

CONCLUSION

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In this volume we have begun to explore seven themes which are broad, but closely interrelated. These are: the child's uniqueness, need for parental care, gift to family and community, flourishing in society, a hope for one generation to another, participating in the family of faith, and partnering in the mission of God.

Why Are We Exploring These Themes?

As Christians in childcare it is vital that we learn to articulate why we do what we do. We need to reflect on our own motivation and understand what drives us. Our goal is to have a broader and deeper rationale for our work that is rooted in the values of our Christian life and faith. Without this we simply remain grounded in the human philosophies of modern and post-modern society.

It is possible, even easy, to go about our life and work as Christians without pausing to consider these things. But this will not get us very far, particularly in our work with children where the overwhelming demands and challenges we face every day easily lead to high stress levels and burnout. Our anger at the denial of children's rights and our pity at the neglect of their needs will ultimately prove inadequate as a driving force. We need to reconnect with the defining principle behind who we are and what we do: the God in whom and for whom we live. More than this—the God who comes to us in the children we encounter, and the God who would reach out to those children with us and through us. Christ Jesus makes this unambiguously clear when he tells his followers “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Luke 9:48 NRSV), and also “. . . their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father” (Matthew 18:10 NRSV). In other words, we respond not merely because we see that children have needs or believe that they have rights, but because only in this encounter can we discover God's way of doing things. And God's way of doing things is not merely a matter of what Jesus says and does (though that is plain enough), but in Jesus' very being as the one who comes from

heaven in the power of the Spirit as a naked infant, to live and to laugh and to love. Our encounter with children takes us beyond the call and questions that their presence raises, to God's doing and God's being. It takes us back to Christ-like living in the power of the Spirit for the glory of the Father. The more deeply rooted we are in this God, the clearer we are about our own identity and purpose. And hence the less likely we are to become discouraged, to find ourselves overstretched, and ultimately to lose hope.

Nor is this pause for reflection merely for our own benefit. Clarity and focus in our own identity and purpose enables us more easily and effectively to interface with others working in the field of childcare, even (or perhaps especially) if their faith or philosophy differs from our own, be they Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist, or humanist. Working together with others towards a common goal (better child health, access to education, improved family life) becomes possible, even if we don't agree about why these goals are a good thing. We are not threatened by others' answers (or lack of answers) to the "why?" question if we have already thought it through for ourselves. This is essential for two reasons. Firstly on a theological level, God's kingdom is bigger than the church. We need to recognize that God is at work in the world through many agencies that may not carry a Christian or evangelical label. Secondly from a practical viewpoint, the challenges we face are immense. We would be naïve to think we can go it alone.

Hence, this volume has been an attempt to give some expression to our motivation. Please note that this book is not in any sense a definitive answer to the "why?" question.¹ Nor is it intended to be! It is merely one contribution to the conversation, a kind of snapshot of where we are now, and some of the discussions and debates that have arisen.

What Contribution Have We Made?

Since the early days of the process at the Cutting Edge symposium of 1999, through the draft framework that emerged in 2004, the symposium in 2005, up until now with the publication of this volume: all have helped with the unpacking of the phrase "God's heart for children" which we have been seeking to grasp. Exploring these seven themes has enriched our understanding, and opened out the conversation.

It has also enabled us to move away from rights-based and needs-based approaches (or even others based on economic paradigms or social models) as our

starting point. This is crucial for us if we are to move beyond our natural limitations and human perspective. Naturally, we must continue to attend to needs, offering generous provision to fulfill what children lack through deprivation and neglect, the essentials for children to live and grow, to flourish and thrive. And we must continue to make use of rights language (and the legal leverage that comes with it), engaging with governments and authorities in terms they can understand. But there is always more need than we can meet with our limited resources. And there are always systems and structures more powerful than our limited influence.

So we need to step back and see these (and our work) within a much broader and richer perspective of God at work in human history, and the place of children and childhood within the divine purpose. Several papers and case studies in this volume have demonstrated what is possible once we grasp this bigger picture.

In the first instance we have seen clearly how lost dignity is reborn when the image of God is fully respected in each child and they are welcomed and accepted for their inherent worth, not judged for their problematic past, nor loaded with future expectations. This is as true in the slums of Calcutta (in Premila Pavamani's case study) as in the favelas of São Paulo (in the study by Stuart and Georgie Christine). And the resulting life transformation for the child can send strong ripples of God's beautiful grace into the child's family and community. In chapter two the links between sin in society and the quality of life that children experience have been clearly spelled out (by Katharine Putman), and explored in Greg Burch's study with reference to children living on the streets.

For some of the most challenging issues, such as children in the sex trade and child soldiers, we have learned that there are very practical responses that bring real hope (Crawford in chapter 4 and McGill in chapter 2). Effective approaches such as these arise out of a deeper understanding of "God's heart for children," going beyond a superficial view of the structural issues which impact upon the child's life. The same can be said for meaningful engagement with the challenges faced by HIV and AIDS (Susie Howe in Chapter 6). It is possible to encounter a tangible living hope through these practical measures, in situations that otherwise would offer no hope.

Furthermore, we have seen clear instances of how an appreciation of the true worth of children opens the door to wider engagement with the problems faced by a community. Besa Shaplo's study from Albania on literacy and civic education is a fine example here. And we have heard once again the call to work inter-generationally (chapter 5), and to include children at the heart of missional initiatives (chapter 7), not merely as subjects (or rather, objects), but as agents of change.

1. Why do we do what we do? Why work with "children at risk"? In other words: What is our motivation?

Crucially, we have drawn breath and paused to consider more closely the multi-faceted blessing of the child as God's gift to us. In chapter 3, Judith Ennew has attentively enabled us to explore what this might mean for us, when so many children are seen as an inconvenience to be eliminated, a burden to be cast aside, a curse to be exorcised. And Stephen Tollestrup (in chapter 5) has encouraged us to wrestle with the nature of promise in today's world as expressed through the children of our communities, so helping us to unlock the enigma of hope.

These are just a few examples of the wealth of contributions from authors in this volume. And many others have given insight to the conversation along the way.

What Areas Need More Serious Work?

In the process of drawing out the themes of *Cutting Edge 2005* and the ensuing dialogue that has led to this volume, several crucial questions have been voiced. Not that these questions are necessarily new, but the need to find empowering answers in the context of our work with children makes the task all the more urgent.

Firstly, it is evident that we need to revisit the narrative of the biblical text, and ask ourselves some tough questions. To begin with: how do we handle Scripture in relation to our work with children? It is not a book of children's stories, though some may treat it as such, for example when writing a curriculum for a Sunday Club. Rather than limiting its power as we package it in simplified language, we must allow the Spirit to unleash the transforming grace of God's Word in a way which radically impacts the children we work with, their families, and their communities. How can we do this?

Another crucial question arises that is related to the first point: how do we respond to the problematic texts we encounter? It is easy to point to violence in other religions and its adverse effect on children, but Scripture has a fair share of infanticide and slaughter of children, much of which appears to be sanctioned by God. Skirting around these texts might look like an easy option, but actually it is an abdication of our responsibility towards children in today's world. If we are to avoid accusations of being naïve in our faith, then we have to engage with these texts and come up with some honest answers.²

In this respect we are reminded to always keep in balance the counter-narratives that inform the events as they unfold, the prophets and seers that speak out against the ungodly actions of leaders and the people. Also, as we read

Scripture, we must not neglect to hold in mind the progression of God's self-revelation. Christ and the Spirit are not absent in the ancient texts, but clearly, the narrators of the Old Testament did not understand God in the same way as the narrators of the New. Having a biblical response does not mean simply picking a few proof texts. We need to be more thorough and rigorous in our engagement of the full story (narrative and meta-narrative) if we are to be credible in our critique of the ever-pervasive mythologies of the world around us. Even keeping all this in mind, there are no easy answers to give to a world half full of children, many of whom suffer.

In talking about the meta-narratives of the biblical text, we refer not only to the over-arching cosmic story, but also to the hidden paradigms which the text brings with it. In exploring Scripture for understanding "God's heart for children" we must also look for these. If in asking "what does the bible say about children?" we simply scan a concordance for the word child (or infant, or youth, etc.) we will miss much of the insight into children and childhood issues that Scripture has for us. For example: in relation to affirmation 2, have we considered what the history of the Israelites tells us about parenting, with God as perfect parent and Ephraim (Israel) as rebellious child? Or for affirmation 6, how may the Exodus story inform our paradigms of faith development? Or for affirmation 5, what do the recurring dysfunctions in Abraham's family line tell us about intergenerational nurture? And for affirmation 7, looking at their whole life story (rather than just an instant), do the stories of characters such as Josiah or Samuel or Moses tell us anything about God's call on young lives? Much rich treasure lies undiscovered here.

A second area that needs more serious reflection is in the stories of our work, the details of our failures and successes as organizations working with children. Macro-level accounts of the number of children rescued, fed, immunized, and such may have their place, but we need to refocus on the local human story, to make the connection with the names and faces of those we seek to serve. We need to ask again: what difference have we made in the life of this child, and the child's family and community? If we don't ask this question, we risk doing a world of good, but neglecting to offer the best. Hopefully a framework such as the one posited here will open us to a more holistic perspective, and prompt us to ask questions of our work.

These are just a few of the challenges that we need to address. There are questions yet to be explored, whether through the symposia of *Cutting Edge*, or in the collectives of the Child Theology Movement, or in our own work with children, or in seminaries and academic institutions, or elsewhere in other contexts.

2. See Bunge, Fretheim, Gaventa, eds., *Children and Childhood: Biblical Perspectives*.

Are These Affirmations Helpful? If So, To What Extent?

Certainly these seven affirmations have been helpful. They have been a useful stepping stone for the process to move forward, providing a solid framework for the 2005 symposium, and have enabled us to get to where we are in the conversation.

Such a framework as this can also help us in assessing the impact of our work. We can (and should) ask questions such as: How is our work with children enabling them to experience all that God intends? We can be more specific: In what ways is our work enabling children to thrive in stable relationships and receive the loving committed parenting they need? Where is our collaboration with government and institutions creating a more just society in which children can flourish? Are we creating opportunities for each child to discover and fulfill their unique calling within the community of faith and the wider world? Each affirmation in the framework can provoke useful questions for deeper reflection, practical outworking, and assessing impact. Doing this exercise enables us to view our organizations and work on a much broader basis than we would perhaps naturally do, particularly if our work has a quite legitimate focus on just one aspect, such as parenting and family life, for example. Such questions set the failures and successes within a more holistic context.

From some of the debates that have arisen as a result of this process, it seems evident that the affirmations cannot stand as they are. No suggestion is being made that such a framework should be discarded altogether. Nonetheless, at the very least these affirmations will need to be revisited, if they are to prove useful beyond the present.

Any affirmations such as these need to be earthed in the meta-narrative of divine history and the human story—that is to say: Creation, the fall, the Christ-event (incarnation, life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension), Pentecost, the Parousia. While this was considered when the affirmations were drafted, it has not been written explicitly into the framework. This has been an acknowledged limitation all along. While present implicitly to some extent, each affirmation needs to reflect the tensions between the ideal of Eden and the reality of today's world, or the now and not yet of the coming kingdom. At the very least, the addition of an explanatory introduction to the framework would help to situate these affirmations. Clarity here would resolve some of the debates about wording.

Little words carry much more than their weight in letters. Recalling dialogues over wording of the third article in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the best interests of the child became “a” primary consideration rather than “the” primary consideration. (In the original Polish draft it was “the paramount consid-

eration.”) Awareness of the need for care in drafting the seven affirmations, little words were not taken lightly. Nevertheless, it was not possible to anticipate the problems arising through mistaken misreadings of the text. For example, affirmation 5 was misread by some to say that “children are the promise of hope . . .” usurping the hope we as Christians have in Christ, and provoking some unnecessarily heated debate over a word that isn't there! Not helpful.

Once again, it must be stressed that the whole framework stands together. These are not seven separate affirmations. Another example may help here: you cannot read the Convention on the Rights of the Child—the whole of it, including the preamble—and imagine it is anti-family. It contains several paragraphs and articles which clearly put the family at the heart of child nurture. Likewise this framework should not be read as saying that single-parent families (or even isolated two-parent families) are the ideal. It clearly does not say that. To take a phrase from affirmation 2 out of the context of the whole (with its clear reference to a fallen world and damaged relationships) would distort the meaning.

These seven affirmations have proven to be a helpful reference point. If they are to continue to be useful, the affirmations should be read carefully, together, and without neglecting the context.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Moving from a draft framework to anything definitive will not happen overnight. As it stands the framework already serves a practical purpose of inviting broader and deeper consideration of our own care for children—an invitation to which we can and should respond. While there is scope for much further reflection on the various nuances of the affirmations, how profitable this would prove is open to question. Agreeing on words and agreeing on meanings are equally problematic. Enhancing the framework with a supplementary explanation that situates the affirmations in a theological and historical context would undoubtedly help avoid some of the adverse reactions, and would serve its purpose well. Now that people have copies of the draft framework in their hands, however, making any changes might not be a simple process.

One important challenge for the future will be to keep the conversation connected! With any discussion out in the public domain, there is no telling where people will take it. As Eglantyne Jebb first penned her Children's Charter in 1923, she could not have imagined it would lead to the most widely ratified International Convention, albeit some decades later.

Our task may be somewhat less ambitious, but as different parties explore facets of child theology and rationale for work with “children at risk,” it will be

crucial to find ways of sharing our discoveries with each other, and so to enrich and encourage each other's insights.

The many contributions to this volume are offered willingly to your comment and critique. It is an open conversation to which all are welcome to share.

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