

# "Toddling Forward"



Papers from the visit of Dr. Keith White, Chairperson and co-founder of the Child Theology Movement, to Australia in June 2010.



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# Introduction

In June 2010 Melbourne was privileged to experience the visit to Australia of Dr. Keith White M.A. (Oxon.), M. Phil, PhD. Sponsored by the *Victorian Council for Christian Education* (VCCE) and supported by *Compassion*, the visit included conversations with faculty from numerous Theological Colleges and the presentation of the papers contained in this booklet. The visit sought to raise the profile of the Child Theology Movement in Australia, engage Theological Colleges with Child Theology and contribute to theological reflection around the practice of ministry with children and their families in a variety of contexts. The hope is that this booklet will also contribute to on-going conversation with regard to Child Theology.

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# Introducing Child Theology

## Dr Keith J. White

### **Introduction**

It seemed to me that it might be useful this evening to try to describe Child Theology in the context of my personal journey of discovery. The narrative will give us a chance to note related aspects of theology (like, for example Children's Spirituality) that feed into and draw from Child Theology, but are not the same thing. And it will also help us get to know each other better.

### **Stage One: Living among Children**

I was born into a rather unusual household in the East End of London (very near where the 2012 Olympics will be held in fact). My grandparents had shared their lives with motherless children, and my parents did the same: in the very same house! This is how it came about that I grew up alongside forty other children, and when I married, Ruth and I continued the family tradition and live in exactly the same place over 110 years after my grandparents began their life's work.

So I have been living among children virtually all my life. And this introduced me to two aspects of theology that I wish to note. The first is children's spirituality.

#### *Children's Spirituality*

There has been a lot written about this in recent years including a book just out called *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey* by Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids 2010). The core idea is that children have their own ways of making sense of the transcendent: they are hard-wired for relationships

of many sorts. In our desire to teach them Christian faith we risk not listening to and appreciating how they are already reaching out to, in touch with, and reflecting on, that which is beyond. Rather than relying solely on catechisms and didactic methods of instruction (however lively and enlightened) it is important, as Gibran memorably pointed out, to give children space for "their own thoughts". Godly Play is an expression of how this can be done.

Now this is has not been a total surprise to me because I have had the privilege of growing up and living alongside children and listening to them all through my life. At first I was amazed at the depths of their insights, and the integration of thought and feelings, but then I came to realize that as an adult I had much to learn from them as well as to teach them. It was a question of how best to do this.

One incident stands out above all others: we were camping in North Wales, and my late brother in law was tucking up three Nigerian youngsters who lived with us for the night. He had read a story to them, and then they prayed. I noticed him leave the tent with tears in his eyes. Concerned, I sidled up to him to ask what was wrong. He pointed to the tent and, through his tears, said that they were praying and he didn't feel worthy to stay in their presence. The prayer was continuing and so I was able to listen to the earnest, and remarkably honest, prayer from outside the tent, and it wasn't long before I was feeling the same way. It was as if God was present, and so near that it was possible for the boys to whisper and for Him still to hear their every word. They prayed for members of their family far away, and those who were part of their new extended family: there was a sense of deep connections, forgiveness and above all integrity. This was for me a memorable introduction to children's spirituality.

Then I think of a time when I was gardening with one of the teenagers we help. We were doing some weeding of the vegetable patch where not so long ago we had built our annual bonfire to celebrate November 5<sup>th</sup> (Guy Fawkes' Night). The ashes had long since been disposed of, and among the plants growing were some fine specimens of rhubarb. The young person looked at the sturdy stems and wide green leaves and commented: "Rhubarb reminds me of God". I paused to take this in, and eventually had to tell him that he had lost me a little: in fact I

couldn't begin to make the connection. He went on without hesitation: "It's so patient and forgiving. If someone had a bonfire on top of me every year I would be very angry and certainly would not produce anything for them to eat. Yet the rhubarb comes up year after year with no trace of resentment."

Child Theology will always recognize that children have experiences and thoughts about God that will bring light and understanding to adults. But that is not what Child Theology is primarily about. This leads us to the second discovery, Children's Theology.

### *Children's Theology*

Children can be theologians in the sense that they will have their own brands of theology, and their particular ways of expressing the truths that they discern. This means that it is not always adults who teach theology: at best it should be a two-way process (like all learning). I do not mean that children's theology is on a par with mature adult theology, but that we must not assume their minds are a tabula rasa as far as theology is concerned.

Let me give you an example from a Godly Play session that I was invited to attend. The subject was the Ten Commandments. The leader told the story of what happened at Mount Sinai, and went on to explain how Jesus taught new insights into God's law. One of the things he said was that we should love God, and our neighbours as ourselves but even more than that, we should love our enemies. This was too much for one of the children. "Are you serious?" he asked. "I can't even love my sister, so how could I love someone I hated?" (His sister nodded sagely in agreement.) "If that is what Jesus taught then you can count me out. What about the Koran? What does it say? Is it any more realistic?"

The discussion continued to consider why the armies of our own country were currently fighting their enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Why didn't our government listen to and obey Jesus?

What I was witnessing was a child doing theology. He was thinking out loud about what the Scriptures and Jesus taught and trying to relate this

to his own situation and the world around him. What is that, if it is not theology?

In numerous ways children do theology, notably in their questions and prayers. This is never to be patronized or dismissed: who can say that adult humans are any nearer to the whole truth from God's point of view?

But this is not what we mean by Child Theology, and this leads me to the next stage on my journey of discovery.

## **Stage two: Caring for Children**

As I took more responsibility for caring for the children and young people it fell to me to assume the leading role in teaching them about God, Jesus and the Bible. This leads me to the third important activity connected with (but distinct from) Child Theology, Religious Education.

### *Religious Education*

There are different terms for this around the world, but in essence the process is about how Christian adults communicate the Christian faith to children. This is theology for children, and it has a long pedigree. There are pictures and illustrations, children's Bibles, children's catechisms, Sunday Schools and Bible Classes, children's books and aids to Bible study, children's hymns and choruses: all of which have the intention of teaching children about the Christian faith.

Some see this teaching as a task to be undertaken solely by the church, but I have always been convinced that the family ("little church" as it has been called) had a vital role in this too. So it fell to me to think about how best to do this in our unusual household. The children came from different faith backgrounds and cultures, they varied in their knowledge of church and the Bible, and they had very different intellectual abilities, and to cap it all there was a large age range!

It took several years of experimenting before I came to realize that most of the resources on offer for families made the same assumption: the

Bible itself was mostly unintelligible and uninteresting to children. It was best dispensed in small doses, and "the pill" needed to be sugared with lots of lively additional material and activity. In time I came to see that the reverse was the case: the narrative of the Bible was what held the children's attention. You know that this idea is at the heart of the meaning of the word "Gospel": it is riveting, spell binding good news!

Over a period of twenty years I worked on producing a new Bible (a whole Bible in case there is any doubt!) for children and young people. It was intended for family prayers in our own household, but it has been in demand around the world. Writing thousands of notes, and 66 Bible book introductions for children was a task that set me on a huge learning curve: I was writing theology for children! And that had to be very smart, because there was no way of disguising unpalatable truths by using obscure words or convoluted sentences!

Theology for children is an important and skilled task, but it is not Child Theology! And this leads us to the fourth activity that I discovered: Theologies of the Child.

### *Theologies of the Child*

Very often this is what people have in mind when they hear of Child Theology. In this they are trying to understand children and childhood theologically. The child is the primary focus of the endeavour. And this has an important place in theology.

What does the bible have to teach about children? Are they innocent or tainted by original sin at birth? Should they take communion? At what age should they be received into the church or be baptized? What would a biblical view of child development look like?

You see immediately that these are important issues, and much time and energy has been devoted to them. I have tried to do my fair share of thinking and reflection in this area notably in the book, *The Growth of Love*. But all this is distinct from Child Theology.

And by now you must be beginning to wonder whether we will ever get to the heart of the matter, or even suspecting that this might be a shaggy dog story!

### **Stage three: Receiving Children**

It is only at this point that we reach Child Theology: thank you for your patience in listening to the story so far! By using the term "receiving" of "welcoming" children, I am deliberately seeking to connect with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18, and also what we read in John 1 concerning Jesus, the Word being received (or not). It is possible to live among, care for, teach children without fully receiving them. So what does this act of receiving imply and entail?

Perhaps the best analogy would be to think of parents and their first child. When the child is born, their life will change radically if they are to receive the child in the fullest sense of the word. Not only their relationship with each other must be adapted, but the very rhythms and pulses of their home and working lives will be attuned to the heartbeat, cries and movement of the new child.

It is theoretically possible to live among children, to care for them, to teach them and to witness their spirituality without changing as a person. Receiving a child in the sense just described cannot be done without changing.

Perhaps it is not easy to communicate the profound difference that I have in mind, but if so you may be willing at this point to take it on trust. There came a time in my personal journey when it became necessary, and then eventually a habit of the heart, to change: whether in the context of my own family of four children, or the extended family of Mill Grove.

And it was through this process that I began to see how all those engaged with children whom I admired particularly had understood intuitively the necessity of changing in order to receive children.



This has led us to the point where we can consider Child Theology. For it is a challenge not primarily to live among children, to care for them, or to admire them, but to change and become humble like them; to receive (welcome) them as a way of entering the Kingdom of Heaven and of receiving Jesus Christ and the One who sent him. It may be that the idea of changing to receive a child comes before the call of Jesus, or it could be the other way round. What is not in doubt in Child Theology is that they go together.

### *The content of Child Theology*

The content is disarmingly simple, at least at the start: Child Theology takes Jesus seriously as our guide. It starts with him rather than a child, and accepts that his action in placing a child in our midst, and what he says while the child is standing beside him, is a call to all disciples. One of the rather surprising aspects of the discoveries of CTM so far is how often this action and teaching of Jesus is marginalized to the point of being invisible. (Very recently I gave as a present one of the best Introductions to the New Testament that I know: it does not mention child in the index, and despite majoring on the Kingdom of God, there is no place for this particular teaching of Jesus. This is typical.)

Those of us engaged in the Child Theology Movement by way of contrast find that we cannot escape this challenge of Jesus. If it is not "the Gospel in a nutshell" it certainly seems to come very close! Jesus tells us that a little child is a vital clue to the nature of His Kingdom, and how to receive our Saviour and Lord. How then can we neglect to heed what he offers us?

Once Jesus has gained our attention (and for two thousand years of church history it has been gained much more rarely than it should have been) he calls us to change. In short our theology (that is our way of understanding and speaking to, with and for God) must be open to change. It is faulty as it stands, and therefore is in need of reformation. And the child is a model of "humility". Quite obviously this does not mean that the child standing beside Jesus was a model of the virtue of humility (we have no idea whether this was so, and we might suspect that humility of this sort is not likely to be a virtue in a little child

anyway). No, the little child is a model of marginality, lowly status, invisibility and the like.

The child stands for Jesus, and what he is called to be in his life and in his death: one who is despised and rejected. This is not an easy lesson. Perhaps that is one reason why it has so often been overlooked or remained unheard.

The child placed by Jesus in our midst is like a lens through which we see Jesus, His Father, and the world in new ways. If you prefer the metaphor, the child chosen and placed by Jesus throws new light on God's way of doing things. So to be willing to change, using this lens, or guided by this light, is to open up the whole of our life, to change everything in order to receive the child fully.

And this full reception includes every aspect of Christian theology. To date there are many aspects of biblical and systematic theology that have developed with this lens of this light. How do we understand Creation with a little child in the midst? What about "Original Sin" and how it is transmitted to little babies? What of Church and the place of the little child? And so the questions multiply. We cannot, we dare not leave anything out if we are to take Jesus seriously.

Perhaps we can see that this call to change and become humble like little children is another way of putting the call of the Cross.

### *The Way we are doing Child Theology*

I hope you see that it follows from this that the way we are doing theology does not simply accept or mimic the ways that theology has been done in the past. We have rather sought to learn from both the wisdom, and also the mistakes of the past.

So there is an international network of practitioners and professional theologians, ordained and lay people, academics and workers, male and female, who come together around God's Word, and taking good account of the context seeking to understand what it means to change and become humble like a little child. There are circles and no second rows!

The international movement is characterised by being non-hierarchical: every effort is made to include all those who seek to take Jesus seriously in this way. We are all seeking to know how we should change and adapt to live as Jesus would have us live.

Images that resonate with the way we are doing things include the mustard seed, and the yeast in the dough.

The movement is always listening, and hopefully always learning. It is like a toddler discovering how big and challenging the world is, and ready to fall over as it stumbles or becomes unbalanced.

## **Conclusion**

I hope this way of describing Child Theology is helpful: if not there are other methods of approach. By retelling something of my own story I can at least be rather more accurate than if I tried to give you generalizations about a movement that is less than ten years old and includes people from very continent.

Only you know why you came tonight, but just in case you are interested in Child Theology and /or seek to take Jesus seriously, I hope you will forgive me if I close by inviting you to join this growing movement. It's a journey of discovery, full of surprises because it is a pioneering journey: no one as far as we know has travelled it for long before.

If you do accept the invitation please don't look to anyone as an expert, and do not make children your focus: it is a pilgrimage following Jesus as Lord and Saviour, Alpha and Omega. Ultimately, the little child throws light on Jesus and the One who sent him. We take Jesus as our Way, as well as Truth and Life.

# *Child Theology as a Seed*

## *Dr. Keith J. White*

### **Introduction**

One way of describing Child Theology, as understood by the Child Theology Movement is as the rediscovery of a theological seed and the planting and replanting of it in different soils and environments around the world. The seed is so seemingly insignificant that it has been overlooked for the most part for two thousand years. But on closer inspection it has within it the potential to change everything. This paper explores just a few of the ways in which it might do this.

And what is the seed? A little child placed by Jesus in the midst of his disciples as a sign of:

- Jesus himself
- God (“the One who sent Jesus”)
- The Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew’s version of the Kingdom of God)
- Humility;
- Entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

This seems a remarkable amount to be contained in the DNA of a single seed! Yet just as we ponder the babe in the manger in our imaginations and wonder how the glory of God could possibly be contained within such a tiny form, so it is with this seed. The Incarnation should have prepared us for such marvels of contraction:

“God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him”  
(Colossians 1: 19).

So I invite you to think of this afternoon in such a context, as seed sowing. This evokes the image of the sower, beloved of Jesus. The

fullest description of the seed of Child Theology is to be found in Matthew 18 verses 1-14. It is important to note that the seed is best seen as theological (rather than say educational or sociological). The disciples were engaged in a theological discussion (or argument), and this was the way that Jesus responded. It is a core element of his teaching about the Kingdom, and of the nature of his kingship.

By definition therefore this seed relates to everything in some way whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, for God in Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven relate to all things visible and invisible.

But the teaching of Jesus does not spell out a doctrine or program in relation to discourses or institutions. This is for us to work on, as with so much of the life and teaching of Jesus. Paul's letters are the foremost example of this process at work. I do not intend to give you a curriculum or method, but rather to ask you to receive this seed deep into your hearts, minds and souls so that it might take root, grow and bear fruit.

So when we think of education, whether religious or secular, we know there will be implications as the seed is allowed to germinate, but the learning outcomes are not specified!

I would like to share with you some reflections and ideas that represent work in progress about this relationship. They are largely intuitive and may be treated as hypotheses: I invite your responses to them.

Given that today's audience is primarily involved in religious education we will seek to explore some of the implications of this theological seed for such activity. My assumption is that Jesus is teaching the disciples all through his ministry, and that this is a vital part of their education, induction. So we can justifiably make connections with our own situations and settings.

The starting point is one that gives us a different, perhaps broader perspective than usual, and it may help us see the wood when we have been used to dealing with the trees.

## **(1)The Whole Child**

The text that contains the seed (in context, of course) is found in all three synoptic gospels. I have over recent years focused on the narrative of Matthew while drawing from the insights of the others, as well as the rest of the Bible.

The child in Matthew's Gospel is anonymous. (S)he could have been anyone's child, perhaps best thought of as a younger equivalent of the "unknown soldier". The child stands for any and for all children. And Jesus does not select the child because of specific features or qualities (we must be careful in our exegesis here). All we know is that the child was marginal to the discussion: lacking status or "clout". "Humility" in this context refers to lack of social position and influence not a personal quality or moral virtue. The disciples were likely to see only one aspect of the child: her lowly status. She does not rank at all in their idea of the Kingdom of Heaven. Nothing merited. Not even worth considering as an entrant! No value in the trading game that they have in mind.

So we know virtually nothing about the child except that he or she is little (*paidion*), and the child as a whole is the chosen sign that Jesus gives. Thus if we are going to make links with education (or with any other discipline) we can do no other than apply everything to the whole child.

This doesn't seem controversial in education: do we not all agree with the premise that we seek to engage with the whole child, and to allow the whole child to develop in and through the learning process?

Let us assume we can get beyond this (but it is closer to current reality than we may care to imagine!) how do we engage the whole child?

This is where the philosophies and models of Froebel, Montessori, Cavaletti and Berryman (Godly Play) are particularly instructive. Everything that happens in the learning environment is intended to resonate and connect with the whole child. Mind, body and spirit are not seen as separate entities or categories, and subjects are not conceived as self-contained.

Surely this is one of the guiding principles of religious education: spirituality has to do with the whole child. And so every method will be employed to connect with the imagination, soul, and heart of the child.

## **(2) The Whole Learning Process**

I have already used the term “learning environment” (rather than school or classroom). To understand what Jesus is trying to indicate as he plants this seed means we have to understand the whole context and history of what is, has been and will be going on. He is nearing the end of a three year program of learning (an undergraduate degree you might say?). The core theme of the whole curriculum is the Kingdom of Heaven. You can see that from the most cursory glance at Matthew’s Gospel. The disciples have a traditional Jewish idea of the Kingdom and nothing Jesus does or teaches seems to disturb, let alone shake this at all. In Piaget’s terms perhaps it could be said that they are locked at a stage of development that means they are unable to take in a concept that can only be arrived at later, perhaps?

And the key thing they cannot, and will not, understand is the Cross. They dismiss the whole idea that the Messiah, the Christ, their Lord, the Son of Man is destined to die as an object of scorn and ridicule. As far as they can see whatever is meant by the “suffering servant” does not and cannot apply to Jesus the Christ. For if they allowed this idea to penetrate their consciousness the whole edifice of the Kingdom they are committed to will come crashing down on their heads and their grand schemes will be scuppered.

Jesus has tried many ways to get through to them (into their “thick heads” as one of my teachers used to say), to no effect.

Can we try to imagine what aspects of education (in our particular case) we have in our minds that Jesus wishes to shake? What is the Cross for us that we are to carry as disciples of Jesus? What is it that needs to be changed if we are to become humble like the little child? Perhaps we are called to a prophetic role in our day and age.

What are the fixed ideas we are committed to as we consider the whole learning process?

Are we wedded to theories of development, faith formation? Has Fowler sewn everything up for us, for example?

Are we committed to methods and institutions?

What are our views of “success” and “failure”?

Do we privilege adulthood over childhood or vice-versa?

Is religious education still squeezed into other moulds?

Are we willing to spearhead radical ways of modifying and utilizing the whole process?

Do we see the learning environment as a “kindergarten”? Are we, as teachers, part of the learning process by the way we continue to explore and learn?

### **(3) The Whole Bible Story**

The disciples had their favourite passages and themes (just like us) and Jesus sought to draw from the whole corpus (with them, as he did later with the two on the Emmaus Road).

Their view of the Kingdom of Heaven could be defended from the Scriptures, but only by privileging certain passages over others.

Now we have a responsibility to connect children and young people with the whole Scriptures, and we select and shape how we do this.

What are our guiding principles?

What of the “literal approach” talked of by Rowan Williams that keeps the rough edges, and refuses to iron out the wrinkles?

What of the troubling parts?



How do we ourselves ensure we engage with the whole?

How do we ensure that children have the opportunity to do the same?

This is not the place to attempt an overall summary of the Bible, but I will give examples of what I mean. The Bible starts with creation, and the story has hints of darkness and chaos, of nothingness right from the opening cadences. And when you get to the book of Revelation there is a cosmic battle going on between these forces of darkness and God's light and life. If security is to be found in all this, it is not the sort of security that comes from Valium and splitting off from real life struggles against the odds.

We find monsters of the deep and on the land Leviathan and Behemoth; we find wars, famines, murder, incest, rape, deceit, slavery, plagues, earthquakes, civil wars, revolutions, invasions overshadowing every event. The birth of Jesus, like the birth of Moses takes place in the context of the systematic murdering of baby boys. This "insecurity" (that which threatens security) occurs at every level: from the intra-personal experience of individual human beings, through families, tribes and nations. And the universe itself is shown to be set in a context of death and extinction.

We find individuals like Job, Jeremiah, wrestling with how to continue living with any integrity or peace: their struggles are described in what some might consider inordinate detail. Esther and her people are threatened with extinction through ethnic cleansing; Jesus wrestles in Gethsemane in a way that recalls his forty days fasting and being tested. This period in turn recalls the forty years of the Israelites in the wilderness; and this period is as nothing compared to the 430 years that the Hebrews spent in slavery calling out apparently in vain to their god.

The problem is that the so-called "Children's Bibles" filter out most of this shadowy, threatening, ugly, evil, dark side and element of the narrative. And this is very significant not only for children, but for us all, because many Christian adults still depend heavily on what they learnt at Sunday School as a basis for their understanding of the Bible.

Perhaps the best treatment of this process and of its effects is by Gretchen Wolff Pritchard in *Offering the Gospel to Children*. She calls what children are offered a “distorted canon”. At one point she summarises her thesis thus:

“But the greatest problem with these children’s Bibles is their distortion of the Old Testament canon, and the implications of this for children’s ability to understand the Bible not as “a story”, but as “my story”. For the heart of the Scriptures is a continuing pattern of exile and return, of loss, hope and restoration, or new life out of renunciation and death. And it emerges not only from narrative, but from prophecy, psalm, and hymns; from vision and exhortation; from parables, image and metaphor.

“This pattern recurs in the Hebrew Bible in three great movements. The first is the primeval exile from the Garden of Eden, echoed in the call to Abraham to leave his kindred and his country and seek a land of promise. The second is the bondage in Egypt of the children of Israel, their deliverance in the Exodus, their entry into the land, and the building of Jerusalem, the joy of the whole earth. The third is the faithlessness of the people, the destruction of Jerusalem, the Babylonian Captivity, and the promise, beyond hope, that the dry bones will live...”<sup>1</sup>

One of the main reasons that for twenty years I have been working on a new edition of the Bible<sup>2</sup> is so that children and families around the world can read the *whole* Bible for themselves. It is my experience of living at Mill Grove that has made the need for such a major commitment of time and energy necessary. “Children’s Bibles”, like ordinary Sunday School lessons tend to stay on the side of what is comforting and neat. So, for example there is never the end of the story of David and Goliath when David walks around holding the giant’s head, or when Saul puzzlingly asks who David is.

What was needed was a complete text that had the difficult bits in it. And the reason is so that the real lives of children and families with all

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<sup>1</sup> G. Wolff Pritchard, *Offering the Gospel to Children* Boston, Cowley 1992, page 43

<sup>2</sup> *The Bible (Narrative and Illustrated)* WTL-IBS, London 2008

their messiness and unsatisfactory “conclusions” and events finds resonance in what they read in the Bible. The two stories (the narrative of the Scriptures and the biography of the reader) are allowed to work on each other dialectically.

#### **(4) The Whole Community**

The seed has implications for the communities of which we are all part: as it grows it brings change not only to individuals but to groups.

Without questioning the role and place of specialists in different areas of life, it is important to explore the role of the whole community in learning process. I don't think this should be hard for professional teachers to accept, especially those engaged in religious education. Isn't it received wisdom that it takes a village to raise (teach) a child?

Jesus was creating a new community, and a radical new type of community at that. As the child stood beside Jesus, surrounded by the solid rank of disciples, a potential new social group was emerging. Would any of the disciples be prepared to break rank, to come down and become humble enough to identify with the little child, and the servant leader who chose to be represented by this little child, this nobody?

He drew from and engaged every part of the communities he encountered: women, outsiders, and children: people drawn from different cultures, ages and backgrounds.

And his purpose was to create a new community, the Kingdom of Heaven that went beyond family and traditional institutional boundaries (Pentecost), and linked people in new ways. It was an inside-out, upside-down and back-to-front sort of group, where the greatest was the servant of all, and the Son of Man gave his life a ransom for many.

How is the whole church involved in religious education?

How does school relate to the whole community?

#### **(5) The Whole Planet**

The seed has within it that which transcends the merely physical, the here and now, the local and parochial. Where it takes root it connects time and eternity, the individual and the universe of which she is part.

The Kingdom of Heaven is restricted by no levels or boundaries, by no nation or region. It is signed and modelled by the One through whom all things were made: who gave His life out of love for the whole world.

The disciples had a very limited view of the Kingdom: it was about a particular piece of land and a particular ethnic group. Perhaps we imitate their parochialism in a variety of ways: territorial, political, ethnic, professional, denominational, institutional, and the like.

It is worth hearing what Froebel saw as the heart of learning and education: “connecting the soul of each child with the whole universe”. How often we settle for so much less! It is not done by amassing facts about the universe, by multiplying subjects, but by connecting with the imagination of children, touching their hearts, stirring their longings, and inspiring their minds.

If there is a book that represents this well it is *Children and our Global Future* by Kristin Herzog. I commend it to you. She shows how following the lead of Jesus leads us into areas beyond which we feel comfortable and where we are at home: the seed has the potential to become a worldwide tree.

How do we nurture the connections between children, the planet and universe?

Do we limit the scope of God’s love and rule?

## **(6) The Whole Purpose**

Jesus had the ability to see into, and to reach into the very heart of the matter. He saw for example that a little child would challenge the very foundations of what his disciples longed for and prized.

Later he was to have a heart to heart conversation with Peter by the Sea of Galilee that led Peter to exclaim: "You know all things!" And still today Jesus probes our very motives and goals; what we see as the purpose of our life and work.

What is our involvement with teaching children all about?

Why are we involved?

What are our real motives?

Religious education must lead to such searching questions. In the midst of death we have a short period on earth. What does it mean?

The seed has within it that which challenges the very ground of our being, and how can we teach religious education to others until we have opened ourselves to the searching light of Jesus?

## **Conclusion**

So it is that I suggest to you that one little seed has within it the potential to affect how we understand and relate to:

- The Whole Child
- The Whole Learning Process
- The Whole Bible
- The Whole Community
- The Whole Planet
- The Whole Purpose

Let me leave you with some words of Maria Montessori. I do not suggest that they contain the whole truth, but they echo something of what I have been trying to intimate about the nature of the seed:

“I seek to discover the man in the child, to see in him the true human spirit, the design of the Creator: the scientific and religious truth. It is to this end that I apply my method of study, which respects human nature. I don't need to teach anything to children: it is they who, placed in a favourable environment, teach me, reveal to me spiritual secrets as their souls have not been deformed.”

And in case we have not already concluded that we can do nothing worthy of the name of religious education without love, here are some challenging words of Paulo Freire:

“It is impossible to teach without the courage to love...”

And finally a poem by Jane Clements, a teacher in the Bruderhof Schools that captures the implications of this for the teacher/child relationship:

“Child, though I take your hand  
and walk in the snow;  
though we follow the track of the mouse together,  
though we try to unlock together the mystery  
of the printed word, and slowly discover  
why two and three makes five  
always, in an uncertain world –

child, though I am meant to teach you much,

what is it, in the end,  
except that together we are  
meant to be children  
of the same Father

and I must unlearn  
all the adult structure  
and the cumbering years

and you must teach me

to look at the earth and the heaven  
with your fresh wonder.”

That seems to me the essence of the seed in Matthew 18: Jesus invites us to do just that. There is “unlearning” (coming down and becoming humble) to do, before we can learn to look at the whole world with fresh wonder, with teacher and child united among other things by the fact that we are children of the same Father. Where that happens the Kingdom of Heaven is being realized, and religious education is manifestly taking place.

# *Child Theology and the emerging Theology of Development*

*Keith J. White, M.A. (Oxon.), M.Phil, PhD*

## **Introduction**

The brief I have been given today encourages me! It is good to know that you are serious about the theology of development! In my experience it tends to get squeezed out in one of two ways. First it seems marginal to those engaged in the heat of the battle trying to combat poverty and to evangelise and transform the world before Jesus Christ comes again. Second, theology is marginalised by the theorising on development that relies on (excellent, but by definition, limited) secular models.

Let me tell you how I went about this task. I read through a number of texts that those in development pointed me to, and listed the main issues in the theology of development that I found in them. Then I sifted and prioritised them into three clusters, before seeing how what I knew of Child Theology might throw light on them. There is risk inherent in such a way of going about things. The writers may not be representative. Things may have moved on. You may have quite other issues of pressing importance. Be that as it may the die is cast and I will share with you my work in progress.

## **Three Issues in Theology of Development**

1. What sort of theology is most appropriate and inspiring?
2. What core theological subject do they have in common?
3. What might a working model look like?



## **(1.1) What sort of theology is most appropriate and inspiring in development work?**

Paula Clifford's Christian Aid Report, *Theology and International Development* (April 2010)<sup>3</sup> is a good resource here: relational/covenant theology; liberation theologies; contextual theologies are explored with a weather eye for a range of contexts (for example: women and HIV; Old Testament interpretation and Palestinian Christians). We have to get beyond favourite doctrines, proof texts, or passages in order to allow God's Word to grasp and challenge us in something of its height, length, breadth and depth.

Perhaps it is the fact that I live in a residential community made up of children and young people who have experienced traumas, poverty and brokenness in extreme or chronic forms, that has sensitized me to the nature and source of a person's theology. Sometimes it seems as if some theology is "sound", neat, comprehensive, but untouched and untested by the rough edges and fragmentation of life, communities and history. It has not been forged in crucibles where the heat has become unbearable to the point of crying with the Psalmist and the crucified Jesus Christ, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

Sometimes the theology that is written or spoken about development can sound too remote, too systematized and smooth, like the prayers each Sunday in rich churches, where everyone is prayed for, including the poorest of the poor, with pin-point accuracy, but the prayers lack the woundedness that comes from acknowledging our part in the whole process. There seem to be two tracks: parallel universes.

So I have always been drawn to rugged theology and theologians irrespective of their labels: Barth and the Barmen Declaration; Romero; Bonhoeffer; Bonino; Ramabai; and Korczak. You could probably add to the list. Theology for them is found not apart from life, but in the midst of it. Here they are thrown upon God's grace, and into His hands, by the overwhelmingly ugly and disruptive effects of sin in every realm of life from the individual heart to the nation and empires. There are tears,

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Paula Clifford *Theology and International Development: Poverty* Christian Aid Oxford April 2010

sweat and drops of blood, Gethsemane-like, wherever they have wrestled in the name of Jesus with injustice and sin.<sup>4</sup>

This theology must be a *theology of the Cross*, in practice, if not in name. For there is no escaping the reality and challenge of the Cross in the midst of life. Let me give you an example from India. In my view one of the greatest theologians and agents of development in the world was Pandita Ramabai. Her calling was to be in God's hands a means of transforming India more nearly into the image of God in Christ, through a practice-based model of development. This created radically new social space within which girls and women could live, relate, be affirmed and learn. Her community was located in Pune, a stronghold of Brahmin orthodoxy, which suspected her of duplicity. She was seen as proselytizing behind a veneer of education.

When some of the teenagers in her community decided to follow Jesus and ask for public baptism, what should she do? If they were baptized, her whole work would come crashing down. If they were not baptized, what integrity would there be for a community of those seeking to follow Jesus. She pointed out to the teenagers some of the difficulties. They came back to her determined to be baptized. She supported them. They were baptized in a local river, and true enough her work came crashing down. (Notice it was the end of the community as she knew it: it was not the end of God's purposes in India!)

That is where she encountered the Cross afresh, like Bonhoeffer awaiting the gallows. Are we prepared to lay all at the altar? Or are there no-go areas? Very often it seems to be the case, though it is not written down, that whatever happens, our organization must continue. This is axiomatic for all employees. Therefore our theology must be tailored, compromised, in order to ensure our reputation and that of our employers.

I hope you will agree that *theological reflection* is a primary method in development. That is, we must assume that as disciples of Jesus Christ we are already engaged with real life. This, rather than deriving principles in some quasi-Platonic realm perhaps in another continent, or by means of a detached reading of the Scriptures, that then inform our

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<sup>4</sup> Haddon Willmer, unpublished paper "Theology and Development" March 2007 (?)

life, work and our organisations. Thus we have a dynamic relation between development and theology, rather than a one-way process, something done and dusted.

And the theology of which we are talking is not that of any elite either professional theologians in the academy, or ordained ministers (though it will include them), but the *theology of the ordinary, lay, normal follower of Jesus*. Every Christian is inescapably doing theology when she prays, cares for a child, gets water from a well, obeys her husband, deals with patriarchy and injustice, and sings Christian hymns and songs. Hopefully she will be part of a group of fellow believers with whom this theology is done, on the ground, in a circle, in the midst of household and community.

Finally what *prophetic edge is there to our theology?* Can we with Jayakumar Christian speak out against the “web of lies” embodied in social, cultural and religious systems including our own, or not?<sup>5</sup> And are we able to critique theories of development with a prior ontological commitment to Jesus Christ and Christian theology?<sup>6</sup> Or is it possible that much of our development work is “functionally atheistic”?<sup>7</sup>

## **(1.2) Child Theology and some possible contributions**

I hope it does not disappoint you when I say that we are not talking here simply of the content (creed/doctrinal basis of theology), but also of the way in which it is done. Child Theology has been characterized thus far in its short life (infancy!) by a readiness to do theology in groups of people, together and in context. The reports of these circles are culturally sensitive.<sup>8</sup> They are available to, but not prescriptive for, those who follow in other parts of the world. It seems simple, but the history of theology shows it is not as easy as that: against the trend worldwide over many centuries we have involved male and female, rich and poor, ordained and lay people, practitioners and academics, and people of many cultures and backgrounds. It seems as if this process and the discoveries made thus far are likely to be of interest, and possibly even help, to those engaged in development.

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<sup>5</sup> See Bryant Myers *Walking with the Poor*, Orbis, Maryknoll 2009 (15th edition) pages 72-80

<sup>6</sup> James E. Loder *The Logic of the Spirit*, is a good example of how this can be done.

<sup>7</sup> Myers (2009) page 162

<sup>8</sup> For copies of the CTM reports see [www.childtheology.com](http://www.childtheology.com)

One of the ways in which we have tried to do theology was discovered in Cape Town when we stumbled upon a process as we wrestled with our biblical understandings of sin with a child soldier and child prostitute symbolically in our midst. It was, if you like, a theology of the Cross, which left us with nowhere else to go.

The willingness to explore, and if necessary, to fall flat on our faces, may be appealing to those engaged in development, when contrasted with those who are sure of their ground, convinced of their frameworks and principles. Who involved in development has not found their theological foundations shaken by the chronic suffering, despair, pain and injustice that is encountered in communities, families, and regions, generation after generation?

Being conceived and born in the internet age means that the Child Theology Movement has been able to communicate in new ways with individuals and groups across the world. We are not tied to a denomination or academy, although we seek to work closely and honestly with both. We have done theology in favellas, in children's homes, in the context of liberation theologies, with Christian development organizations, denominations, and local theologies.

Children are evocative signs in development (ask Save the Children, World Vision, Compassion, and TearFund!), and likewise in theology, but they have often been marginal in the former, and invisible in the latter. So Child Theology is likely to have something to offer both in focus, if not yet in content!

The starting point in the midst of our lives and a variety of cultural contexts has been the action and teaching of Jesus in placing a child in the midst of a theological discussion about greatness in the Kingdom. Jesus is therefore the Alpha and Omega of Child Theology.

To this we now move.

## **(2.1) The Kingdom of God: a key theological issue in common?**

Arguably the Kingdom of God is the most important theological issue for those who seek to follow Jesus in practice. It is not the time or place to defend this but I can point to Gospels as a whole, the life and teaching of Jesus, both before and after the Resurrection, and the Lord's Prayer should it be necessary.

And no theology of development can, or would wish to ignore or avoid this. As evidence I can say that every document I have been pointed to in preparation for today makes reference to this Kingdom.

We do not have time to define adequately this Kingdom today, let alone discuss it, but we can note some of its contours and challenges. I would offer you a thought first given to me by a black brother in Christ while I was teaching in Alabama. 'Europeans will never get it until they let go of their histories of empires and colonialism represented by the words, royaume, reina, kingdom and reich. Instead, whenever these words appear in Scripture, read them like this: "God's way of doing things is like this", or "Where God has his way, this is what it is like".' The scales fell from my eyes as I was freed from territory, power, status, domination, hierarchy, competition and so much more.

If we do not allow ourselves to be purged (daily?) from our histories we will fall into the trap of perpetuating empires and domination by another means.

With this in mind, and because time is short, let me spell out the main theological questions that arise in the development literature that I have recently come across:

- (i) How far is development by FBOs synonymous for Christians and Christian agencies with the Kingdom of Heaven?
- (ii) How does this Kingdom relate to Church? Synonymous again, or does the Kingdom challenge, even judge Church?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Myers (2009) page 39; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*

(iii) Is the Kingdom well or adequately represented when we talk of “holistic development”?

(iv) Do our agencies represent (incarnate) the Kingdom well?

(v) How do evangelism and proselytisation in Christian development fit with the Kingdom?

(vi) What sort of transformation does the Kingdom of God represent?

(vii) Where are we in the “Now”, “No longer” and the “Not Yet”? (What is our eschatological theology?)

## **(2.2) Child Theology of some possible contributions**

Here we come to the very heart of Child Theology. Jesus placed a child in the midst of his disciples (“embryonic church”; those called and chosen to continue the life of the Kingdom) as a sign of this Kingdom. Let us see what happens if we seek to respond to these questions with the child placed by Jesus in the midst. This is not a developed theological argument: rather some musings about how a conversation could unfold.

Before we get on to the theology of the Kingdom, could we just pause to consider the significance of children, childhood and development, as it is to be seen in development theory?

Children are symptoms of mal-development, or social disorder: the appalling statistics of children at risk or children suffering: malnutrition, lack of education and health care, HIV/AIDS effects, abuses like commercial sexual abuse and trafficking, child soldiers, and child labour.

Children are strategic for development practice: they are the future: investment here can have long term effects; they are malleable, educable; and in some societies, especially poor ones, children are large proportions of the population.

And children are humanly significant: the child is a sacrament, a sign and presence, of hope, joy, light in darkness, for all sorts of people.

Further, despite all this, children are negligible: they can be neglected and disposed of, there are always more if we need them. There can be no denying, and there is no final or complete, elimination of the despising of children by societies. The UNCRC is a prayer rather than a totally effective prohibition on abuse.

All this is rehearsed at large in *Celebrating Children* and other places (see the writing of Bryant Myers, WVI, as one of the greatest players). And it fuels the activism, and the better organisation of activism at which Cutting Edge and Viva aim. But does it fuel the heart of our theology in the same way? Have we welcomed children as placed right in the midst of our theology of development in the same way we have welcomed them into our secular models of development?

With this in mind we revisit our theology of the Kingdom of Heaven with a child placed by Jesus in the midst.

(i) It would be unwise for any Christian or agency to conclude that would they are doing adequately or fully embodies the Kingdom of Heaven. The disciples thought they were on the right track: they saw development following the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel. And as we now see how history has unfolded in the light of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ we see how limited their vision was, how partial. Is this not a salutary lesson for us all, always? We see in part.

What is more, what we call development is what we are doing or hope and plan to do. What of God's activity and presence? What is he doing? The love of God is broader than the measures of man's mind. What of the millions of suffering children that we do not even know about, let alone help? Jesus assures us that their angels always behold the Face of the Father. This is part of the Kingdom of which we know nothing, but isn't it likely that in the final analysis, this will be its major part, by far?

(ii) The child in question is the unknown child so we cannot say that she was part of the Christian fold, company of followers of Jesus. So implicitly the horizons of the Kingdom are wider than those of Church. It is instructive to see how theologians have read this incident in the Gospels. In Matthew many are so determined to see church as the framework for understanding Jesus and the child, that they completely overlook the way that the commentators are being judged even as they write and speak!

(iii) If we could restrict the use of “holistic” to what God is doing, through us, despite us, and around us, then it may have merit, but we tend to claim it rather too readily as a description of what we do. The child has everything ahead of him: there are possibilities and openings we can do nothing about. There are dreams and visions lying within the child.

(iv) As for our agencies representing the Kingdom well?! Who would be daring enough to stand in the dock and be tried by those we seek to serve, let alone by the living God. And there is a fundamental problem we are loath to recognise whenever we organise ourselves, whether into micro or macro organisations. The Kingdom does not seem to relate to them at all easily. Our plans and planning tend to result in concrete, whether buildings or intended outcomes that form the basis of funding and salaries: the Kingdom is more like the wind, or the lavish scattering of seed. There is a fundamental discontinuity or even contradiction.

Look at the headquarters (metropole) of any empire: what do you see? You spot the speck of dust in others; why cannot we see the beam in our own? We have status and hierarchies, competition and power: in a word, greatness! And the Kingdom represented by the child deconstructs all this. The disciples are invited to consider that they are outside God’s way of doing things. They do not like it; and nor do we! But they continued, and so do we.

(v) Perhaps it is when development is seen in relation to evangelism that we find some of the curious paradoxes of the Kingdom appearing. Is the child receiving good news? Does the child represent good news? How does this intervention of Jesus mould the way the disciples will



live, teach and preach? It could be preaching without using words all the time perhaps?

Here standing beside Jesus and among them is the personification of “graced vulnerability”<sup>10</sup>.

(vi) As for the kind of transformation involved in development and the kingdom respectively: what a huge topic! I would only plead here that it is never again discussed without a child placed by Jesus in the midst. Are there not limitless possible outcomes for this child? What if one of them is the Cross? How do we see that in terms of development?

(vii) I have found that the very nature of childhoods provides a useful eschatological analogy: “now” and “not yet”; human and not yet mature; on the way but with a road still stretching out ahead.

If there is one text that I have read in the last few weeks that has helped me to rethink how Child Theology might relate to theology of development it is Kristin Herzog’s work.<sup>11</sup> It seems to me to show how when children are received as placed by Jesus among us we find strange dynamics unfolding and we are connected to the smallest details high in Peru as lives and communities change, as well as global structure, and the finitude of the planet. If I were to choose key books that might form a focus of future discussion between development and child theologians hers would be among them. And wonderfully and tantalisingly it does not mention development or Kingdom of God in the Index! So we have to get to work rather than being spoon-fed.

You will see in the book how we are challenged to live, and this leads us to the third issue today.

### **(3.1) What might a working model look like?**

So we seek to be faithful in the way we do theology and to align our theology of development with the Kingdom of God. This ultimately boils

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<sup>10</sup> D. Jensen *Graced Vulnerability*

<sup>11</sup> Kristin Herzog *Children and our Global Future: theological and social challenges* Cleveland, Pilgrim Press 2005

down to the question: how shall we then live? And given that development operates at several different, thought interlocking levels, we are looking for a model rather than a program.

And a model for our theology must be embodied, incarnational: people seeing how we live and love, and glorifying our Father in Heaven.

Lived theology of development modeled on, inspired by the life and death of Jesus. Was he not engaged in “development”: living in a particular neighbourhood and culture and then drawing together a group that would be part of God’s mission in changing the world? Good news for the poor! (I am grateful to have been introduced to the work of Lindy Backues. He did his PhD on development in Indonesia, and his primary theology is incarnational.<sup>12</sup>)

Here are some to the questions that arise:

What is the best locus standi for Christian development? Should FBOs work on behalf of governments or global NGOs? Should they be an integral part of Church? Should those engaged in development take a vow of poverty? Should they be insiders or outsiders? Should they prepare for celebrity or outcast status?

How long do you walk with the poor? Do you go a mile in their moccasins, or a lot farther? Is development possible without living among the poor, “moving into their neighbourhood” (as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*)?

What is an appropriate lifestyle for everyone in a Christian development agency? Is it upside down enough to replicate the Kingdom of Heaven? How does it compare to the teaching of Jesus about the greatest and the least? Is any hierarchy defensible?

At what level do you live development? Is “glocal” possible?

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<sup>12</sup> Lindy Backues “The Incarnation as Motif for Development Practice” in *World Mission in The Wesleyan Spirit; “The Image of the Incarnation as Motif for Development Practice in West Java, Indonesia”, unpublished PhD thesis. This is also one the important theological ideas that Bryant Myers identifies in WWTP, pages 46-47*

Who are the insiders and outsiders in development? Who are the subjects and who the objects? (See [Deborah Storie: \*The Value of Straw\*](#))

What sort of outcomes are we living for in development? Are the outcomes of the agency subject to theological scrutiny?

What of sustainability? Has development anything to say of Indus or MacWorld civilizations on this score?

Can corporations be justified?

Can donors live a completely different lifestyle to those they help?

### **(3.2) Possible contributions of Child Theology**

I suggest one very modest first step: to change and become humble as the children. We do that by receiving them, welcoming them. How is this theological? Because it is a response to the command of Jesus, is a sign of the Kingdom, and a way of receiving Him and the One who sent Him.

And what has that got to do with development and associated theology? Arguably, a child and development are one and the same thing, when you get down to it. A child is both an example, and also a site, of development.

What's more this teaching of Jesus is realistic: we cannot transform the world, but we can welcome a single child! Perhaps this is the greatest strength of sponsoring a child as a way of resourcing development. But on the other hand the parable of the one lost sheep contains a very big challenge: what would you do if you lost one sheep out of a hundred? Perhaps as soon as we use the word development we are at risk of allowing statistics to override a single person or child.

However impressive our operations, they are as a drop in the bucket compared to the need. We must leave to God what we cannot do, humbly acknowledging the limits of development. At this point we can

only trust the “angels beholding the face of the Father”. The way of the Cross: God is where we cannot be or make a difference.

Can we become as children (and enter the Kingdom) without receiving children? This may be one of the relatively overlooked keys to understanding development better. In poor communities a child is sold for body parts. What does it mean to accept a child in the poorest community or household, street or city? Could this be a way to begin, to start afresh?

Let me finish with the story of the place where I have lived all my life, and to which I alluded, on page 1. (There are others such as The Pavement Project; PEPE, for example.) It is a story of development done in the name of Jesus in an ordinary neighbourhood in London. We have received over 1000 children into our family home since 1899. They have lived as part of our family for as long as they have wished. We have served the children of the neighbourhood as part of this.

Of all the options open to me as a Christian Community Development Worker this is the one that I believed was right as a permanent base of operations.

Recently I was asked to reflect on my experience in a book: *The Growth of Love*.<sup>13</sup> The aim was to bring together child development theory and theological reflection.

I suggest that the discoveries I made may have relevance today. If we are genuinely to receive/welcome children in the name of Jesus there will be considerable moving of the furniture inside and outside our hearts!

And if they are the subjects of development we must be ready for surprises, disappointments.

There are five hallmarks of the context in which they will thrive, and in which love will grow.

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<sup>13</sup> Keith J. White *The Growth of Love* Abingdon: BRF, 2008

So let me suggest that a theology of development informed by the child placed by Jesus in the midst will be characterised by:

**Security:** a primal need of all humans. Chaos, frailty, fragmentation all conspire to undermine this. How do we, in the name of Christ go about providing it? We need to think very hard. And when we do so we realise that we cannot ultimately provide cast iron security: we can but try. Security, as the Bible makes clear, is ultimately in the hands of God alone. Romans 8: “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ”; Matthew 18: “their angels always behold the face of my Father in Heaven”; Psalm 46 “God is our strength and refuge”...To have integrity we must speak of this reality; this truth. And we must model it wherever we can. Are we to be relied upon? Can we be the human face that reliably smiles back at the little baby? This is a primary task at Mill Grove.

**Boundaries:** there are many aspects to this. There has to be some understanding of household, community (the phrase: the community recurs in development theory, as if it is non-problematical!); religious, cultural, political, and economic contexts and boundaries. What we do has to respect appropriate boundaries, to challenge inappropriate boundaries, and to help to rebuild good ones where they have been broken down. In development terms the rules of engagement are pivotal and crucial. And theologically we are offered distinctive models of boundaries and behaviour by Jesus Christ. Boundaries are clear and lived at Mill Grove.

**Significance:** each human, each child needs to experience love. Giving and receiving are integral to human identity and belonging. An “I” – “Thou” relationship with one other person is vital. Can we find one? By God’s grace it is usually to be found among family and kin, but if not, should we be one? This is not a mere human project, but theologically reflects the love that God has lavished on us: this demonstrates that we are significant to Him beyond measure or belief. Does not development has as one of its values the recognition of the significance of those we are seeking to come alongside? The leaders of Mill Grove since 1899 have felt it imperative to remain committed and available to those who have come to live as children in the community.

What model do agencies use to demonstrate significance without creating dependency?

**Community:** there is no development without community. Likewise at the heart of Christian theology is the community that God is creating on earth. Community is at the heart of God, and He is calling and creating a community to serve and glorify Him. We cannot see development in simply individual terms. But what sort of community does God intend? Mill Grove is a residential community. L'Arche communities have been important around the world. What models do we have in mind that represent non-hierarchical examples of inclusive, creative life together where children are welcomed and at ease?

**Creativity:** so often the poor relation! Culture, art, craft, music, dance, and all the blessings of this life handed down through the ages. Where development is effective there will be renewed and restored intentionality, choice, agency and therefore creativity in every part of the community. At Mill Grove this is in evidence all through, but not least in the importance attached to play, self-expression and exploration. We are learning together.

This model amounts to something like the proverbial “village” that it takes to parent a child. It has something of the model of a compost heap about it too. And one of the side-products of Mill Grove has been what some have jokingly called “the Mill Grove tribe”: a worldwide extended family. Love has grown in and among its members, and this in turn supports the residential community.

## **Conclusion**

I have deliberately ended with a practical example: it is very local. It is easily overlooked because it is small, and not part of a big organisation. It is not labelled development, but more often as care, child care, residential care and the like.

What if our theological reflection leads us to change and become humble enough to realise that all over the world there are places like this that welcome children in the name of Jesus and become agents of change? What if there are countless hidden signs of the Kingdom?

As a theologian and sociologist teaching among other things globalisation, I could not live anywhere else or do community development any other way. This is where Jesus has led me, so here I must stand so help me God. It is where these three issues have come together in a very concentrated, challenging and illuminating way. It is palpably not God's calling for everyone, even most people, but it may just provide some helpful pointers to ways in which Child Theology and Theology of Development can inform each other. The model is offered tentatively with this in mind, hoping for responses and critiques.

# Appendix - Introducing the Child Theology Movement in Australia

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## 1. Why the Child Theology Movement Exists

In response to Jesus' action of putting a child in the midst in Mt 18:3, the Child Theology Movement (CTM) exists to...

*“Reform all theological reflection and enquiry ‘with a child in the midst’ and to ensure that theology of this kind informs every aspect of the church’s life and mission, including that which relates to children”*

## 2. What Child Theology Is in the context of the Child Theology Movement

*Child Theology is first and foremost about Theology*

As defined by the CTM, Child Theology is an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology –historical, biblical and systematic – in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples. This child is like a lens through which some aspects of God and his revelation can be seen more clearly. Or, alternatively, the child is like a light that throws existing theology into new relief. In other words, Child Theology stresses that the child Jesus placed in the midst of his disciples is not intended as the object of analysis or adoration, but as a sign or clue to a greater understanding of God and his kingdom.

*Child Theology is an Adjectival Theology*



In common with Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology, Child Theology may be described as an “adjectival” theology. Both Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology critiqued traditional theological content, processes and hermeneutics from a particular standpoint or with a particular group in mind – as does Child Theology. Just as Liberation and Feminist Theologies were set in and arose within new understandings of poverty and women, so Child Theology arises at a time when there is a change in the general consciousness about children.

### *Child Theology is a Process*

The way theology is done is critically important. Child Theology promotes an open-ended and inclusive process, respectful of all who take part whatever their formal status or training, and is determined to involve male and female, practitioner and academic, ordained and lay on equal terms.

### *Child Theology is wider than Children’s Issues*

Whilst Child Theology will not let go of the child lest it forfeits the very sign chosen by Jesus, neither will it make the child or childhood the ultimate focus or boundary of its reflection. Though for Christians already committed to and engaged with children and young people Child Theology may sharpen and throws light on their understanding of children and obligations to them, the focus of Child Theology remains the major themes of Christian faith and life.

### *An Important Note*

It should also be noted that in making children more visible and, to some extent, acting as a corrective to the marginalization of children in mainstream academic theological discourse, the Child Theology Movement is acutely aware of the twin dangers of either overlooking/undervaluing the child or turning the child into an object of idolatry. Thus, the Child Theology Movement seeks to encourage advocacy for, action on behalf of and affirmation of children whilst at the same time avoiding slipping into idolatry or secularity.

### 3. What Child Theology *Is Not* in the context of the Child Theology Movement

Just as it is important to articulate what Child Theology *is*, it is also important to distinguish what it *is not*. Christian Theology approaches children and childhood in a number of ways, each with particular emphases and interests. Child Theology is distinct from:

- Theologies of Childhood
- Children's Theology
- Theologies for Children
- Children's Spirituality
- Children and Religious Education

*Child Theology is distinct from Theologies of Childhood*

*Theologies of Childhood* provide sophisticated theological understandings of children and childhood and our obligations to children, take into account various perspectives on children and childhood from both the Bible and the Christian tradition and ideally honour the dignity and complexity of children.

*Child Theology is distinct from Children's Theology*

*Children's Theology* involves listening to theology – the thinking and speaking about God – as articulated by children in relation to Christian faith and then encapsulating that theology in a transmissible form.

*Child Theology is distinct from Theologies for Children*

Theologies for children could be described as theology framed in concepts and language considered appropriate to the age, stage, culture and context of specific cohorts of children.

*Child Theology is distinct from Children's Spirituality*

*Children's Spirituality*, unsurprisingly, is the field concerned with the exploration of children and spirituality. There are many definitions of spirituality and it is important to note that Christian spirituality is usually considered to be a subset of the broader field.

## *Child Theology is distinct from Children and Religious Education*

*Children and Religious Education*, for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, was generally the area given most attention to by those in the church concerned with children – usually focussed on the passing on of stories, values and culture with a view to faith formation and faith based action.

## *Child Theology and Theologies of Childhood*

Whilst both *Child Theology and Theologies of Childhood* put children at the centre of serious theological reflection, prompt action on behalf of children and have implications for the church and children themselves (especially in the areas of Children and Families ministry, Religious Education, Faith Formation and Child advocacy), *Child Theology distinctively*

- Builds on theologies of childhood
- Fosters a particular process
- Re-examines fundamental doctrines and practices of the church using the "lens" of the child
- Provides new insights into central themes of the Christian faith.

## **4. The Child Theology Movement in Australia**

### *The First Consultation in Australia – Newcastle 2007*

In terms of process, a major emphasis of the Child Theology Movement has been the facilitation of “Consultations” across the globe. Thus far, more than a dozen such Consultations have taken place in places such as Penang, Cape Town, Cambridge, Houston and Prague and countries including Brazil, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Nepal, Sweden – and Australia.

The approach generally adopted by the CTM - and also reflected in the Australian Consultation (held in Newcastle in July 2007) - has the following features:

- It involves an international network of theologians and practitioners
- It includes a mixture of genders, denominations, cultural backgrounds

- It uses a distinctive approach for putting a child "in the midst"
- It recognizes that child theologies will be diverse, building on:
  - The Bible
  - Authoritative texts in particular traditions
  - Research in social and natural sciences
  - Experiences in their own specific cultures and faith communities
- It respects and encourages the development of indigenous forms and expressions of Christian theologies and practices world-wide.

Nb. The report of the Australian Consultation (along with reports from a number of the other Consultations) is available at <http://www.childtheology.org/new/shop.php?ProductType=1>

### *The Situation Today*

Following the Australian Consultation, a small group of Children & Families practitioners agreed to meet together consider how to progress the Child Theology Movement in Australia. This small group subsequently facilitated a session at the 2009 "Leaders 2 Go" Conference that has in turn led to the formulation of a series of draft "*Aims and Objectives*" for the CTM in Australia.

## *Draft Aims*

- Foster the development of theological academic research, publications and course outlines relating to Child Theology
- Ensure every student in an Australian theological college has the opportunity to engage with the tenets of the Child Theology Movement
- Assist the church at a local, regional, state and national level in applying the insights derived from a “child in the midst” approach to the church’s whole life and mission

## *Draft Objectives*

- Establish a national “college” of Children & Families ministry that would develop and implement strategies to integrate Child Theology as outlined above
- Develop and implement a state-based strategy for engagement with theological colleges
- Develop and implement a strategy within each denomination for discerning and applying the insights derived from a “child in the midst” approach to its life and mission
- Develop a methodology involving consultation and collaboration that facilitates engagement with Child Theology at different levels of ministry

## **5. Some Useful Resources**

- The ***foregoing material*** is largely taken verbatim from the following resources available through the **Child Theology Movement** at <http://www.childtheology.org/new/objectives.php?pID=2>

*“Introducing the Child Theology Movement”* Booklet  
*“Penang 3”* Consultation Report  
*“Australasia”* Consultation Report

- A ***fantastic website*** to explore with regard to theology of childhood, Child Theology and Children's Spirituality is <http://childfaith.net/> (in particular the "Theology", "Research" and "Resources" sections)
- Some ***excellent books*** for further reading related to the areas of theology of childhood, Child Theology and Children's Spirituality include

|                                |   |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Balswick, King, Reimer         | The Reciprocating Self: a theological perspective of development              |
| Brennan, Patrick McKinley      | The Vocation of the Child   |
| Bunge, Marcia                  | The Child in Christian Thought  |
| Bunge, Marcia                  | The Child in the Bible  |
| Jensen, David H                | Graced Vulnerability  |
| McConnell, Orona,<br>Stockley  | Understanding God's heart for children:<br>toward a Biblical framework        |
| Mercer, Joyce Anne             | Welcoming Children  |
| Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J      | Let the children come   |
| Richards & Privett             | Through the eyes of a child   |
| Hier-Jones, Angela             | Children of God: Toward a Theology of<br>Childhood                            |
| White, K., Bunge, M. et al     | Toddling to the Kingdom   |
| Catterton-Allen, Holly         | Nurturing Children's Spirituality   |
| Erricker, Ota & Erricker       | Spiritual Education: cultural, religious and<br>social differences            |
| Hay & Nye                      | The Spirit of the Child   |
| Hyde, Brendan                  | Children and Spirituality: Searching for<br>Meaning and Connectedness         |
| Pottebaum, Gerard              | Exploring the Spirituality of Childhood                                       |
| Ratcliff, Donald               | Children's Spirituality: Christian<br>perspectives, Research and Applications |
| Roehlkepartain, Eugene         | The Handbook of Spiritual Development in<br>Childhood and Adolescence         |
| Stonehouse, Catherine          | Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey                                     |
| Yust, Karen Marie              | Real Kids, Real Faith   |
| Yust, Johnson, Sasso,<br>Roehl | Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality                                   |

Some ***fascinating articles*** to explore

Aasgaard, Reidar  
Paul as a Child: Children and Childhood in the Letters of the  
Apostle  
*Journal of Biblical Literature*; Spring 2007; 126, 1

Bunge, Marcia  
The Child, Religion and the Academy  
*The Journal of Religion*; Oct 2006; 86, 4

Carroll, John  
Children in the Bible  
*Interpretation*; April 2001; 55, 2

DeVries, Dawn  
Toward a Theology of Childhood  
*Interpretation*; Apr 2001; 55, 2

Gundry-Volf, Judith  
“To Such as These Belongs the Reign of God” – Jesus and  
Children  
*Theology Today*; Jan 2006; 56, 4

Moltmann, Jurgen  
Child and Childhood as Metaphors of Hope  
*Theology Today*; Jan 2000; 56, 4

Wall, John  
Fallen Angels: A Contemporary Christian Ethical Ontology of  
Childhood  
*International Journal of Practical Theology*; 2004; 8, 2

White, Keith                    A Little Child Will Lead Them  
*Child Theology Movement Website*

