

Welcoming Children Reinstating Children in our Theological Reflections on Mission

There are around 7 billion people in the world.

Almost third of these are children under the age of 15.

God defends children.

Jesus welcomed children.

Children have been chosen by God to play a significant role in His kingdom plan throughout history.

Yet children have been marginalised in our mission thinking. The disproportionately small amount of time and energy devoted to children in theological institutions seems to parallel the reality that less than 20% of mission resources worldwide are spent on children despite their numbers and their receptivity to the Good News.

It's a scandal. As a result of this 'great omission', children have suffered and the church has been diminished. This paper presents a challenge to theologians and theological institutions to use their influence to reinstate children in missional thinking and to address with urgency and gravity, the issues that children and Christian childcare workers are grappling with.

Joining God at work on behalf of children

In 2002, the United Nations declared that this world should be 'a world fit for children'. The church has been relatively slow to see its vital place in making this a reality. Yet God is at work, and recent years have seen some exciting child-centred initiatives at a global level. For example:

As early as 1996, **Dr Dan Brewster**, a missiologist, challenged the church in his paper: *The 4/14 Window: Child Ministries and Mission Strategy*¹. Since then, the **Global Alliance for Advancing Holistic Child Development** has challenged Christian theological institutions to develop high-level holistic child development training programs to equip Christian workers and professionals to care for children around the world.

Viva has been instrumental in networking and equipping thousands of people, churches and agencies across the world who work among children at risk.

*Understanding God's Heart for Children*², a book that rose out of their grass-roots consultations with childcare practitioners, explores a biblical framework for ministry to children at risk.

In 2004, a **Lausanne Occasional Paper** *Evangelization of Children*³ produced by 35 people representing every continent, implored the church and its theologians to take children as seriously as God does.

Since 2008, the **Global Children's Forum** has been growing as a partnering network of global children's ministry agencies and leaders whose vision is to

¹ Published in Dr. Phyllis Kilbourn (ed): *Children in Crisis: A New Commitment* USA Marc Publications 1996

² Douglas McConnell (Editor), Jennifer Orona (Editor), Paul Stockley (Editor): *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework* USA Authentic Media 2007

³ Strachan, Wendy and Simon Hood, eds. *Evangelization of Children*. Lausanne Occasional Paper # 47. 2004. available at <http://www.lausanne.org/2004-forum/documents.html>

ensure that every child in every generation is given the opportunity to engage fully with Jesus, through God's word.

Since 2009, **the 4-14 Window Global Initiative** has been drawing together thousands of people in a 7-year commitment to strategise together so that a new generation of young Christ Followers will be raised up who will transform the world.

The **Child Theology Movement** formed in the early 21st century, has been challenging the church and its theological institutions to consider the significance of Jesus' action in putting a child in the centre of the disciples when they were having an argument about greatness in the kingdom of God. It asks the question: how might the child's presence among us and in Scripture re-shape our theology and practice?

The reality is that there are hundreds of thousands of practitioners in children's ministry who are engaging every day in mission among children. But with their very best efforts, there are millions of children every day who remain desperate for the hope that the words and the actions of the Good News will bring.

The task of mission amongst children urgently needs theological reflection and research that will permeate the church and that will

- **inspire the church beyond its existing paradigms so that children become an integral part of the life and mission of the church.**
- **inform and encourage those who are already working among children**
- **sustain a model of mission to children that will create a 'world fit for children'.**

Joining children in their world: 4 stories

How do we move forward?

In the 1910 Edinburgh Missions Conference, there were groups that were largely absent: women and leaders from developing countries were among those. The 2010 Edinburgh Missions Conference made deliberate efforts to redress the balance 100 years later and we celebrated the attendance of large numbers of women and of those from the Global South.

Yet in the preparations and presentations in Edinburgh 2010 Missions Conference, it was hard to find more than a few fleeting references to children.

How do we start to redress the balance in favour of children? We start in their world and learn from their experiences.

In Latin America

About 40 boys live in a streetkids centre in Lima. They are tough and they have tough stories. These are boys who don't easily trust people. Nor do they believe you when you talk about God. Why would a God who is so good and pure have anything to do with boys like them who have come to believe they are worthless? You can tell them the stories of Jesus' miracles – but there's no connection. It just increases the distance between them, the insignificant, and God the all-powerful.

Each night, the staff simply read a passage of the Bible to the boys. There's little comment – just the Word of God, together with a silent prayer. Usually there's no response. But one night it was different. As the boys were listening to the Bible story, the adults realised that almost every boy was crying. 'This is our story,' they sobbed. What had they heard? It was the story of Jesus' arrest and his silence in the face of the

abusive questioning of powerful people: ‘... he was silent and did not answer’ (Mark 14:61). The street boys understand this silence: if they are arrested, abused, pressured for information - no matter what is inflicted on them – they have a code of silence. When you own nothing except your thoughts and feelings you protect these with silence – no one can take these away from you. ‘Our silence is our truth. This Jesus is one of us,’ they say.

For theological reflection

These boys are *doing* theology. They are not biblically literate but they have discovered that in God revealed in his Word, there is someone who understands them – not just because he is God and knows everything but because He became one of them: vulnerable, abused, marginalised.

How do we accompany these boys on that journey of discovery?

How do we do that without manipulation or presumption given the power dynamic that exists between powerless children and adults?

How do we as adults listen to and learn from children knowing that spiritual insight is not the sole domain of adults?

And – as we journey with children –

What is good about the Good News for children?

How does a child experience the Holy Spirit?

In Asia

A woman has worked among child prostitutes for several years. Some girls (and boys) are sold into prostitution as an economic measure by the parents. Most are now drug addicts. It’s difficult work and encouragement is hard to come by. There have been times when a child seems to be well along the path of rehabilitation when she slips back into familiar ways – into a life with at least some certainty. If they grow older, they become less ‘desirable’ as prostitutes, so they start on a life of petty (or serious) crime. But many will not grow older: they will die of AIDS. In despair, this childcare worker asks: Are there some children who are so damaged they can never be restored?

For theological reflection

These children are made in the image of God. But the image is so tarnished. Is it recoverable?

What is the status of the child before God?

Is it possible for a child who has never experienced love to experience the love of God?

Is our theology of hope robust enough to help this childcare practitioner?

Is our theology of suffering and dying robust enough to help us accompany *children* who are suffering or dying?

In Europe

An 18 year-old university student tells the story of how she has come to be studying social work with a view to working with teenage prostitutes. ‘When I was 12 years old’, she says, my church took a group of us – all aged between 12 and 14 – down to the Red Light district in Amsterdam. That night I spent half an hour talking to a girl-prostitute – and that changed my life forever.”

For theological reflection

Children are actively participating in the mission of God.

What does it mean to 'empower children' to engage in mission in the Kingdom of God where power is clothed in humility - the opposite of its construct in the world today?

How do we 'empower' children to be witnesses to Christ in ways that are authentic for children? What is a child witnessing to?

How do we inspire courage to serve God amongst the vulnerable: courage on the part of parents, the Christian community and the child?

How do we balance the God-given mandate to protect our children with the God-given mandate to accompany them in the real world?

In Australia

Joseph is from a church background and at the age of 5, has become captivated by the stories of the Bible. Excitedly telling his mother the latest things he has learned, he pauses for a moment and then asks thoughtfully: 'But Mum, when is God going to finish this story?'

Joseph's 5 year old experience had led him not only to appreciate the story of the moment, but to glimpse a bigger picture:

that this story is part of a big story
that this big story is God's story,
that some day this story will end –
and that all this has something to do with him.

How do we open the Bible with children in a way that ignites their imagination and respects their integrity?

How do we move away from our information-based or entertainment –based approach to the Bible to a more holistic approach, with confidence that children can meet the living God in his Word?

How do we encourage children to respond to what God is saying to them?

How do we explore biblical concepts with children in ways that are simple without being simplistic?

How do we respond to the difficult questions that children pose in ways that encourage them to keep exploring?

How can the Christian community be enriched by the insights and enthusiasm of children?

Building the Future

The Psalmist wrote: We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord⁴. We can do that in words; we can do that in actions. We need both.

But this is the responsibility of the whole faith community. We can no longer expect that tired Sunday School teachers and catechists, exhausted childcare workers and busy parents must bear all the responsibility for mission among children whether they be found in our churches or outside them.

⁴ Psalm 78:4 New International Version

If this is to be a reality, it will take a paradigm shift in the church. If the paradigm is to be shifted, it will require a change in theological thinking and commitment that will filter down from *every* theological institution through *every* part of the church. It cannot remain the domain of a few specialist seminaries.

But imagine what might happen⁵:

Imagine theological institutions that ...

- allow theological thinking about children, by children and on behalf of children to inform all disciplines
- esteem children's ministers as highly as all others in ministerial training
- create a synergy between theory and practice that is rooted in the harsh realities of a child's world.
- are active in training and equipping children for mission

Imagine families whose parents or caregivers ...

- have confidence in their role as *spiritual* caregivers
- are empowered to live out Christian values in their homes
- are equipped to create spiritual traditions in the home.

Imagine a church that ...

- commits the necessary resources to help children to follow Christ
- builds a 'good news' relationship with every child in their community
- believes that, like the biblical child Samuel, children can have a voice in their congregation and invites them to be in the midst of its teaching, worship, evangelism and discipleship.
- where people of all generations work together to see 'God's Kingdom come' in their communities

Imagine a child ...

- who knows and experiences that Jesus is present with him and will never forsake him – even when the pain of his life never fully goes away
- who finds that hope and the kingdom of God are not mere concepts but acts of love by those who gather her into a place of protection and care - away from fear, war, stigma, exploitation and abuse
- who finds that Jesus can help him understand the difference between sinning and being sinned against, and that both of these are wrapped with the healing grace and constant love of God
- with special educational needs who encounters Jesus' unconditional love among church friends - and becomes one of their worship-leaders.
- who is excited that he meets God in the Bible - because she has something of the Scriptures in a format he can understand
- whose experience of following Jesus is such that she shares it naturally among peers and family

⁵ This section is adapted from the ⁵ Strachan, Wendy and Simon Hood, eds. *Evangelization of Children*. Lausanne Occasional Paper # 47. 2004. available at <http://www.lausanne.org/2004-forum/documents.html>

Imagine a world where children are ...

- safe, well-cared for and living in hope
- given many opportunities to know and respond to the love of Jesus Christ
- encouraged to bring hope, healing, comfort and Jesus to one another
- able to be disciplined no matter how diverse their family or faith background.

In Conclusion

'A World Fit for Children' cannot only be the mandate of the United Nations. It is surely the mission of the church in the next decades.

When the next Edinburgh Missions Conference is held to explore different ways of that mission is impacting our world.....

Will children be prominent on the agenda?

Will children be active and equal participants at the conference?

Wendy Strachan
Scripture Union International
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