Bible.

PLENARY

CHILDREN IN MISSION – A CHALLENGE TO CHRISTIAN MOVEMENTS AND ORGANIZATIONS

BY RUTH PADILLA DE BORST

Latin American Theological Fellowship, Costa Rica

World Vision Latin America

Introduction

Angela burst into the room, burning to share what had just happened.

Shirley was SO mad at me!

Why, what happened?

She yelled, “Why didn’t you tell me?”... She was so upset!

What hadn’t you told her?

You didn’t tell me your parents were white! –I never thought to tell her...

Angela had been born in Liberia as a daughter of the Mano people, and had lost her mom the day after she had come into the world. She had then been adopted by her white parents, development workers who were evacuated soon after, when the civil war broke out. Angela had grown up in Central America, with her US and Latin-American-born siblings and her Latino friends. Why had she never felt the need to explain herself when she started school in Boston? Life as is was, as an African born, Latino raised, black girl with white parents and siblings, was normal. In her mind, it did not demand explanation. She had been somewhat oblivious to the fact that she did not fit other people’s expectations or the categories of belonging constructed around her.

Until that day, Angela had been a child. That day, she began stepping into the adult world – a world of clearly bounded categories

of color, race, belonging and exclusion. A world that values people according to their acquisition power, their positional power, the power of their appearance, or their connections.

I've been asked to consider "Children in Mission: a challenge to Christian movements and organizations." Surely among you are people with far deeper involvement and reflection on this concern than one who has spent most of her adult life ministering among adult students, professionals, church leaders, and communities. So I offer these thoughts as the inarticulate babble of a baby, trusting that your experienced ears will filter some sense into them and that, by God's grace, they may contribute to our transformational involvement in God's world as promoters of God's good purposes for all people –including children. We will first enter into an encounter recorded in Mark 10 that challenges followers of Jesus in the first century and today to live within *a logic* distinct from that of the prevailing social order and its fixed categories. We will then explore, in light of that encounter, four implications for Christian movements and organizations engaged with children.

Hindrance Turned on its Head

No! This is not the right time. This is not the right place. Take them away! Don't you see the teacher is busy?

Jesus' disciples shoed them away. After all, their teacher was busy teaching the right interpretation of the law to the right people – including themselves, of course. And who did these people think they were, interrupting important Kingdom-building business for such an insignificant matter? Children! As law-abiding Jews, the disciples did not engage in prevailing Greco-Roman practices such as discarding babies when they judged them as weak or thought they could not care for them. But as far as they were concerned, Jesus surely had far more weighty concerns than laying hands on these socially insignificant, dependent, even disposable children! So they began pushing the bothersome group away.

Imagine their utter shock at Jesus reaction! "When Jesus saw this, he was indignant." He was angry at them when they were simply

acting as faithful guardians of their Rabbi! “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them.” Do not hinder *them!* They are the hindrance. They are...

Oh, all right... Here we go again with an act of compassion, it's good for public relations. Maybe he's doing it to gain favor with the Pharisees he has just antagonized. Or to recruit more followers for his cause. Let's be patient and help him get over with it quickly.

But Jesus is not done. This is not mere charity or a good photo op for donors. With this encounter, the disciples –and the witnesses of that day and of ours—are in for a lesson far more challenging to prevailing expectations and established categories.

Let the little children come to me for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

What on earth?! Everyone knows that it is the powerful that own and rule the land. The Emperor's grip is felt across the Mediterranean, with heavy taxes and oppressive armies. And the Temple hierarchy keeps tight reins on our religious – and economic – life. Kingdoms naturally belong to the rich and powerful. But Jesus says the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these children? To the powerless? To the nobodies of the world?

This clearly does not fit the ruling categories. However, for Jewish people knowledgeable of their Scriptures and tradition –Jesus' words should not have been so shocking. They echo the voice of the prophet of old – a voice we find recorded in texts like Isaiah 7:4 and 9:6 that affirm that God's promised and life-giving presence among God's people is not signaled by the arrival of some mighty warrior or some master politician, but by the birth of a simple child. Or like the text we find in Isaiah 11:6, where it is a little child who takes the lead in the peacemaking of creation. Yet, for the Israelites who received Isaiah's word upon their return from exile, as for Jesus' first followers under the yoke of Roman and Temple power, these voices run counter to most others in their context.

So Jesus continues, seeking to reinforce his subversive message:

Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.

Receive, he says, not grasp.¹ Receive the Kingdom as a child, expectantly open to awe, discovery and surprise – not pre-establishing every detail; trusting – not controlling; humbly and unabashedly dependent – not fabricating and guarding autonomy and self-sufficiency.

Only in embracing this posture, with a logic of powerlessness, can prejudiced, category-bound, self-seeking men and women even key into the existence of another way of being, and be ushered into the Kingdom of God.

Finally, Jesus does not simply refer to children or use them as an object lesson for discipleship. He authentically cares about *them*. So “he took the children in his arms, placed his hand on them and blessed them.” He lavishes those the Romans would discard, those the disciples have turned away, with fully engaged, attentive, respectful and tender love.

“So What” for Christian Movements and Organizations?

Now, what pointers does this encounter of Jesus with little children, and particularly with his baffled disciples, offer to movements and organizations that seek to get involved in God’s world as promoters of God’s good purposes for all people –including children? I will mention four pointers.

- 1) Indignation is a proper and necessary response to exclusion – particularly of children.
- 2) Compassion toward children, if it is Christ-like, is necessarily coupled with a passion for God’s justice.
- 3) Christian organizations engaged with children must always be on guard lest they instrumentalize them.

¹ Life and hope are found “in receiving and not grasping, in inheriting and not possessing, in praising and not seizing. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 79.

- 4) None of the above is possible without a constant conversion to the logic of God's Kingdom.

Let's briefly explore these pointers in the time we yet have.

1. Indignation is a proper and necessary response to exclusion – particularly of children. Allow me to paint a broad stroke picture of the condition of children in my part of the world. The darkest feature of our beautiful continent is inequality. In no other region is the gap between wealthy and poor as gaping as it is in Latin America.² We claim the wealthiest man on the face of the Earth, Mexican tycoon Carlos Slim. And meanwhile, almost six out of every ten children live –and die– in poverty. Two out of every five people living in extreme poverty are under twelve years old. Four out of every ten children are chronically undernourished. Far fewer girls have access to school than boys, so four out of every ten cannot read.³ Half the people suffering from HIV are under fifteen years old. And

The probability of a young Latin American being a murder victim is 30 times higher than for a European, and more than 70 times greater than for young people in countries like Greece, Hungary, England, Austria... or Ireland.⁴

These are more than alarming statistics. These intertwined factors compose a portrait of exclusion. Even as the world becomes more interconnected through commerce and technology, and it could appear that more people are granted opportunity for progress, more and more are actually being pushed away. And the ones who most

² Sites as the following develop this information:

[http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=38268;](http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=38268)

[http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100141?cookieSet=1&journalCode=soc;](http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100141?cookieSet=1&journalCode=soc)

http://www.iadb.org/exr/english/PRESS_PUBS/ipintr.html

³ Nils Kastberg, "La situación de la Infancia y Adolescencia en América Latina" in *Seamos como Niños*. Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós. 2007), 11-37.

⁴ LATIN AMERICA: Map of Violence-The Young People of Latin America 11/26/2008|RITLA
http://www.ritla.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4759&Itemid=284

suffer are the socially insignificant, dependent, even disposable children!

In the face of this, and no matter if their area of ministry is Bible translation, student work, higher education, theological education, agriculture or sports, all Christian movements and agencies must grapple with this portrait of exclusion and their place in it.

A first step is to name evil to its face. As Nicholas Wolterstorff declares:

In a world of scarcity in which everyone is in want, poverty would be a common challenge to everybody. But in a world of abundance in which many people are poor in order that a few others may stay rich, poverty—or better, wealth—is an infamy.”⁵

And what is the Gospel response to the infamy of exclusion? It is the very response Jesus gave to his disciples when they rejected the children. Indignation. Unquenchable dissatisfaction. Anger at all that hinders the most vulnerable from access to full life. An unswerving unwillingness to settle for things as they are in light of our conviction regarding things as they *should* be and *will* be when God’s Kingdom is fully present on earth as it is in heaven. Unavoidable questions for all Christian movements and organizations include: In what way are we complicit in the exclusion of the weakest and most vulnerable in our society? Are we perpetuating value systems, educational systems, socio-economic or political systems that are keeping children from access to the blessings God intends for them? *Indignation is a proper and necessary response to exclusion – particularly of children.* But we are not to remain stuck there. We are called to respond in compassion.

2. Compassion toward children, if it is Christ-like, is necessarily coupled with a passion for God’s justice. Since justice, unrelenting action to set things right, is at the heart of God’s character, no less should it be in that of God’s creatures. What does the Lord require of you, calls out the prophet Micah, but to do justice,

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 75.

love mercy and walk humbly with your God?⁶ Right relations with God spell themselves out in hearts of compassion and hands of justice. Jesus' disciples were shocked into awareness that day: their teacher did not give a quick handout and move on. He sought to repair broken relationships, to draw the excluded, the children, into his circle of love.

In his indicting book, economist Easterly affirms: "Poor people die not only because of the world's indifference to their poverty, but because of ineffective efforts by those who care."⁷ He spells out "the white man's burden":

The tragedy in which the West spent \$2.3 trillion in foreign aid over the last five decades and still has not managed to get twelve-cent medicines to children to prevent half of all the malaria deaths."⁸

Well-intended charity, individual expressions of compassion, and particularly big-scheme aid projects will not drive at the core of portraits of exclusion. Without a passion for God's justice, a vision for righting wrongs, and fostering right relations, these efforts can easily do little more than bolster the pride and sense of power of the privileged giver and reify worldly categories of ins and outs, ups and downs, valuable and disposable.

If, in contrast, Christian movements and organizations strive to look through the eyes of God's Kingdom, they will see the dignity, value and resourcefulness that has so often been effaced in those whom our society excludes. They will also gain perspective to understand the systemic machineries of injustice that maintain exclusion and exploitation.

They will not only see the individual girl forced into prostitution. They will also dare to take on the multinational business of sex traffic

⁶ Micah 6:8

⁷ William Russell Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 7.

⁸ Easterly, 4.

and corrupt public security systems. They will not merely be horrified by the fact that in the last fifty years more girls have been killed – simply because they are girls—than men have died in all the battles of the twentieth century.⁹ They will also denounce and seek to transform chauvinistic cultural values, they will to strengthen new forms of family belonging, and they will celebrate and promote policies like those being implemented in Rwanda, that are intentionally empowering women and so opening up a brighter future for girls.¹⁰ Because compassion toward children, if it is Christ-like, is necessarily coupled with a passion for God’s justice. And this leads us to the third pointer.

3. Christian organizations engaged with children must always be on guard lest they instrumentalize them. Big eyes, tender face. As we all know, few things move people to give than a photo of a child. And strings are pulled when the plight of young girls and boys is vividly painted. And so they should. However, and this is our third pointer, *Christian organizations engaged with children must always be on guard lest they instrumentalize them.* Yes: Jesus does use the occasion to challenge his disciples’ perspective. Jesus turns the table on them: they perceive the children as a hindrance; Jesus portrays *them* as such. “Do not hinder them,” he rebukes them. And yes: Jesus does take advantage of the opportunity to reveal more about the nature of God’s up-side down Kingdom. Yet the children remain the focus of his action: He sets other matters aside, takes the children in his arms, places his loving hands on them and blesses them.

Ministry done in the name of Jesus likewise must always face the ‘hindrance’ test. Are children simply being used for funding purposes? In all the relief and development programs, are children becoming objectified? Is our engagement with them so “programafied” that the actual children are lost or rendered a simple cog in the development machinery? Are our efforts facilitating or

⁹ Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky: Turning oppression into opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York: Random House, 2010, p xvii.

¹⁰ Kristoff, 211ff.

hindering the children's access to the arms of their loving Father? Questions like these demand constant organizational soul searching. Because, and this is our final pointer,

4. None of the above is possible without a constant conversion to the logic of God's Kingdom.

In an effort to be efficient, expedient and professional, institutional responses to the needs of children can too easily become governed by the logic of prevailing culture, the logic of power, in which people are categorized accordingly. The powerful, the moneyed, the educated, the adults, define the terms and reach down to the deprived –of whom children constitute the prototype.

The radical reversal of God's Kingdom is that it is precisely those who the world judges as deprived and excluded who belong most fully. Powerless children are the prototypical citizens in God's Kingdom.

World Vision International, the Christian organization I have recently become a part of, states, as an intended outcome of its work, that

All children and youth involved in WV related programs have opportunities to explore, experience, and demonstrate God's love in their lives and relationships, and are mobilized to lead a global movement for the well-being of children.

For this is to be so, not only in WVI programs but also in those of other Christian movements and organizations, staff, volunteers, donors, and field workers, we will all need to undergo the same conversion process as the disciples. Can we release our grasp and allow God's Spirit to free us from the deadening logic of power, with its exclusionary categories, and open ourselves up to the logic of God's Kingdom, which all the child-like are welcome to receive?

If we can, perhaps Angela will have a chance to grow into an adult with the freedom and joy of being God's beloved African born, dark-skinned, Latin-cultured, English-speaking beauty God made her to be, and to lead others in the pathway to fuller life, with reconciled relations with their Creator, with their fellows and with the rest of creation.

May God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit grant us the grace of walking alongside children as fellow discoverers, with awed expectancy, and so engage in the Triune God's mission of granting full life to all creation.

RESPONSE 1

BY D. J. KONZ

Compassion Australia

Introduction

‘Can we release our grasp and allow God’s Spirit to free us from the deadening logic of power, with its exclusionary categories, and open ourselves up to the logic of God’s Kingdom, which all the child-like are welcome to receive?’

This is the concluding challenge from Ruth Padilla de Borst’s paper, a challenge emanating from the narratives of Mark 10:13-16 and Matthew 18:1-14 in which children, welcomed by Jesus into the circle of his disciples, confront and confound the latter’s theologies, priorities and deep-rooted motivations. And which likewise, can confront, confound and – if we dare allow it – *convert* ours and those of our organisations, also.

I would like to acknowledge the great honour it is to respond to Ruth’s paper. With greater theological acuity than my own, Ruth has given voice to some of the same matters (and more) that I have observed working in a holistic mission organisation focusing on the development of children in poverty, and from involvement with Child Theology over a few short years.

By way of response, and as we take further steps towards applying our discussion on this topic, I tentatively venture to expand on just a few of the many excellent points that Ruth has made. We will focus our discussion under three key headings.

Theology Matters!

In her exposition of Mark 10:13-16¹ in which the disciples turn away the children being brought to Jesus, Ruth makes the astute point that Jesus’ anger is directed toward the disciples because *they*, rather

¹ Paralleled in Matthew 19:13-15 and Luke 18:15-17.

than the children being brought to him, were the hindrance to the work of God in that moment. With disordered priorities stemming from an ignorance of ‘the logic of God’s Kingdom’, and driven by what Professor Haddon Willmer of the Child Theology Movement describes as their ‘ambitions and anxieties’, the disciples became a hindrance to the embrace and inclusion of the last, the least and the littlest, seen in such passages and elsewhere as proper priorities in God’s economy.

The simple point here is: theology matters! For many of us, attending a theological conference, that truth will seem self-evident. However many Christian organisations and movements (including those engaging with children) function with surprisingly flimsy theological foundations, leaving them susceptible to defaulting to ‘the logic of prevailing culture, the logic of power, in which people are categorized accordingly,’ to cite Ruth’s turn of phrase.

The common but unhelpful divide between practitioners theologians (and often, missiologists/theologians) is in urgent need of bridging, perhaps through a process of intentional collective reflective practice,² in which the enthusiasm, praxis, and now often ‘marketing’ of mission are deeply informed and as appropriate challenged by a foundational dialectical engagement with Scripture and robust theological reflection, so that ‘the logic of God’s Kingdom’, as Ruth so aptly puts it, continues to establish, subvert and convert the priorities and practices of Christian organisations.

In doing so, the children placed by Jesus in *our* midst have a role to play, just as did the children Jesus welcomed into the midst of his first disciples. The methods and insights of the Child Theology Movement promise to be instructive in this regard.

² A good starting point for such is Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995).

Inclusion Matters!

Ruth has rightly heralded the call for the inclusion of children by Christian movements and organisations, and likewise for proper indignation at the injustice of the social, physical, and educational and broader exclusion of children around the world.³

Such exclusion finds roots in historical-patriarchal social structures and values, seen in operation in Jesus' day; even during relatively recent historical eras such as the European Enlightenment was childhood viewed, in Jürgen Moltmann's words as 'only a preliminary stage to the true and full humanity of adults.'⁴ In addition to the very real entrenched social exclusions of children which Ruth has highlighted, until recently (with a handful of exceptions) children have subsequently also remained largely excluded from theology and mission.⁵ This neglect, it could be argued, has in turn contributed to the ongoing social exclusions children continue to suffer; a Church which truly grasped the profundity of Jesus' words, 'whoever welcomes a little child... in my name, welcomes me' (Mt 18:5), and that the essence of religion which pleases the Father is to care for the widow and orphan (alongside purity from the world's corruption, James 1:27) would not rest whilever children continued to suffer poverty, preventable death and illness, abuse and neglect.

³ It is indeed pause for thought for Christian organisations to consider whether they are, in Ruth's words, 'perpetuating value systems, educational systems, socio-economic or political systems that are keeping children from access to the blessings God intends for them.'

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, "Child and childhood as metaphors of hope," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (n.d.): 594.

⁵ Bonnie Miller-McLemore writes that 'Children have not been proper subject matter for theology, not because they were unimportant but, more simply, because they had vanished from the sight of the typical male theologian sequestered in his study, removed from the daily grind of childcare.' From the "Foreward," in David Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A theology of childhood* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), viii. Perhaps a similar assertion can be made regarding mission. It is no coincidence that children have been neglected in both simultaneously, for the two are ultimately inseparable; the absence in one has led directly to the absence in the other.

It is encouraging to see that such exclusions are beginning to be addressed, leading in turn to a growing mobilisation of Christian organisations and movements toward engagement with children. The Scriptures, as Roy Zuck, Dan Brewster, and others have highlighted, are replete with examples of children playing pivotal roles in the redemption-history of God's people.⁶ Together with Jesus' interactions with children (welcoming, healing, delivering, resurrecting / resuscitating and affirming as 'signs' of the Kingdom), the Scriptures repeatedly testify that children have full, rightful places in the *missio Dei*, both as participatory agents and objects of the divine outreaching.

However, without entering into the debates of the past half century about the relationship between *missio Dei* and human mission, it is nevertheless pertinent to observe that when we come to human participation in God's redemptive mission, there are nevertheless cautions to be sounded about the *way* in which children are included.

How Children are Included, Matters!

Here, Ruth highlights two issues of concern regarding the inclusion and participation of children: objectification and instrumentalization. I would venture to add two more: idealisation and even idolisation.

⁶ For example, the quick thinking and courage of Miriam, the sister of the baby Moses, enabled him to be raised amidst his Hebrew family and tribespeople, albeit as child of the Pharaoh's daughter; young Samuel prophesied to Eli when priestly corruption and parental indulgence distracted them from hearing the voice of Yahweh; David received the anointing of a king and braved battle with Goliath while still in his boyhood and youth; Esther, Josiah, the servant girl of Namaan and other children all played important roles in the unfolding of God's purposes. For more, see Roy Zuck, *Precious in His Sight: Childhood and children in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), and Dan Brewster, *Future Impact: Connecting child, church and mission*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion International, 2010).

As Ruth suggests, Christian organisations have sometimes fallen into the regrettable posture of objectifying children in their marketing, fundraising and development efforts. In much the same way, mission movements and organisations which develop an emphasis on children also risk objectifying them – for example, as ‘unreached people groups’ or even as ‘number of beneficiaries’ – in which the individuality and humanity of children bearing the *imago Dei* – become lost behind adult outcomes, agendas and to efforts to evangelize, ‘save’, or grow the ‘impact’ of an organisation ‘for the Kingdom of God.’ Perhaps even worse, as children come into focus as subjects (agents) of mission, they are at risk of becoming ‘strategies’ and vehicles for the attainment of the same adult goals (no matter how ‘godly’ those goals may seem).

To instrumentalize the child in service of adult purposes – particularly where those purposes are driven by unexamined if subconscious adult ‘ambitions and anxieties’ – is, to borrow a phrase from my dear friend Dr Keith White, to ‘abuse a child’s childness.’ As we seek to include children in the full life and mission of God’s community, we must actively strive to dignify, humanize, and respect each child’s childliness, inviting them to participate fully in the life and mission of Christ by the Spirit, but with the freedom to do so on a child’s terms, not serving the purposes of the adult world. Of course it remains necessary to educate, shepherd and expose children to opportunities to learn and grow in courage, faith and deed. Achieving a delicate balance here is undoubtedly no easy task, but remains one for which we must strive.

Two further risks for Christian organisations and movements committed to championing the cause and inclusion of children are: idealisation and even idolization, to which I turn briefly.

Idealising children is a form of objectification in which we romanticise childhood and view it as the preferred, ideal human condition. There is a tension here with understanding what Jesus is actually saying when he states ‘unless you change and become like

children, you cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven.⁷ In the affluent, middle-class Western context, in which my family finds itself, it is easy to retrospectively and wistfully view childhood as a life stage of innocence and wonder, unencumbered by adult cares, concerns, seemingly intractable sinfulness and cynicism. Perhaps, in some contexts and experiences, there is a measure of truth in this view. However the reality for the majority of children globally involves much greater hardship, demands, and all too often outright suffering; romanticizing childhood does little to mobilize the body of Christ to address these real and pressing injustices in the gritty, raw but real circumstances faced by the vast majority of children globally.

Idolising children is just a short hop from idealising them.⁸ Idolatry is to give something the status of a god; in fact to place on par with or above the one true God. For those of us passionate about children, a danger is that children become such a central object of our mission, our actions and even our theologizing that they receive greater attention than does God and his Kingdom. In this regard I appreciate the efforts of the Child Theology Movement to consistently reiterate that theology is rightfully about God, not (in the first instance) about children; similarly, it is Jesus, not the child, who is the primary protagonist in Matthew 18 and Mark 10; without him, no

⁷ On this point, Jurgen Moltmann's thoughts may be clarifying: 'We can only come into the kingdom of God if we receive it like a child with empty hands. That does not mean one has to go back to being a child (which would be childish) but become upon analogy "like a child." We don't have to imitate children to become part of God's future, rather we must be in solidarity with them, respecting their intimate proximity to God's future. The point is not that children are closer to the kingdom of God because of their especially childlike properties (like innocence or naiveté that adults have lost), but rather that the kingdom of God is closer to them because they are loved, embraced, and blessed by God.' "Child and childhood as metaphors of hope," 600.

⁸ Even some secular writers and commentators have adopted such terminology, describing both an extreme idealisation of childhood and youth, and some modern (and for that matter, ancient) parenting philosophies which communicate to children that they are the sun around which all other human planets orbit. See, for example Daniel Donahoo, *Idolising Children* (Sydney, NSW: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).

teaching would have occurred. We might say then that children are to be included in, but are not to dominate our theology, for if we replace our rightful central emphasis on God, with the child, we turn our primary affections from where they rightfully rest.⁹

Conclusion

Ruth's four pointers are an excellent response framework. Based on our discussion here, we might add the following :

- 1) Christian organisations and movements should think carefully and *theologically* about the manner in which they include – or exclude – children.
- 2) As we work to overcome exclusion, we must make our own welcoming inclusion of such a nature that children remain free to be children, unencumbered by adult expectations, attitudes, and agendas. The phrase Ruth cites in regard to children – ‘explore, express and experience God's love’ is, for mine, a helpful and healthy description.
- 3) As Ruth has concluded, we must continue to be converted to the logic of God's Kingdom, in which ‘powerless children are the prototypical citizens.’

To this end, as we engage with children themselves, will we do so in a reflective manner, opening our lives to the Spirit of Christ, to allow Him through those children to challenge our attitudes, expose our ambitions, adjust our assumptions and continually convert us, so that we too might enter into and under the reign of God on earth in anticipation of the eschatological new creation where age, gender, race, powerlessness and social insignificance no longer have force as categories of exclusion? Can we extend the same to our organisations and movements, so as to collectively ‘release our grasp’ and allow the Spirit to free us from the ‘deadening logic of power,’ embracing

⁹ This was the test of affections to which Abraham was subjected with his son Isaac on Mount Moriah: the child of the promise was not to supplant the One who had made and kept the promise, and who alone could bear the weight of worship.

instead the counter-intuitive but profoundly transformative logic of God's Kingdom – a Kingdom which embraces the little, the least, and the last? And in doing so, we may, by the grace of God, build – and receive – that Kingdom, also.

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RESPONSE 2

BY ELIZABETH WALDRON BARNETT

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Introduction

Ruth Padilla De Borst offers somewhat of an unnecessary disclaimer – or perhaps an apology - of one who has spent her ministry with adults – students, church leaders. Her humility is beautiful.

But in my context, this type of disclaimer is heard frequently and it is not an expression of humility, so much as a voice of abdication and disowning. As a children and families ministry consultant I hear church leaders, heads of organisations and movements and pastors routinely claim no experience of children, no knowledge of children. These people are often in fact parents – they co-habit with children and yet express distance and otherness from children.

The ‘othering’ of children sustains a theological dissonance. The perpetuation of one anthropological vision of child and another of adult fuels adult polarisations in theology –

discipleship against evangelism,

proclamation against activism,

truth against compassion.

In organisations and movements it has become culturally accepted to ‘other’ children. To regard them as a ‘speciality.’ Sometimes, this is a helpful way of keeping account, and making sure we remember children. However, it has also taken on a destructive function of isolating children – and allowing vast sections of the community an excuse to ignore children.

Mainstream theology has served us poorly in this regard and has on the whole failed to deliver the resources it might for countering such reactions as division and exclusion. The theological resources for a thorough-going anthropological unity are not far from us. I am

confident that they lie securely embedded in the witness and provocations of the biblical texts.

Ruth, working from Mark's gospel, (as the Child Theology movement follows Matthew 18), demonstrates how Jesus' action of placing the child in the midst qualifies our theologising. We are not to do a separate 'child theology' on its own, but to do only 'Theology' – our best and most textured thinking with children amongst us, present and active, engaged and influential. This is not a theological reorientation only for the sake of the child, but for the sake of all our theologies. The first challenge to organisations and movements is to audit the theological frameworks of our actions and systems for gospel consistency – in our affirmations equally of both children and adults.

It is in the context of adult arguments that the child is placed:

We must read this with chagrin, as a warning - and recognise the deliberate prophetic act of Jesus. Children live in the midst not only of our theology, but also in the midst of our arguments, our competitions, our ego strutting. Thus, children are affected, terribly affected, by our conflicts and power struggles. Jesus won't let us get away with deceiving ourselves that we can take our theological disputes out the back, out of view of our children. Children are present, and we must constantly ask ourselves – what is it that children experience of us as adult disciples of Jesus?

The church in western culture has undergone a self-dissection – creating separate silos for ages and classes and ethnicities, and gospel movements and organisations in many ways have followed suit. While we segregate our children – often under the banner of an educational or developmental agenda – they observe and experience how this functions to exclude and relativise their participation in community. While adult organisations contest authority or veracity or authenticity of their practice with one another, it becomes exceedingly evident to children that they **are** still marginal – competition elevates methodology over humanity. This may be particularly prevalent in the western contemporary protestant church, which is a reservoir from which leadership and workers are drawn. The segregation of children from adults forms a base assumption

which then influences the practice and theology of other movements. Movements and organisations, resisting this have a significant role to play alongside the church as a prophetic voice – one crying in the wilderness – advocating and in fact taking another way.

Children as Instruments in Human Hands

Ruth cautions against the exploitation of children as ‘instruments’ in our process of theology. This voice must be heard among organisations and movements who work directly with children, and in communities where children are present.

Constantly in Christian discourse we hear phrases that ‘instrumentalise’ children – in evangelism it can be as bald as “get the child get the parent” – a phrase which posits the adult is the premier goal and the child is simply a means to a (perceived) greater end (though the objectification of both child and adult is tragically apparent). This same instrumentalisation infects much of the popular rhetoric surrounding aid and development or social justice organisations. Here engagement with children becomes framed in the cause of building a better world.

I am not accusing these particular organisations and movements, in their actual relationship with children, of submitting to this idolatry. I maintain great trust and regard for the quality of grass roots engagement that occurs, both at the social justice action and the, (for want of a better term), purely evangelistic ends of the spectrum of gospel concern, along with the diversity of expressions that organically combine proclamation, demonstration and transformation along that continuum. However, once we are one step removed from grass roots participation, a narrative of development and progress emerges in many Christian organisations and movements, in my culture at least, which speaks of caring for children as a means to improving the world – appealing to a fundamentally selfish desire on the part of givers, sponsors, donors and protagonists, dressed in acts of kindness to children.

In this paradigm our relationship to children is predicated on a burdensome expectation that children will ‘make good’ our

investment. Compassion towards children and their communities is somehow meant to provide the giver with a better future.

Christian organisations and movements must be careful in the representation of their work. Doing it unto the least of these, is not a rewardable investment in the Kingdom of God, and we must resist the rhetoric that would seek to motivate actions that look like championing justice, when they simply reinstate an economy of growth and greed for the giver.

When we speak of the suffering of children in our world we must tell the whole story of evil. As Mark (and Matthew also) - rather embarrassingly for the disciples - break etiquette. They expose the destructive dysfunctions among the disciples with clarity and connectedness to the existential reality for children; so, too, we must tell whole stories, whole truths. When we speak of child soldiers, we must name the manufacturers of their weapons. When we speak of child prostitutes we must name the business partners and clients. When we speak of drug dependent children we must name their lines of supply - including all of the beneficiaries of the system. We must especially pay attention to tracing the six degrees of separation (or possibly fewer) between each of these children and ourselves - tracking the sources of intervention between them and freedom and justice. Here if we are to be evangelists like the four in our New Testament, we must be willing to implicate disciples of Jesus in the truth-telling about what restrains, impedes and excludes children from justice and free participation in community with Jesus.

Other examples can be drawn from the experience of children in the over educated, over resourced, over sensitised cultural environments of North America, much of Europe and Australia where I am living with my own children. Our children are excluded from the community of faith through distraction and dissuasion. They are theologised by the experience of exclusion, minimisation and trivialisation. Most Western Evangelical Christians genuinely believe that wisdom and maturity in the Kingdom of God belongs to adults, especially those who have studied at a Bible College. The witness of the New Testament alone clearly runs against this, locating the Kingdom of God amongst the children, the so called foolish, the

marginalised. Thus in our culture, children are betrayed by their own ecclesial communities, and the truth of the gospel of doing justly and loving mercy and walking humbly with God is obscured for children. The Kingdom of heaven belongs to them – but they know it not.

Having been prevented from acknowledging their participation in the Kingdom as children, as they grow they depart from us, wondering where God may be found, where the Kingdom is breaking in. It can take years to rediscover the truth which might have been known intuitively as children, were it affirmed and not obliterated by significant adults. No wonder it is so difficult for Christian adults to act on behalf of the marginalised! They must unlearn their un-theology in order to recover the ‘logic of the powerless.’

Somehow we have lost our biblical vision of Christ crucified. On the cross we see Jesus, bloodied, vulnerable, at risk, disregarded, violated, physically weak and fragile, powerless, inarticulate, with no advocate, beyond reason or rationalism. The crucified Christ bears more in common – in solidarity we might say -with millions of children, than with most Christian organisations and movements.

Children as Instruments in God’s Hands

Having given significant space here to supporting Ruth’s critique of the instrumentalisation of children in the hands of human, if Christian, organisations and movements, there is a qualifying condition which needs attention.

While we resist with all vigour the employment of children as a mechanism for human structural agendas, we must not completely ignore the function and agency of children in the world: that is the significance of children as instruments in the hands of God.

The Child Theology Movement attends specifically, not only to the child in the midst – but the child placed by Jesus in the midst. Thus while we repent and seek conversion, as Ruth has called us, from exploitation of children as instruments, the place of children as agents of the Kingdom, as ministers of the gospel of Jesus must be affirmed. Children employed by Jesus are not instrumentalised, but are reinstated in community.

Ruth envisages for us, through her particular organisation, the young who not only experience the Kingdom of God but who are, themselves, mobilised to lead as the ‘powerless prototypical citizens’ of the Kingdom.

What can this actually mean – without betraying our important prior commitment to relinquishing a grasp on children as tools or weapons or appliances in our own causes?

It cannot mean that we simply exchange children for adults in positions of power within systems that are fundamentally antithetical to the Kingdom paradigm. There are movements which seek to do this – elevating children as imitators of adult preachers, prophets, missionaries. It may mean that adults disengage from such systems, and in that freedom, develop new ways of relating with children, which neither objectify (as a means to an end) nor subjectify (as substitute protagonists within power structures) children. It means that adults are required to adopt a new posture in relation to children – of listening, responding and alongsiding.

RESPONSE 3

BY PETER MAGETO

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Introduction

Ruth Padilla de Borst begins her paper in an African style, with a story. In this story, Angela was African born, adopted and Latino raised and only became aware of her world bounded categories of color, race, belonging and exclusion at a certain age. Just as it was for Angela, it is for the African Child. In an African setting, children are born in a family, a clan, a tribe. Children are considered God's gifts to the family. You only become aware of this at a certain age, and their specific roles in relating to members of such categories. Angela's context was that of confusion, silence, non-status. Angela was truly removed from her life mission, leave alone the mission of God. No one dared to ask Angela how she would be involved in mission. This is what continues to happen in our time as children are not asked about missions, or being involved in mission or being considered in mission.

Children as Hindrances or Opportunities

Ruth argues succinctly that we live in a generation that covets sin. A generation that knows nothing about others, except itself. To be more specific, we live at a time when individually and corporately, we seek to silence others. We silence others because of their lack of power, appearance, and connections. It is against this backdrop that Ruth introduces us to Mark 10 which provides an opportunity to rethink of our prevailing social order and fixed categories just as it was in the time of Jesus and his disciples "that a child is the symbol of a person who is treated coldly by society."¹

¹ Ahn Byung-Mu, Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark, in R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed. *Voices from the Margin, Third edition*, 87-102 (New York: Maryknoll, 2006), 97.

In Mark 10, the disciples shoved the children away. Jesus challenged his disciples to rethink their understanding of the Kingdom of God. Therefore they shoved the children away. In the African context, a child is central in any given setting, family or social order. The focus indeed is on the disciples who are frustrating their efforts. We must be reminded that in Mark 9: 36-37, Jesus had embraced a child and identified himself with its vulnerability and powerlessness, saying, “whoever receives one of these children in my name receives me...” In fact, Ruth is correct, Jesus is not on a Public Relations exercise, he is providing social order change, “*For the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*” In other words, “To receive God’s rule like a child depends on the qualities of vulnerability and trust, transparency and defenseless, integrity and wholeness, expectation and humility.”²

Toward the Future: A Child Engages Christian Movements and Organizations

From Jesus’ encounter with the children in Mark 10, and the examples Ruth provides, there are four key pointers that Christian Movements and organizations are challenged to consider in their mission engagement. Ruth’s four pointers can be mentioned of any child in the continent of Africa. From poverty, hunger, lack of education, exploitation, malaria, HIV and AIDS, to refugees and child-soldiers. It is the children who suffer. They suffer because of the politics of exclusion according to Ruth. The politics of exclusion may sound good, but in some contexts, it goes beyond exclusion. However, in Africa, it is the Christian movements and organizations that have been at the forefront in providing education, healthcare, fed the hungry, etc. It is OK for us to give credit where it is due. Even in the 21st century, Christian movements and organizations have opportunities to confront social, economic, political or religious systems that sometimes are portrayed as inclusive but very

² Herman C. Waetjen, *A Reordering of Power: A Socio-political Reading of Mark’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

segregating. Indeed, this is what Ruth challenges Christian movements and organizations to address in embracing Children in mission.

First, Ruth challenges the Christian movements and organizations to “*name the evil to its face.*” I will extend her argument that naming alone is not enough, but also providing an alternative to the named evil will lift the lives of the children. The naming of the evil to its face must include the fact that mission has been conducted by missionaries and missiologists who did not train or understand the relevance of basic truths, love, holiness of the gospel. It is also a challenge that some lacked the basic theories and methods of the humanities and human sciences so that they can understand the people they serve. “Otherwise theologians will answer questions people do not ask and be seen as irrelevant, and they will not be aware what of the Gospel they proclaim is from Scripture and what is from their socio-cultural contexts.”³

Second, Ruth challenges Christian movements and organizations to *demand for Christ like justice*. This is the central point of Padilla’s paper. The Christ-like justice declares, “The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing, “ (Luke 4: 16-19). To engage in Christ like justice means Christian movements and organizations risk their faith in proclaiming the good news in a compassionate manner which is the basis of engaging children in mission. For Ruth, God’s justice entails “a vision for righting wrongs, and fostering right relations, these efforts can easily do little more than bolster the pride and sense of power of the privileged giver...” This, Ruth argues, can only be overcome through compassion. However, compassion, if not well articulated, can create a false hope. For compassion driven by God’s justice is key in Ruth’s presentation.

³ Tite Tienou and Paul. G. Hierbert, “Missional Theology,” in *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, April 2006: 219-238, 231.

Ruth's embrace of prophet Micah's declaration of doing justice, loving mercy, walking humbly with God can be realized if Christian movements and organizations engage in "understanding the systemic machineries of injustice that maintain exclusion and exploitation" of children in mission. This engagement can take place within the community of believers which is itself the true *oikos* (household) of God according to 1 Tim. 3: 15; Ephes. 2: 19-20. It is within the household of the community of believers that God's reign of justice, love and mercy find meaning, for in this household, there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, young or old, children or adults (Gal. 3: 28).

This household of God boils down to what I call the Christian home, an area that Ruth does not mention. In the years past, the missional church sought to engage members in the home. Even in the 21st century, it is important for Christian movements and organizations to embrace the Christian home as one of the chief points of contact between the gospel and children. Given the fact that the church around the world is largely children and young people, any failure to address the meaning of the Christian home as a component of engaging children in mission would be a massive failure in Child theology.

As Dana Robert reminds us, "the Christian home should continue to emphasize partnership among its members under Christ as head of the home...The Christian home should promote the well-being of each of its members, including nurturing individual gifts as well as communal responsibilities."⁴ In the Christian home, both the boy and girl child are given due consideration. While Ruth makes a call for the girl child to be favourably considered by giving an example of what Rwanda as a country is doing, Christian movements and organizations should not ostracise and exclude the boy child at all. Rather, may it be the intention of such movements and organizations to embrace the children of God as they come or go to them.

⁴ Dana L. Robert, "What happened to the Christian Home? The Missing Component of Mission Theory" In *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, July 2005: 325-340, 337.

Third, Ruth challenges Christian movements and organizations that *instrumentalizing children must be resisted*. The temptation for Christian movements and organizations to instrumentalize children through misuse of films, newspapers, pictures and sending the same back to their motherlands for fundraising should be addressed. The fact that most Christian movements and organizations work in vulnerable situations that emanate from social, economic and political systems that undermine the dignity of God's people, must not become a license for such organizations to instrumentalize children in mission. In cases where Christian movements and organizations fall into the temptation of exploiting the poor children through their activities, such should be highlighted and stopped immediately. Jesus provides a picture that embraces children and not instrumentalizes them, for their social transformation in God's Kingdom. Any organizations that seek to use children for funding purposes only must be resisted. It is true, sometimes they drive guzzlers to poverty-ridden places, hence become an impediment in mission. Ruth raises pertinent questions that Christ Christian movements in Africa should answer.

Fourth, Christian movements and organizations are challenged to *keep constant conversation of God's Kingdom*. In the Lord's prayer, there is a clear call to replace earthly Kingdoms with God's Kingdom when we proclaim, "Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as in heaven." This is what Christian mission is all about, constantly conversing of God's Kingdom. Ruth has shown that Christ's invitation of his disciples to consider children in his mission was an eye-opener to understand the receiving of the Kingdom in a different manner. Ruth shows the child-like characteristics of receiving the Kingdom expectantly, discovery, surprise, trusting not controlling, humbly and dependent. Indeed, in engaging constant conversation of God's Kingdom in the child way, there is a logic of powerlessness, broken prejudice, boundless categories, not self-seeking. Truly, engaging constant conversation of God's Kingdom in a child way may enable Christian movements and organizations to centralize the needs of children in mission.

Let me conclude with remarkable words from a small child who was once asked by his teacher, “How many points to the compass are there?” His reply was “Five”: North, South, East, West, and where I am.” As I wish to ask: Church, Christian Movements and Organizations, *WHERE IS THE CHILD?* Perhaps, and I pray, this is the reason why this conference is taking place, that instead of looking for great, prolific, and magnificent individuals, churches, organizations, we are being summoned to start where we are, with the children of God.

In contextualizing Angela, we are reminded that ours is not to run away from the context God has given us, but to ensure as Christians and the Church generally, we are being called to decide the extent to which the Church is prepared to put its prestige, wealth, magnificent churches, highly trained clergy, and all the other things that make Christian churches, institutions and organizations on the altar of God so that those who do not know Christ may be brought to a saving knowledge of him. Indeed, Ruth reminds us that mission, social concern, and evangelism are segments of one piece of cloth, may we intentionally let the Children come to Christ.

RESPONSE 4

BY CATHERINE STONEHOUSE

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Introduction

Ruth Padilla de Borst has provided an insightful and challenging paper for our reflection. She guides the reader in a thoughtful viewing of the events in Mark 10, making clear the child's place in the Kingdom of God and the way in which Jesus welcomed children. I strongly affirm her call for us to express indignation in the face of exclusion—particularly of children—and compassion toward children as well as a passion for God's justice. Her warning to guard against instrumentalizing children and her emphasis on constant conversion to the logic of God's Kingdom are extremely important. I deeply appreciate Ruth's development of these themes.

In my research, writing, teaching and ministry with children, I have focused on understanding the spiritual formation of children and how we as parents and members of faith communities can join children on their spiritual journey, enhancing the formation of both children and adults. Because of my background I have chosen to reflect on this excellent paper through the lens of spiritual formation.

Toward the end of her paper, Ruth quotes an intended outcome of World Vision's work, that:

All children and youth involved in WV related programs have opportunities to explore, experience, and demonstrate God's love in their lives and relationships, and are mobilized to lead a global movement for the well-being of children.

She also claims that to reach such a goal "staff, volunteers, donors, and field workers... will all need to undergo the same conversion process as the disciples" (6). I am using these statements to lead into reflections on the formation of children as participants in God's Kingdom and the formation—constant conversion—of adults involved in Kingdom work with children.

Formation of Children as Participants in God's Kingdom

The World Vision intended outcome statement, which I assume would be embraced by many other Christian missions and organizations, raises questions in my mind. How do we provide opportunities for children to “explore, experience, and demonstrate God’s love”? What formative influences might mobilize children “to lead a global movement for the well-being of children”? There are many answers to these questions, but in this brief presentation I want to focus on just one influence, the formative power of Scripture.

As a Christian educator I have always valued the Scripture’s role in the spiritual nurture of children, but a few years ago, as I read *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen,¹ I was gripped in a new way by how profoundly important the story of Scripture is to the child’s spiritual formation. I want to share just a few insights from Bartholomew and Goheen, as a basis for reflection.

What was God’s intention in giving us revelation largely in the form of a story? Three points from Bartholomew and Goheen address this question and offer important insights for our ministries with children. These authors claim:

1. God intends that the biblical story be formative
2. God intends that children meet God in THE Story
3. God intends that we make the biblical story our story.

Let’s look briefly at each of these intentions.

1. God intends that the biblical Story be formative

Bartholomew and Goheen state: “It is the divine author’s intention to shape our lives through [the Bible’s] story. To be shaped by the story of Scripture we need to understand two things well: the

¹ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

biblical story is a compelling unity on which we may depend, and each of us has a place within that story.”²

The Bible is not just a collection of ancient stories, or a book of facts and life lessons to be learned. To be formed by God’s story, children need to hear the unified, exciting, unfolding story of God’s acts in history.³ Specific events need to be connected to the flow of God’s plan and actions. For children to really know and make that story their own, they need to experience the whole story, not just once, but repeatedly throughout their childhood.

Children are growing up in cultures that live by a story that is very different from God’s Story. For the biblical story to become their primary, meaning making story, it is crucial that they learn God’s whole story, and that they learn it as early as possible. Where are the children with whom we minister learning that story?

2. God Intends that Children Meet God in THE Story

Listen to Bartholomew and Goheen again, “as we enter deeply into the story of the Bible, God will be revealed to us. We will also find ourselves called to share in the mission of God and His purposes with the creation.”⁴ We do want children to know basic biblical facts.

² Ibid., 12.

³ Bartholomew and Goheen (27) see this unified Story as a drama in 6 Acts:

Act 1 – God Establishes His Kingdom: Creation

Act 2 – Rebellion in the Kingdom: Fall

Act 3 – The King Chooses Israel: Redemption Initiated

Scene 1 – A People for the King

Scene 2 – A Land for His People

Interlude – A Kingdom Story Waiting for an ending: The Intertestamental Period

Act 4 The Coming of the King: Redemption Accomplished

Act 5 Spreading the News of the King: The Mission of the Church

Scene 1 – From Jerusalem to Rome

Scene 2 – And into the World

Act 6 – The Return of the King: Redemption Completed

⁴ Ibid., 22.

But our ultimate purpose is that they will get to know God—not just know *about* God, but *know* God.

Children can come to know God as they enter the stories of Scripture and see God in action, discover God’s character event by event, and hear God speak to them in the story. We want them to know the God who loves each child, a God who is with them in suffering and who is passionate about justice. They get to know God when we, children and adults together, enter God’s story to celebrate the wonder and mystery of God’s plans and God’s ways. It happens when we present the biblical narrative as God’s story with God as the main character. When we introduce the human characters in God’s story, we want to tell their stories in a way that allows children to see God at work in Samuel’s life, to see God’s plans for Esther, and how God response to David, to discover God’s grace, mercy, and justice.

Do we believe this is possible? Can children truly experience God’s presence and love in the biblical narrative? Will God speak to them at the point of their need? I believe that as they enter the biblical narrative, the Spirit of God guides children, often affectively and intuitively, to grasp the truth their hearts most need. And God will be planting in their hearts the seeds of compassion and a passion for justice.

3. God Intends that We Make the Biblical Story Our Story

Bartholomew and Goheen encourage us to “invite readers [in our case, children] to make [the biblical story] their story, to find their place in it, and to dwell in it as the true story of the world.”⁵ Did you notice that in each of Bartholomew and Goheen’s three points they articulate the importance of finding our place in God’s story?

How do we invite children to make God’s story their own? Perhaps rather than *telling* children what the story means, we should lead them to engage the story reflectively, wondering about its meaning. How we guide children into God’s story matters. By telling God’s story as unconnected bits and pieces and giving children the

⁵ Ibid., 12.

meanings we think they need to hear, we can inoculate them against a life of unfolding, growing love for God. When we take control rather than letting the Spirit control, we may hinder children from finding *their* place in God's story. But when we enter the biblical story with children, wonder together about its meaning, and listen to hear what God has to say to us, we will all hear God's word. God will guide children to find their place in God's story, and when we trust God to guide, we will avoid "using" children.

In her paper, Ruth led us into the Scripture to get to know the heart of Jesus, and find our place in the story, a place along side the first disciples, hearing the call of Jesus to welcome and learn from children. She modeled the approach to Scripture presented by Bartholomew and Goheen, and let the Scripture speak, an approach that is formative for children, youth, and adults.

Last spring I was in Haiti with colleagues from our counseling department. We partnered with Haitian leaders in a seminar for pastors, helping to equip them to provide emotional, psychological and spiritual care for their people in the wake of the earthquake. We celebrated the strong faith of these brothers and sisters who had suffered so much. But we also heard stories of the spiritual damage we as Christians can do to ourselves and to others when our understanding of God is not adequate for the situation. That experience left me asking, how can we lead children to know God in ways that sustain and guide them when they face suffering or crisis, when for them life is a struggle for survival? I continue to wrestle with that question.

Formation – Constant Conversion – of Adults Involved in Kingdom Work with Children

Ruth's call for ongoing conversion to the logic of God's Kingdom rings true for me. The culture around us can so easily blind us or squeeze us back into its mould even after we have had a glimpse of Kingdom logic. And the demands of life and ministry can push us toward supposed quick and easy, one size fits all approaches. Dependence on the renewing of God's Spirit is essential if we are to

resist such pressures and experience constant conversion—continual transformation (Romans 12:1-2). Reflecting on Ruth’s paper and our discussions during this consultation suggests to me some processes that God might use in our ongoing conversion.

Ruth Padilla de Borst notes that fostering right relationships is crucial as God’s passion for justice burns within us and we seek a “vision for righting wrongs” (5). In the words of Nicholas Wolterstorff, she also pictures Jesus’ response to children as “fully engaged, attentive respectful and tender love.”⁶ Such deeply connected relationships with children are the places where God can lead us into clearer understandings of the wrong that needs to be righted, and keep our passion for justice burning brightly. Might Wolterstorff’s description of Jesus’ relationship with children also be used to evaluate our interactions with children and thus foster continuing conversion?

It seems to me that one necessary aspect of our continuing conversion is theological conversion. In recent years major progress has been made in our theological understanding of children through the good work of the Child Theology Movement, consultations like this one, and Marcia Bunge’s efforts to get theologians and biblical scholars focusing on children. However, as Jerome Berryman shows in his recent book, *Children and the Theologians*, for many centuries theologians gave little attention to children, and in that vacuum people cobbled together a *de facto* theology that influences attitudes and practices. He challenges us to take a hard look at our *de facto* theology, and provides guidelines for that process.⁷ What unscrutinized beliefs about children and ministry are lodged in our minds and may be in need of conversion? And what about our theology of praxis? Is it time to focus more on integrating our understandings of theology and insights from the study of God’s greatest and much loved creation, human beings?

⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 75.

⁷ Jerome W. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way of Grace* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), 200-215.

Consultations like this one are a wonderful setting for this ongoing theological work, which needs to be done in global settings where voices from all corners of God's Kingdom can be heard. I look forward to the journey of continuing conversion enhanced as we join together on that journey.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

How Far Were the Expectations Fulfilled at the *Now and Next* Theological Conference on Children?

At this point we may be in a position to judge how far the *Now and Next* event lived up to the aims spelt out at the beginning of the report:

- an international gathering
- to do sustained and serious theological and missiological reflection
- in which children and young people are seen as agents of God's mission,
- and lenses through which we find, with the help of the Holy Spirit,
- new insights into God in Christ.
- open the way for new streams of theological understanding of church and mission

It was an international gathering with attendees from all continents. There was serious theological and missiological reflection. How sustained it was, or could have been, given the scale of the gathering is a matter of opinion. There was general agreement that worldwide in the church children tended "to be seen but not heard" in Christian life and worship. Against this background the conference saw children as agents of God's mission, as part of the church, and lenses through which fresh insights into the heart of theology (that is God in Christ) were revealed.

There were many contributions that set discussions in cultural and geographical contexts. There were sharp contrasts in certain respects. For example in Europe the attendance of children in churches is dwindling, in many cases to zero; whereas in Africa the

numbers of children involved in church is immense. But there was general consensus that seminaries, church and mission had not paid sufficient attention to the actions and teaching of their Lord when he placed a little child in the midst of his disciples as a sign of the Kingdom of God.

Thus it was refreshing and encouraging to be in a setting where children were in view all through. In our imagination we sought to welcome and receive them in the name of Jesus, and to consider how our thinking, praying, professed and operative theology and practice would change in the light of what God revealed to us by His Spirit.

It is difficult to describe the power that theological reflection on the little child placed by Jesus in the midst released among those who gathered. Like a mustard seed, or yeast in the dough, the little child when received as a gift from Jesus stirred connections, and challenged long-held assumptions. New light was thrown on hitherto shadowy features of church and mission. Activists who seek to be obedient to the call of Jesus and the logic of the Kingdom, whether teachers, pastors, evangelists, or carers, found new horizons, unexpected connections, and fresh possibilities opening up. This was only possible because of the determination to be still, to wait on God's Spirit, and to become humble enough to consider that our best endeavours might in some respects be off track.

Back to the Sponsoring Organisations

There are eight sponsoring organizations committed to the process of theological reflection of which this conference is a focal point. They have each made their own contributions to the process, and will find ways of scrutinizing the report for implications for their work and mission. It was not the intention to make specific recommendations to them by name, but a request will be made by the organizing group to each that they respond with comments and confirmation of what they will do in the light of the findings of this report.

One of the emerging conclusions is that however much enthusiasm and effort there is in the name of Jesus among children,

Christian children's workers and organizations must, like and alongside children, be agents of change in the whole church including notably the seminaries and academic institutions that shape and model so much theology. If all our energy is confined to meetings of and communication between those already convinced of the significance of children as children and as signs of the Kingdom, then it is sadly possible that the bulk of church and theological education will remain undisturbed. It may continue to go about its work unaware of the blind spot in its midst, and not tapping into the potential of what Jesus offers in and through the little child.

The conference is a message to the mainstream: for too long we have been deaf to the words of our Master, and blind to the sign of the little child: "Today if you will hear his voice, harden not your heart." With this call comes the warning that this is not a cosy option: it is a full-scale challenge to the status quo.

Challenges to the Groups Addressed in Each Theme

What follows is an attempt to summarise some of the practical implications that flow from the conference. It is indicative rather than comprehensive.

All Christians

All participants realized that the call to repentance, change and humility was a continuous process of conversion, taking up the cross daily. There is the risk that those engaged in really good, necessary and laudable work with children in the name of Jesus might assume they are on the right track. The child placed in the midst by Jesus is a sign and challenge for us all.

It no doubt came as a surprise to some participants that they were welcomed as theologians. If so, the report makes it clear that all followers of Jesus must be theologians. This is because they speak to, with, for God, whether in prayer, in stories, or in their lives, personal and public, sacred and secular. The challenge that arises is to dedicate ourselves to deeper and fuller study of the Bible, open to change our understanding of Jesus, the Kingdom of God, as the child placed by

Jesus in the midst provides fresh light or a new lens revealing what previously remained hidden.

The way we do theology must be constantly reformed. Theological reflection on every aspect of our lives, witness and worship is called for, with children as constant signs of the nature, presence and challenge of God to reform the status quo into that which is more in line and accordance with His reign and nature. In this way the leaven will permeate the whole of the church rather than an approach which is described woodenly as bottom up or top down!

Churches

Most of the participants had grown up as children in churches, and there is much for which to be thankful. There are examples of excellent life, ministry and mission that welcome children to their rightful place in the name of Jesus. But there is also substantial cause for concern. As we listened to the call of Jesus to receive the child in the midst, it became apparent that for the most part churches had not got it right. Pastors were often unable to relate to children appropriately, those who taught children were untrained, and church seemed in many respects to be upside-down as we allowed Jesus to shine the light of the Kingdom on our practice.

By God's grace many churches continue to provide safe places for children and young people, but we are acutely aware that there has been neglect and abuse of children in churches worldwide. The call to change and to humility must take account of the whole picture and the whole story.

There are some practical suggestions in the report that relate to corporate worship, children's ministry, households and families, parents. But one consistent theme is the need for churches to call and help seminaries reform in order to equip pastors and leaders for ministry informed by the light of the child placed by Jesus in the midst.

The Biblical insistence that pastors should be good husbands and parents is one that merits much closer scrutiny: "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how

can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 4/5). Is this a simple and practical way by which children may influence the life of the church simply by being children?

Special attention must be paid to the creative tension between recognizing and receiving children (and young people) as having particular gifts and needs, and the desire to welcome them as fully part of the body of Christ. There are no easy or ready-made templates, to guide churches worldwide. It is rather a process of continuous listening and shared discovery.

The *oikos* and "little church" may be among the most fruitful areas of practical theological exploration signed by the child. What agreement there was in the conference tended towards that which was personal and small, and there was little enthusiasm for mega-churches, and grand schemes.

Seminaries

It comes as no surprise that a conference dedicated to theological reflection on a subject that has received too little systematic and sustained attention to date should pay particular attention to the bodies that shape and influence so much theological content and practice.

Several of the speakers and many of the participants were from seminaries, and their contributions were marked by a readiness to change in order to receive what their Lord was revealing through His Word, and through the reiterated messages from churches.

The practical challenges of change should not be underestimated however. Curricula are set and often brimful; mainstream theological categories do not make room for the little child placed by Jesus; there is too little material of theological substance making the case for Child Theology; and churches generally are not looking for pastors and leaders characterized by an affinity to children, and a humble attitude.

It is vital therefore that those seminaries willing to consider change are connected not only with each other, but also with those people and groups that doing the theological research and reflection around the world. There are writers who have published significant

works, and there are emerging networks in several countries. The Child Theology Movement may have a key role to play in facilitating such connections in order to serve both church and seminary. Publications, consultations, research and conversations must be widely accessible.

The role of HCD, which was well represented in Nairobi is significant in this process. To date there were 70 or so seminaries that had some connection with the HCD Global Alliance. This indicates a willingness on the part of Christian educators to consider children (“holistically”): the challenge is to find ways of ensuring that HCD programmes are theologically informed and robust, so that they reach the mainstream of the seminaries. If they do not, they could reinforce the view that children’s ministry is a separate or specialist activity. There is no doubt that children’s ministry is of great importance in itself and strategically in the life and mission of the church, but the child placed by Jesus is a sign for all Christians, all professors, all courses, and all theological activity and reflection.

It is likely that one of the most creative ways forward will be for individual seminaries, or small groups of them, to pioneer models of how Child Theology can permeate theological education. There are encouraging implications as this report is being compiled that some have already started serious conversations in this direction.

Christian organizations and movements

Many national and international organizations were represented at *Now and Next*. Some had children as their primary focus, but not all.

One challenge to them all is to review their aims, strategies, and mode of operations in order to seek to bring them into line with the strange and rather elusive “logic” of the Kingdom. We should not say this lightly. If the Kingdom is primarily about signs, little ones, and small things, the larger organizations must examine how far their size, methods, and ambitions are congruent with the example and teaching of Christ, and the way God does things. The call to continuous conversion is for us all, but may pose a particular stumbling block to those who seek to work at national or international levels. How do

they receive individual children? How do they avoid “instrumentalising” children?

Those concerned primarily with children need to consider how much effort and energy they are willing to devote to changing mainstream theology. It is significant that Compassion International has for ten years sought to facilitate such theological reflection. There is always the risk that supporters see such activity as tangential to the organisation, and their reasons for giving in the first place.

Organisations like WCC, WEA, INFEMIT and the like will need to seek ways of illustrating how children are being received as signs to the whole church and mission.

What Next?

There is unanimity in the realization that the theological status quo is not acceptable: there has to be change. This must be at every level from the local to the regional and international, from household to diocese, from church to seminary, and from biblical to systematic theology. The child placed by Jesus in the midst has not been, and is not yet in the midst of theological writing, seminaries and the training of pastors, nor is the child received in the midst of church, whether the household or the gathered community. Christian organizations committed to working for and with children acknowledged that their theological understanding is relatively weak, and that their default positions were shaped more by contemporary theory and management, than by the nature of God’s Kingdom.

Considerable time was taken in groups to think through practical steps to change the situation, and many of these have informed the comments above. Some individuals and organizations committed themselves to specific actions. For example a group of seminaries in Eastern Europe is planning a conference to develop the thinking of *Now and Next*. There is an invitation to make a substantial contribution to the WCC gathering in Korea in 2013. The Child Theology Movement is trying to make theological material more accessible around the world.

We are also aware that there is a plethora of examples of Christian activity and theological reflection around the world that was not represented and did not find a voice in Nairobi. This includes organizations, denominations, and networks. Child Theology is by its nature an inclusive process, and every step from now on must be reaching out to connect with and learn from others. Often this theology will be implicit, and it may wear different labels. This is congruent with the way the Kingdom of Heaven seems to work.

Whatever the outcomes it is to be hoped and prayed that there will be better connections between all those engaged with children in the name of Jesus, at whatever level in whatever ways who are reflecting theologically. In doing theology together we must never compromise our theological rigour, but we can do better at sharing what is happening on the ground. In future, we need to find ways of sharing experiments, discoveries, mistakes with each other and reflecting theologically on them as fellow disciples eager to learn.

But ultimately we must return to source. The Kingdom of God, as taught and modeled by Jesus, does not grow through intentional human effort and planning. It is far more organic, unpredictable and surprising. Its characteristic dynamic is serendipity: God turning things around and making good out of them. So it is that each person must seek to do his or her bit to model what they have seen and heard whether as parents, relatives, teachers, advocates, pastors, evangelists and so on. Hopefully a network of those who see something of the point and implications of Child Theology will continue to develop worldwide. But there must be a spirit of humility, of prayerfulness and watchfulness: it is God's mission to which we are called, and He chooses to work when and how he chooses. We must tune in to His heartbeat and rhythms, ready to recognize His presence, and to respond to His gentle bidding.

NOW & NEXT FINDINGS REPORT

Preamble

In March 2011, 105 theologians, church leaders, Christian educators and mission practitioners gathered in Nairobi, Kenya for the *Now and Next Theological Conference on Children*. Representing 28 countries across 6 continents, 35 organizations, 48 academic institutions, as well as 16 alliances and networks, this gathering was a significant and timely theological consultation on children.

The aim of the conference was to reflect theologically on the place of children in the life, Kingdom and Mission of God. To that end, it brought together insights from what has been called Child Theology, as well as, theologies of childhood. Some who were present had engaged in many years of theological reflection on the topic; for others, it was a new and enriching theological exploration.

The conference was structured around 5 key papers by Prof. Dr. Marcia Bunge, Dr. Keith White, Canon Vinay Samuel, Dr. Victor Nakah and Ruth Padilla de Borst, each followed by a series of formal responses and group reflections. The conference included times of cross-cultural worship as well as meditative, creative, and liturgical reflection and prayer.

Despite the diversity of culture, vocation and church affiliation, there was a strong sense of united purpose and an acknowledgement of past individual and collective failings – in particular a recognition that children have not received due and just attention. This led in turn to a commitment to further the inclusion of children in the life, theology and mission of the church.

The conference was held at the beginning of Lent, and coincided with major political shift in Northern Africa, as well as a devastating earthquake and tsunami striking eastern Asia.

The gathering was made possible by the support of the Child Theology Movement, Compassion International, Daystar Christian University, the 4/14 Global Initiative, The Global Alliance for Holistic Child Development, the International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT), the Lausanne Movement, Overseas Council International (OCI), and World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).

Some Theological and Missiological Issues

- 1) Six biblical themes on children in the Bible were presented. Children are viewed as:
 - i. Gifts of God and sources of joy,
 - ii. Sinful creatures and moral agents,
 - iii. Developing beings who need instruction and guidance,
 - iv. Fully human and made in the image of God,
 - v. Models of faith and sources or vehicles of revelation,
 - vi. Orphans, neighbours, and strangers in need of justice and compassion.

All six biblical themes exist in tension, and cannot be viewed in isolation.

- 2) Jesus is the model for our servant ministry to children,
- 3) Children can experience, express and communicate God's love and truth.
- 4) Children are an integral part of God's Mission.
- 5) Children are full participants in the life and ministry of the church, including through prayer, worship and the exercising of spiritual gifts.
- 6) Child Theologies and theologies of childhood, while distinct, both contribute to an understanding of the Scriptural significance of children.
- 7) Jesus placed a child in the midst of his followers to realign their understanding of the Kingdom of God.
- 8) Humility is a hallmark of life in the Kingdom of God.

Confession

We humbly acknowledge and confess:

- Throughout history, much of the Church has marginalized children.
- We have not sufficiently provided a welcoming, safe, and embracing environment for children, leading to their exclusion from the life and mission of the church.
- We have ignored Jesus' words that to welcome children is to welcome Him.
- We have not recognized the importance Scripture places on children.
- We have not recognized children as pointers to God's Kingdom.
- We have hindered the full participation and contribution of children.
- We have overlooked, objectified and exploited children for the purpose of marketing, fundraising, or mission agendas which do not substantially benefit children.
- Christian training programs have largely ignored children in the equipping of ministry leaders and workers.
- We have suppressed and silenced the voice of children.
- We have not adequately and consciously equipped parents and families for the task of raising children to know, love and serve God and their neighbours.
- Children in, and out of the Church have often been invisible.
- We have often overlooked children in church, seminary and organizational budgets.
- We have failed to protect children.
- We have not provided adequate environment for children to flourish.
- We have not included creative opportunities for children in our worship, liturgy and witness.

- In our ministry efforts to, and with children, we have manifested a lack of unity, integrity and synergy.
- We have not paid sufficient attention to the spiritual formation of children.

Proposed Agenda for a Renewed Emphasis on Children in Theology and Mission

We propose the development of a renewed and contextual emphasis on children in theology and mission that could include the following elements:

- 1) Local churches should have amply resourced, intentional and thoughtful programmes of children's ministry and spiritual formation.
- 2) Theological education and ministerial formation programmes should include biblical and theological perspectives on children.
- 3) Churches should prioritize the appointment of well-trained and committed pastoral staff for children.
- 4) Church bodies should assign child ministry coordinators for the encouragement, affirmation, accompaniment, and innovation for children's ministries and evangelism.
- 5) The worship of the church should be welcoming and church-friendly.
- 6) Church budget should allow sufficient funds, personnel and other resources for children's ministries.
- 7) Seminaries and Christian universities should develop and implement interdisciplinary and intercultural studies and research on childhood and child development.
- 8) More contextual and theological research should be undertaken on: children in mission; children and spiritual gifts; spiritual formation of children; Child theologies; theologies of childhood; the child encountering biblical narrative.

- 9) Seminaries should develop strong ties with local churches and child ministry organizations to facilitate theological reflection on children.
- 10) Churches and organizations working with children should develop and implement sound child protection measures and policies.
- 11) Mission organizations, movements and churches should affirm and include the mission agency of children while taking care to avoid their objectification or instrumentalization.
- 12) Organizations seeking to serve children, should seek to maximize the effective use of resources.
- 13) Para-church organizations should foster collaboration with churches in mission to, and with children.
- 14) Churches, scholars, and global Christian alliances should actively support and contribute to the development of contextual theological resources by the Global South for the Global South and its Diaspora.
- 15) Produce child related theological resources globally.
- 16) Theological dialogue on children should be sustained locally, regionally and globally.

Commitment

We commit to:

- Affirming the immeasurable value of every child, as made in the image of God.
- Affirming, therefore, the full humanity and dignity of children.
- Countering systemic, social and other injustices against children.
- Investing ample human, financial, material and spiritual resources into the holistic formation of children.

- Ongoing; intentional and contextual theological reflection on and with children.
- Developing and mainstreaming contextualized formal and informal training programs for ministry to, and with children.
- Increasing collaboration across churches, cultures, places and organizations towards authentic holistic witness.
- Protecting children from acts of cruelty, injustice, abuse and exploitation.
- Humility in our practice and presence with children, as servants of Christ.
- Earnestly listening to and learning from children.

Nairobi, Kenya

March 9-12, 2011

ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

Aim

This three-day conference aims to do sustained and serious theological and missiological reflection in which children and young people are seen as agents of God's mission, and lenses through which we find, with the help of the Holy Spirit, new insights into God in Christ. We expect and pray that the conference will open the way for new streams of theological understanding of church and mission.

Brief Description

The conference serves several purposes, for example:

- 1) a follow-up of the 4/14 Global Summit, providing theological and missiological support for the enthusiasm and energy of that conference,
- 2) a follow-up to the Lausanne Congress at Cape Town, recognizing that the theme, "God in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself" manifestly includes children and youth.
- 3) a conversation with INFEMIT reflections on the "*Now and Next Generation*" as this international organization celebrates its 35th anniversary;
- 4) an opportunity for the Child Theology Movement, on its 10th anniversary to engage globally with theologians and to share something of what has been learnt on the journey so far, including providing each participant with publications;
- 5) an opportunity for leaders of church organizations, denominations, theological institutions, and Christian movements to meet, worship, learn together and to seek God's will in His Mission with particular reference to children and young people;

- 6) setting the stage for further regional consultations leading to a larger global conference in 2012.

Given the above, it is a potentially historic event both in its focus and scope. Some have compared it to the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference in that it could well break new ground in global theology and mission.

Organizers and Co-Sponsors (in alphabetical order)

- 1) 4/14 Window Global Initiative
- 2) Child Theology Movement
- 3) Compassion International
- 4) Daystar Christian University
- 5) Global Alliance for Advancing HCD
- 6) INFEMIT
- 7) Lausanne Movement
- 8) Overseas Council International (OCI)
- 9) World Evangelical Alliance / Africa Evangelical Alliance

Conference Outputs

- 1) A conference report or compendium of conference papers and summary of discussions providing a framework for future regional and global follow up. There may well be other booklets or resource material strengthening the theological and missiological foundations of Christian movements (e.g. 4/14 Window movement), Christian organisations, seminaries and churches. These publications are intended for review at regional, local and international levels. Papers will be useful in seminaries, etc.
- 2) A statement outlining aspects of joint commitment and the collaboration which will take place between and amongst the participating organizations and movements.

- 3) A plan to make available the conference report and statement to churches, seminaries and child ministries so as to synergize a non-competitive ethos for mission, ministerial training, and best practice.

Rationale and Approach

Rationale:

There has been much helpful and creative comment on programme structure and processes. The basic rationale is that every participant is welcomed and respected as a disciple or follower of Jesus, and active in work that he or she believes to be significant in God's Mission. We are all keen to sit at the feet of those who will expound the Scriptures, and open up to us fresh (or time-valued) insights into the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God through the lens of the child. However, rather than assume that our activities and organisations simply need more energy, resources and/or synergy, we are intent on listening carefully to the Word of the Lord in order that we might be corrected, guided, chastened by God's Spirit. We want to allow ourselves to be surprised by the Holy Spirit.

Objectives:

- 1) To reflect on Theology, Church and Mission in 21st century with a focus on the significant role of children and young people
- 2) To explore theological understandings of the Kingdom of God in the emerging contemporary context ("Global Kingdom landscape") with the child in focus, and discern ways in which seminaries and theological institutions can better equip local churches and practitioners to serve God's Kingdom by reaching and building the next generation of leaders.
- 3) To contribute to the development of theological/ecclesiological/missiological frameworks regarding children and youth to support the work of the co-sponsors, and others

committed to God's Kingdom, producing a report outlining what commitment and collaboration we believe should take place in response to God's Word.

ABOUT THE SPONSORING ORGANISATIONS

IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

Child Theology Movement

The Child Theology Movement is an international network, comprising theologians, and practitioners, which involves theological work of any kind taking its cue from Jesus who placed a child in the midst of the disciples when they were having a theological argument in the expectation that it would help his followers to get it right (Matthew 18).

Compassion International

Compassion International is one of the world's leading Christian child development organizations. In response to the Great Commission, the ministry exists as an advocate for children, to release them from their spiritual, economic, social and physical poverty and enable them to become responsible and fulfilled Christian adults.

Daystar University

Daystar Christian University in Nairobi, Kenya is one of the premier Christian liberal arts Universities in Africa. The name 'Daystar' is derived from the Bible (2 Peter 1:19) which is used to describe Jesus Christ. Daystar's vision is to be a distinguished, Christ-centered, African institution of higher learning for the transformation of church and society. Daystar is developing an Institute for Child Development which will initiate, encourage and support HCD programming and curriculum development in seminaries and Christian theological institutions in East Africa.

The 4/14 Window Global Initiative

"Raising up a New Generation from the 4/14 Window to Transform the World" (also known as the 4/14 Window Global Initiative) is a bold

process of collaboration and mobilization that seeks to respond in obedience to God's call for this new missional focus. This global initiative or movement begins with the launch of global tracks that will serve as building blocks to the fulfillment of the movement's core purpose. As each track fulfills its mission, the overall mission is fulfilled.

The Global Alliance for Advancing Holistic Child Development

The Global Alliance for Advancing Holistic Child Development, also known as the HCD Global Alliance, is a voluntary group of seminaries, Bible schools, and other Christian academic institutions working together with researchers, trainers, practitioners, and other Christian leaders to create a global movement of academic programs in holistic child development (HCD).

The International Fellowship of Evangelical Mission Theologians (INFEMIT)

The INFEMIT community has been recognized as a key promoter of Mission as Transformation among Evangelicals since the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne in 1974. INFEMIT connects mission leaders, activists and scholars who have been active in ecumenical, evangelical and charismatic global movements like the World Council of Churches, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, the World Evangelical Fellowship and global Pentecostal and charismatic organisations.

The Lausanne Movement

The Lausanne Movement, also known as The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, grew out of the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization and mobilizes evangelical leaders to collaborate for world evangelization. The Lausanne Covenant defines the movement's goals and expresses its commitment to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The movement's tagline is '*The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World.*'

Overseas Council International

Overseas Council partners with seminaries, Bible institutes and other strategic ministries by leveraging people, expertise and resources to advance quality Christian leadership training, thus empowering churches around the world to fulfill the Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ.

World Evangelical Alliance

World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) is a global ministry working with local churches around the world to join in common concern to live and proclaim the Good News of Jesus in their communities. WEA is a network of churches in 128 nations that have each formed an evangelical alliance and over 100 international organizations joining together to give a worldwide identity, voice and platform to more than 420 million evangelical Christians. Seeking holiness, justice and renewal at every level of society - individual, family, community and culture, God is glorified and the nations of the earth are forever transformed.

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS



Gender Representation

Male	63
Female	42

Country Representation

Africa

- Burkina Faso
- Central African Republic
- Ethiopia
- Kenya
- Mali
- Mozambique
- South Africa
- Togo
- Uganda
- West Africa
- Zambia
- Zimbabwe

Europe

- Bulgaria/Russia
- Romania
- Switzerland
- United Kingdom

Latin America & The Carribean

- Argentina
- Brazil
- Chile
- Costa Rica
- Ecuador
- Jamaica
- Peru

North America

- United States of America

Asia & The Pacific

- Australia
- India
- Malaysia
- Mongolia
- Philippines
- South Korea
- Thailand

Organisations/Institutions Represented

Christian Academic/Research Institution

- Asbury Theological Seminary, USA
- Asia Graduate School of Theology (AGST), *Philippines*
- Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary (APNTS), *Philippines*
- Bethel Seminary, USA
- Canaan School of Transformation, *India*
- Caribbean Graduate School of Theology (CGST), *Jamaica*
- Carlile College, *Kenya*
- Centre for Contemporary Christianity (CFCC), *India*
- Centro de Estudios Teológicos Interdisciplinarios (CETI) -
Fundación Kairós, *Argentina*
- Christ College, the Honors College of Valparaiso University, USA

- Daystar University, *Kenya*
- Evangelical Theological College, *Ethiopia*
- Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de Bangui (FATEB),
- Gaba Bible Institute, *Uganda*
- Institutul Teologic Penticostal Bucharest, *Romania*
- International College of Cultural Studies (OM), *India*
- Kampala Evangelical School of Theology, *Uganda*
- La Faculté de Théologie et Missiologie Évangélique au Sahel (FATMES) , *Mali*
- ESEPA Seminary, *Costa Rica*
- Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary (MBTS), *Malaysia*
- Moi University, Uasin Gishu Children's Forum, *Kenya*
- Nairobi International School of Theology (NIST), *Kenya*
- Nazarene Seminary of the Americas, *Costa Rica*
- Petra College, *South Africa*
- Scott Theological College, *Kenya*
- Seminario Sudamericano (SEMISUD), *Ecuador*
- South African Theological Seminary (SATS), *South Africa*
- South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS), *India*
- University of South Africa (Unisa), *South Africa*
- University of the Free State, *South Africa*
- West African Baptist Advanced School of Theology, *Togo*

Christian Alliances/Networks/Fellowships

- Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA), *Zambia*
- Association of Evangelicals in Africa, *Kenya*
- Asia Theological Association (ATA), *Philippines*
- ATF, *Mozambique*
- Child Theology Movement, *UK*
- Christian Forum for Child Development (CFCD), *India*
- Evangelical Fellowship of India – Commission On Relief (EFICOR), *India*
- Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, *Costa Rica*
- HCD Global Alliance
- International Council of Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE)
- International Fellowship of Mission Theologians (INFEMIT), *India*
- Latin America Mission, *Costa Rica*
- National Council of Churches of Kenya, *Kenya*
- Regional Alliance HCD Southern Cono, *Chile*

- World Council of Churches – Programme on Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE), *Geneva*
- World Evangelical Alliance – Theological Commission, *UK*

Christian Organizations/Ministries

- Agape Outreach, *Kenya*
- Bible Centred Ministries International, *USA*
- Biblica, *Kenya*
- Child Development Training and Resource Centre (CDTRC), *Ethiopia*
- Children of the Heavenly King Ministries, *Kenya*
- Christian AIDS/HIV National Alliance (CANAs), *India*
- Church Army, Carlile College, Centre for Urban Mission, *Kenya*
- Compassion Australia, *Australia*
- Compassion International, *Togo*
- Compassion International, *Burkina Faso*
- Compassion International, *India*
- Compassion International, *Kenya*
- Compassion International, *USA*
- Cornerstone Development Uganda
- Hope For Kids EE, *Kenya*
- JCS International, *Mongolia*
- Kidzana Ministries, *USA*
- Music for Peace Afrika, *Kenya*
- Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life, *UK*
- Overseas Council International, *USA*
- State House Girls School, *Kenya*
- Viva India, *India*
- Vulnerable Children Caregivers of Athi River (VCCAR) & Ahadi Family Kenya, *Kenya*
- World Vision International - Asia Regions, *Thailand*

Church

- Child Evangelism Fellowship, *Kenya*
- Christ I The Answer Ministries (CITAM), *Kenya*
- Christian Children Welfare Trust, *Kenya*
- Fountain of Power Ministry, *Kenya*
- Kisumu Pentecostal Church, *Kenya*
- Mombasa Pentecostal Church, *Kenya*
- Nairobi Baptist Church, *Kenya*
- Pneuma Ministries International, *Kenya*
- Prachinburi Church & BanNonSomBoon Church, *Thailand*

Denominational Body

- Assembly of God World Mission, *UK*
- Baptist Union of Victoria, *Australia*
- Bulgarian Orthodox Church, *Bulgaria*
- Church of God, *USA*
- Northmead Assembly of God, *Zambia*

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

Dr. **Joshua Banda** is a pastor, bishop, and educator with national responsibilities in the Assemblies of God denomination in Zambia. In addition, he is a key leader in the church's efforts to combat HIV/AIDS in the region, currently leading a multi-denominational group in conjunction with World Vision, Children AIDS Fund and others. His doctorate is from Oxford Centre for Mission Studies; Class of 2011, where his studies focused on the HIV/AIDS. His previous experience includes the founding of the Hope Clinic, which provides anti-retroviral drugs to more than 800 AIDS patients each month. Joshua and his wife, Gladys, have 4 children.

Mrs. **Elizabeth Barnett** is a Children and Families Ministry Facilitator with the Baptist Union of Victoria. She has held pastoral roles in Baptist and Anglican churches and been a long term volunteer in the missions of Scripture Union, for whom she is a freelance resource writer and trainer. She teaches units in Children and Families Ministry and Biblical Studies at Ridley college, Whitley College as well as guest lectures in other Melbourne colleges. Beth is currently undertaking doctoral studies in the area of New Testament examining the constructs of maturity in the letters of Paul. Alongside the highly introverted life of a theologian, Beth is a musician, having initially trained in the bizarre universe of Opera. She loves the multi-sensory, multi-media experience of life and the arts - especially when linked to reading the Bible and thinking theologically in missional community. She runs each night to keep her brain in balance and is a lone vegan in a household of carnivores; namely her husband and 2 teenage boys, whom she adores.

Dr. **Bernard Boyo** is the Dean of Community Life at Daystar University. He is also involved in administration and lecturing at Daystar. He has a PhD. in Theology, Master of Theology, Master of Divinity and Bachelor in Theology. His passion is to engage biblical texts with life related issues, how we fit in today as Christians and society as a whole. He is married to Rahab and has 2 children.

Dr. **Marcia J. Bunge** is Professor of Humanities and Theology at Christ College, the Honors College of Valparaiso University (Valparaiso, Indiana); Director of the Child in Religion Ethics Project; and the University's W.C. Dickmeyer Professor. Bunge received her B.A. in English and Music from St. Olaf College and her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. She is the translator and editor of a selection of writings by J. G. Herder entitled *Against Pure Reason: Writings on History, Language, and Religion* (Fortress, 1993). For the past ten years, her primary area of research has been religious understandings of children and childhood, and she has edited and contributed to four volumes on the subject: 1) *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans, 2001); 2) *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2008), co-edited with T. Fretheim and B. R. Gaventa; 3) *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (Rutgers, 2009), co-edited with D. Browning; and 4) *Children, Childhood, and Religious Ethics: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press). She has 2 children: Isaac (17) and Anja (10).

Rev. Dr. **Corneliu Constantineanu** (PhD at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies and the University of Leeds, UK) serves as the President and Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Intitulul Teologic Penticostal, Bucharest, Romania. He is also the former Academic Dean of Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia where he taught for many years. His most recent books include *First, the Kingdom of God. A Festschrift in honour of Prof. Dr. Peter Kuzmič* (co-editor, ETF Croatia, 2011); *The Social Dimension of the Gospel* (Romanian Bible Society, 2011); *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul's Theology. Narrative Readings in*

Romans (T&T Clark Continuum, 2010); *Encountering the other: Studies in Reconciliation* (Casa Cartii de Stiinta, 2009). Corneliu is married to Ioana and they have 2 daughters, Anamaria and Carmen.

Dr. Ruth Padilla de Borst is the General Secretary of the Latin American Theological Fellowship, San Jose, Costa Rica. Born in Colombia and raised in Argentina by an American mother and an Ecuadorian father, Ruth has a wealth of unique experiences and perspective on cross-cultural missions. Ruth is also the director of International Fellowship of Students' (IFES) Spanish-speaking publishing house, *Ediciones Certeza Unida*, and team leader of Christian Reformed World Mission's work in El Salvador. For many years, she worked with the growing Christian student movements of Latin America under the umbrella of IFES, of which InterVarsity is a member movement. She has an MA in Interdisciplinary Studies from Wheaton College Graduate School and a doctoral degree from Boston University School of Theology. She recently joined World Vision in Latin America.

Dr. C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell is a Brazilian theologian, born and raised in the huge metropolis of São Paulo. She earned a PhD from Duke University (Durham, USA) and until 2008 was Professor of Biblical Theology & Ethics at the South American Theological Seminary in Londrina, Brazil. Her current work includes serving as New Testament editor for a one-volume Bible commentary for Latin America (*Comentário Bíblico Contemporâneo*) and another book project with UK author, John Baxter-Brown, on the theological history of evangelism and mission 1910 – 2010. Rosalee is the Executive Director of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance and is involved in inter-faith dialogue and peace and reconciliation initiatives. Rosalee is married to Samuel Ewell. They have 3 children.

Dr. Genevieve Lerina James is an urban missiologist by training. She serves at The University of South Africa (Unisa) in the discipline of

Missiology and heads the Unisa Campaign for learning where she is responsible for the design and implementation of learning outreach initiatives. Since 2008 she has served as the editor of *Missionalia*, the Southern African Journal of Missiology. Her doctorate is from the University of Natal in Pietermaritzburg (now University of Kwa-Zulu Natal).

Mr. **D. J. Konz** is the Executive Director of Child Advocacy at Compassion Australia, where he leads Compassion's strategic advocacy to church and government in Australia on behalf of children in poverty. DJ is part of the Child Theology working group in Australia, the Church Advocacy stream of the Global Children's Forum, the Academic stream of the Transform World 4-14 movement, and sits on the National Steering Committee of Micah Challenge Australia. He has an MA in Theology and Religious Studies from Nottingham University and has commenced studies with the Oxford Centre of Mission Studies toward a doctorate in Trinitarian missional theology, examining Christ as the archetypal child. DJ has 2 beautiful girls in his life: his wife Louise and his 3-year old daughter, Bethany.

Rev. Dr. **Peter Mageto** is a Senior Lecturer and Head of Theology and Pastoral Department at Daystar University, Kenya. He holds a PhD in Theological Ethics, a Master of Theological Studies and a Graduate Certificate in African Studies. He is the current Chairman of the Ecumenical Symposium of Eastern Africa Theologians (ESEAT) and serves also in various national and international organizations in various capacities. He is engaged in *Research in Church Leadership, Academic Ethics and Integrity Driven Leadership* and author of the book, *Victim Theology*. His passion is to be a bridge between the academy and the church in transforming society. This can only be done through spiritual formation which begins in childhood. He is married and has a son and a daughter.

Dr. **Johannes Malherbe** grew up in the Western Cape where, after completing his theological studies, he also served as the pastor of a rural congregation. He joined Petra College in 1996, beginning his formal involvement with issues of children's ministry. In addition to his leadership role at Petra College, he has served as an advocate for children in various national and regional networks. He is married to Annelie, a music teacher, and the family has 4 children. He has done extensive research on African childhood and will soon publish a book on how this has been influenced by foreign involvement. His latest challenge is to represent the interests of children in the mining sector and heavy industry in South Africa.

Rev. Dr. **Victor Nakah** is the Regional Director for Overseas Council International (OCI). Before joining OCI, Victor served as the President of the Theological College of Zimbabwe (TCZ) for 10 years. He has also served on staff with Scripture Union and the Fellowship of Christian Unions (IFES) in Zimbabwe. Victor is both a minister and theologian and therefore takes the relationship of the church and seminary very seriously. He is passionate about spiritual, biblical and contextual leadership. He enjoys expository preaching and preaches often at mission and student conferences and in a number of churches as he travels on the continent and abroad. Victor, his wife, Nosizo and their 2 daughters, Nothabo and Rumbidzaishe, make their home in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe.

Dr. **Bill Prevette** is currently a PhD tutor in practitioner and action research at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. He travels internationally working with church leadership, education and research concerning children at risk and human trafficking. He holds a PhD (Wales/Oxford Centre for Mission Studies), MA Missiology (Fuller, USA), BA Biblical Studies, BA Pastoral Counseling, has served as an appointed missionary with the Assemblies of God since 1987. He serves on numerous boards and is a trustee of the Child Theology Movement (UK) and an adjunct professor at Northwest University (Seattle, USA), Southeastern University (Lakeland, FL, USA). He also teaches at seminaries and colleges in Eastern Europe and Asia. His

research interests include missiology, ecclesiology, holistic child development, and faith-based interventions and practice

Dr. **David E. Ramirez** is from Chile, SA. Currently, David is serving as the Church of God World Missions Director for Latin America. He has served as a Director for South America and Administrative Bishop for the South West Hispanic Region, USA. He established the South American Seminary in Quito, Ecuador (SEMISUD). At this time he started the HCD master program at SEMISUD. He holds a D.Min. from Asbury Theological Seminary (Beeson Scholar), M.Div. from the Pentecostal Theological Seminary and two Honorific Doctor degrees for his excellence in Christian Leadership. He is an international speaker, writer and professor on Christian Global Leadership, Narrative Preaching, Church Planting, and Practical Theology. He is married to Fernanda Snaidero from Argentina and they have 3 beautiful children.

The Rev. Dr. **Vinay Samuel** is the Founder and Director Emeritus of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS). He is a graduate of Union Biblical Seminary in Yavatmal, India, and holds a doctorate in theology from Cambridge University, which he attended as the first scholar of the Langham Trust. Dr. Samuel is recognized internationally as a development economist and theologian. He bridges the gap between ecumenical social activism and the evangelical church. As a theologian who stresses the dignity of the oppressed, he has been a practitioner of development and has published widely. Dr. Samuel, an Indian by nationality, is an ordained Anglican priest.

Rev. **Joe Simfukwe** is an ordained Baptist minister who currently serves as Principal of the Theological College of College of Central Africa, in Ndola, Zambia which he joined in January 1994 after graduate studies (Morling College) and pastoral ministry in Sydney Australia (Gymea Baptist Church). He did his tertiary and undergraduate studies in Scotland (Alloa Academy and Glasgow

University) followed by seminary training at Spurgeon's College in London after a brief interlude in the Agricultural research in his home country where he served as the first Zambian Seeds Officer. From Spurgeon's College he served as the first Zambian pastor of Lusaka Baptist church for ten and half years before proceeding to Australia for further studies in preparation for his role in theological education. He also currently serves as the director of the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA) a member of the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) of which he is the current ExCo chair. He is married to Alice and they have 2 sons, 3 daughters, 1 grandson and 2 grand-daughters

Dr. **Cathy Stonehouse** has recently retired from Asbury Theological Seminary where she served as Dean in the School of Practical Theology and professor of Christian Discipleship. Before becoming a professor at Asbury Seminary, Dr. Stonehouse provided leadership for the Christina education ministries of the church and was involved in inter-denominational curriculum design and development. She has had opportunities to teach short term in Asia, Africa, Haiti, Britain, and Eastern Europe. She has also given volunteer leadership in the local church, most recently as a member of the Children's worship team. Dr. Stonehouse is the author of *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (1998), *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*, with Scottie May and Beth Posterski, and Linda Cannell (2005), *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for those Who Nurture and Teach*, with Scottie May (2010), and *Patterns in Moral Development* (1980).

Dr. **Sunny Tan** currently serves as the Academic Dean of the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served as a pastor of a Baptist Church in Penang, Malaysia for about 10 years before joining the faculty of the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary in 1994. He studied at the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary (Penang), Regent College (Vancouver), and the Asia Baptist Graduate School of Theology (Philippines). He is a director of the Child Theology

Movement. Sunny is married to Rosalind Lim and they have 2 adult children.

Rev. Dr. **Dietrich Werner** is Programme Coordinator of Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) in World Council of Churches (WCC), and is based at the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, Switzerland. He is an ordained pastor of Northelbian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Northern Germany, and was formerly Director of Studies at the Northelbian Centre for World Mission and Church World Services. He holds a PhD in Missiology and lectures Missiology and Ecumenics. He has teaching experiences in India and was former assistant to Rev. Prof. Dr. Konrad Raiser, formerly WCC General Secretary. He currently resides in Switzerland, and is a father of 5 children.

Dr. **Keith J. White** is the leader of Mill Grove, a Christian residential community that has been caring for children and young people in the East End of London UK since 1899. He holds a PhD., M.A. (Oxon.) and an M.Phil. He is the founder and Chair of the Child Theology Movement. He is an Associate Lecturer at Spurgeons College, and a member of the faculty of the Asian Graduate School of Theology. Keith teaches the theological foundations module of HCD at MBTS in Penang, Malaysia. Among the books he has written or edited are *A Place for Us; In His Image; Caring for Deprived Children; Why Care?; Re-Framing Children's Services; Children and Social Exclusion; The Changing Face of Child Care; The Art of Faith; The Growth of Love, and Reflections of Living with Children*. He led the team that produced a new international Bible (The Bible, Narrative and Illustrated). He is married to Ruth and they have 4 children and 5 grandchildren.

ABOUT THE EDITORIAL TEAM

IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER

Dr. **Siga Arles** is Vice Chairman of the Transform World India Connections and was Chairman of the Missiological Task Force for 4/14 Global Summit. Siga Arles hails from the Church of South India in Kolar Gold Fields. He is a graduate of Asbury Theological Seminary where he obtained his M.Div and M.A degrees in 1975. Later he obtained his PhD from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland as a Langham Scholar. As a Professor of Missiology he had served widely and is now directing the Centre for Contemporary Christianity (CFCC) based at Bangalore, mentoring post-graduate students in Missiology and Holistic Child Development. He also directs Karnataka Mission Network and India Ministries Fellowship.

Dr. **Dan Brewster** is the Director for International HCD Ministries Compassion International. Dan has worked with Compassion for 27 years. He has been in the past Compassion's Africa Area Director, and the Advocacy Director for Asia. He has traveled to over 100 countries and has been involved in planning and monitoring child and family development or relief projects in more than 50 countries. He has a doctorate in Missiology from Fuller Seminary, and likes writing and teaching in areas of Christian holistic child development. He and his wife Alice have lived in Penang, Malaysia for the past 12 years. He was the Chairman of the Steering Committee for the *Now and Next* Theological Conference on Children.

Mr. **Chik-Bu Kok** has worked in Christian non-profits for a number of years, including the organization Viva, working together with networks to help the Christian community brings hope and transformation to children at risk. He is currently undertaking a

Master's degree at the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary, while at the same time working as the communication person at the seminary's HCD Institute. He also manages the website of the HCD Global Alliance and edits its quarterly *Communiqué*.

Dr. **Rosalind Tan** is director of the HCD Institute at MBTS and also South East Asia regional coordinator of the HCD Global Alliance. Her interest is in developing contextual training for children's workers in the Asian settings and her areas of study include education, human development theories, curriculum development, and instructional theories. Rosalind's PhD research was on Vygotsky and faith formation of children. Her latest article is entitled "*Vygotsky Visits Calvary Seminary*."

Dr. **Keith J. White** (see details in *About the Contributors* section).

“It is so rewarding to see how a deeper understanding of biblical and theological issues surrounding children is rising higher on the agenda of many organizations, and especially in the programs and curricula of many seminaries around the world.”

- WESS STAFFORD, COMPASSION INTERNATIONAL

In March 2011, theologians, church leaders, Christian educators and mission practitioners gathered in Nairobi, Kenya for the *Now and Next* Theological Conference on Children. This timely and significant gathering was to reflect theologically on the place of children in the life, Kingdom and Mission of God. The group wanted:

- To explore theological understandings of the Kingdom of God in the emerging contemporary context with the child in focus, and discern ways in which seminaries and theological institutions can better equip local churches and practitioners to serve God's Kingdom by reaching and building the next generation of leaders.
- To contribute to the development of theological/ecclesiological/missiological frameworks regarding children and youth to support the work of the co-sponsors and others committed to God's Kingdom.

Some who were present had engaged in many years of theological reflection on the topic; for others it was a new and enriching theological exploration. The papers presented:

- Theme 1: Children as Signs of the Kingdom of God – A Challenge to Us All
- Theme 2: The Church and the Child – A Challenge to the Churches
- Theme 3: Child Theology – A Challenge to Seminaries
- Theme 4: Children in Mission – A Challenge to Christian Movements and Organizations

Join us in this exploration of these important topics!

