

Edited by

Jan Grobbelaar & Gert Breed



Welcoming Africa's children –
Theological and ministry perspectives

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**EDITED BY
JAN GROBBELAAR
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Research Justification

The purpose of this book is to combine perspectives of scholars from Africa on Child Theology from a variety of theological sub-disciplines to provide some theological and ministerial perspectives on this topic. The book disseminates original research and new developments in this study field, especially as relevant to the African context. In the process it addresses also the global need to hear voices from Africa in this academic field. It aims to convey the importance of considering Africa's children in theologising.

The different chapters represent diverse methodologies, but the central and common focus is to approach the subject from the viewpoint of Africa's children. The individual authors' varied theological sub-disciplinary dispositions contribute to the unique and distinct character of the book. Almost all chapters are theoretical orientated with less empirical but more qualitative research, although some of the chapters refer to empirical research that the authors have performed in the past.

Most of the academic literature in the field of Child Theologies is from American or British-European origin. The African context is fairly absent in this discourse, although it is the youngest continent and presents unique and relevant challenges. This book was written by theological scholars from Africa, focussing on Africa's children. It addresses not only theoretical challenges in this field but also provides theological perspectives for ministry with children and for important social change.

Written from a variety of theological sub-disciplines, the book is aimed at scholars across theological sub-disciplines, especially those theological scholars interested in the intersections between theology, childhood studies and African cultural or social themes. It addresses themes and provides insights that are also relevant for specialist leaders and professionals in this field.

No part of the book was plagiarised from another publication or published elsewhere.

Jan Grobelaar

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List of abbreviations appearing in the Text and Notes

CAR	Children at Risk
CBO	Community-based Organisations
CFCI	Child-friendly Cities Initiative
CTM	Child Theology Movement
FBO	Faith-based Organisations
HCD	Holistic Child Development
NGO	Non-governmental organisations
NIV	New International Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
OVC	Orphans and Vulnerable Children
SNTS	Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
URCSA	Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa

Preface

Since the beginning of the 21st century there is a growing global debate on the relationship between children, childhood and theology and the implications of this relationship for theology and ministry. Even though most of Africa's children suffer from extreme poverty and social exclusion because of the global network society and economy, it is alarming that the African context and African theologians are fairly absent in this global discourse. Much of the theological literature in this field of study in theology is from American or British-European origin.

On July 24–26, 2014 a conference was held at North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa with the theme *Welcoming children: Theological perspectives from Africa on children and childhood in church and society*. It was a joint project by the Faculty of Theology at North-West University and Petra Institute for Children's Ministry. A need for theological books on children and childhood from an African perspective was identified as one of the main challenges for theology in Africa.

At the end of the conference, the Faculty of Theology at North-West University and Petra Institute for Children's Ministry decided to take up the challenge to publish such literature. From this initiative, two academic publications on theology and children, as an expression of an African voice on this emerging academic field, were born. This first book was titled *Theologies of childhood and the children of Africa*. The present book is the second one. It focusses on Child Theology and the challenges of holistic children's ministries.

As with the first book, this one was written from the perspectives of various theological sub-disciplines and is, therefore, relevant to scholars across theological sub-disciplines. The diversity is enhanced by the fact that the authors are affiliated with four different theological faculties: The Free State University, North-West University, Pretoria University and Stellenbosch University. The coherence lies in the fact that all the authors have an interest in the intersection between theology and childhood studies and share the view that it is important and necessary to consider Africa's children in theologising.

It is important to take cognisance of the fact that this book is written from the perspective of Christian theology in general and not from the angle of religious studies. The reason is that the authors want to elevate the status of theology and its connection with children in contemporary society, especially in the African context. Therefore, it emphasises the role of theology as positive, empowering and liberating for children, a category of human beings which appears to be more and more ignored and excluded in society in general. The authors want to contribute to creating a welcoming culture for Africa's children amidst all the discouraging elements of African life.

An important question in this debate is: How do we understand the concept child? Usually a child is a person below a certain age. The problem is that there does not exist only one view on this age limit. Through the ages societies defined the beginning and end of childhood differently. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines a child as someone between birth and 15 years. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 states in Article 1 that a child is any person under the age of eighteen. In section 28(3) of the South African Constitution (18 of 1996) a child is defined as someone younger than 15 years. From a developmental perspective, a child is usually viewed as a person below the age of puberty, which starts at around 11 to 12 years. These different understandings of a child are also present amongst the authors of this book. Mostly, these differences are determined by the focus of the specific author's ministry environment that has informed and formed each one's working definition of a child. Therefore, the authors of this book did not work with only one definition of a child. Some authors prefer to see children as part of the general concept 'youth'. There are some of us who deliberately choose to focus on younger children under the age of 12. For some readers, this may seem to be confusing. But in most chapters, it is clear with which age frame the author is working. The differences in this regard should not be seen as a problem but rather as an enriching factor that presents the diversity of opinions present in our societies.

The approach of this book is in the first place theoretical, but it also provides concrete suggestions for ministry practices as well as congregational and social change. It addresses relevant challenges for the African continent. The chapters on 'Child-inclusive cities: towards a liberating praxis with children' and 'Seeking justice for poverty-stricken children in Africa' address concrete and very relevant issues for the African continent and offer useful theological and ministry perspectives on these challenges.

Our intention is that the book will be useful for those academics interested in the intersections between theology, childhood studies and African cultural and/or social topics. Our hope is that it will also be of value for practitioners and leaders in congregational and non-profit ministries involved with children, for childcare workers and specialists in social work. We will be delighted if the insights provided in this book can assist many people in broadening their theological perspectives on children and renewing their ministry practices with children. The book challenges us all to contribute to creating a welcoming culture for children in both the society and the church.

In the first chapter, written by Dirkie Smit, the Systematic Theologian of Stellenbosch University, a clear and sound systematic and theoretical analysis is made of the notion of trust and the phenomenon of distrust in this world. The importance of building cultures of trust, and why it is necessary, in the process of welcoming children in this world and in Africa is emphasised. It provides a theoretical background against which the following chapters provide theological and ministry reflections and perspectives on different aspects of welcoming Africa's children. The next two chapters attend to welcoming children in theology. In Chapter 2, Jan Grobbelaar from North-West University attends to the need of doing theology in a way that welcomes children as partners in the process of theological reflection. It gives an overview of the history of Child Theology and asks important questions about the methodology of Child Theology. It confronts theologians who work on the intersection of theology and childhood studies with various challenges to be addressed in the future. Chapter 3 by Elijah Mahlangu, the New Testament scholar of Pretoria University, and Jan Grobbelaar look at the hermeneutics necessary for doing Child Theology in Africa. Chapter 3 argues that the understanding of the concepts of child, family and community in African culture appear to be closer to the biblical ecclesiology than the Western concepts and that this recognition should guide the hermeneutics of Child Theology in the African context. The authors draw from a variety of approaches and sources to make this argument.

The following five chapters focus more on the necessity and understanding of a holistic approach in welcoming Africa's children. In Chapter 4, Jan Grobbelaar discusses the important challenges of developing holistic children's ministry as part of creating a welcoming culture for Africa's children. The author draws a short historical overview of developments in ministry with children in Africa, which form the background for understanding the challenges for both the church and child-focussed agencies in developing holistic ministry with children in Africa. He proposes that the idea or

paradigm of hospitality in today's context can help us to address these challenges. The next four chapters examine four different challenges of a holistic or hospitable approach to ministry with children. Malan Nel, from Pretoria University, attends in Chapter 5 to the challenges of welcoming children in the church. It gives a solid theoretical foundation for starting to think practically about the question of integrating children in the life and ministry of faith communities. The author argues for an inclusive approach to church ministry that takes children and youth seriously without differentiating between them too much or subsuming them under the general umbrella of undifferentiated church ministry. Ultimately, the author argues that children should be integrated into the whole life of the church, and the challenge for churches is how to create such an inclusive environment.

In the chapters that follow, we move outside the church to the public sphere. To welcome the children of Africa in this world, the development of a public theology that addresses the plights of Africa's children is necessary. This aspect is investigated in Chapter 6 by Nico Koopman of Stellenbosch University. The author discusses three aspects of a public theology for children in Africa: Public theology as a theology of vulnerability, a theology of solidarity with the most vulnerable, and a theology that advances the implementation of human rights, especially for children. The last two chapters look at two big challenges on the African continent that need to be addressed in the public sphere in the process of building a culture of welcoming Africa's children as part of a holistic approach to children's ministry. In Chapter 7, the challenges in creating child-inclusive cities are discussed by Stephan de Beer from Pretoria University. Chapter 7 argues that children's integral liberation and holistic flourishing cannot be achieved unless conditions are created that will respect, advance and institutionalise the rights of children in very concrete ways. The author makes an important distinction between child-friendly cities and child-inclusive cities, with the view that the latter is more radical and better in the end. In Chapter 8, Pieter Verster of the Free State University attends to the challenges in seeking justice for the many poverty-stricken children in Africa. In Chapter 8, he reflects theologically on the interrelatedness of the concepts of justice, poverty, children's ministry and the African context.

The realisation of a book such as this is always a team effort. Therefore, I want to extend a word of thanks to all the people who contributed to the planning phase of the book. In this regard I want to extend a special word of thanks to the distinguished international scholar in this field, Marcia Bunge, Professor of Religion and the

Bernhardson Distinguished Chair of Lutheran Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College (St. Peter, Minnesota) and editor of *The Child in Christian Thought* and *The Child in the Bible*, for facilitating our planning workshop and giving so much valuable advice on the way to the completion of this project.

Thank you to all the authors for your hard work to finish this project. Your willingness to invest your time and academic skills to reflect theologically on children and all the challenges that confront us when ministering to children on the African continent was very encouraging for me. A special word of thanks for the support and the contributions made by the co-editor of this book, Gert Breed. For her dedicated administrative support, I also want to thank Nadine Havenga.

For any book to be published, a lot of the hard work is done behind the scenes. To all the members of the publishing team I want to extend a word of sincere gratitude. Thank you also for the friendly and professional services we received from all the staff members of AOSIS Publishing with whom we had personal contact during this time. I especially want to mention the name of Andries van Aarde, the Chief Editor: Scholarly Books at AOSIS Publishing. Thank you for all your good advice, your personal support in the time I struggled with my health, and your dedication to this project.

This book is dedicated to all Africa's children.

Jan Grobbelaar

Extraordinary staff member

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Notes on Contributors

■ Gert Breed

Gert Breed is associate professor at the North-West University in South Africa. He lectures on pastoral theology, congregational and youth ministry. He received his ThB, ThM and ThD degrees from the Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education. He is Director of the School for Minister's Training at the North-West University and Rector of the Theological School of the Reformed Churches in South Africa. The current focus of his research is congregational ministry from the perspective of the *daikon* word group in the New Testament. Breed published various articles on the *daikon* word group and other subjects related to congregational ministry. He also contributed to a book on the meta-theoretical assumptions of research as well as a book on corruption in South Africa. He is co-editor of this book.

■ Stephan de Beer

Stephan de Beer is the Executive Director of the Centre for Contextual Ministry at the University of Pretoria where, amongst other things, the focus is on the training of community leaders in South Africa, Africa and beyond, for contextual engagement in their communities. He also provides ongoing leadership for developing and established Local Leadership Foundations throughout the continent of Africa. He grew up in the inner city of Tshwane which instilled in him a passion for urban centres and their potential to be real and sustainable homes for all people. He studied theology but always with a commitment to the urban vulnerable and poor. He did his practical internship in Hillbrow, Johannesburg in 1989 and saw the potential of Faith-based Organisations to address the challenges of inner city decay. He spent 6 months in Chicago in 1992, doing coursework in urban ministry and development, visiting almost forty urban projects, and connecting with faith-based social entrepreneurs in and around Chicago leading a movement of urban transformation. He was also introduced to Leadership Foundations at this time. Returning to South Africa in 1993, Stephan sensed that urban churches were ready to engage in reviving their parishes. He united six churches into a charitable trust that became Pretoria Community Ministries and eventually the Tshwane Leadership Foundation, with the knowledge that urban regeneration efforts had to become more radical, holistic, and transformative. He has published several articles in peer-reviewed academic journals, as well as chapters in scientific books.

■ Jan Grobbelaar

As a pastor, academic, advocate and trainer, Jan Grobbelaar has been involved with children for most of his career. He obtained his DTh in Practical Theology at the University of Stellenbosch in 2008 with a dissertation focussing on intergenerational children's ministry. As staff member of Petra Institute for Children's Ministry, he is a consultant for research and theological projects at tertiary level. He is an extraordinary staff member of the Unit for Reformed Theology and Development in the South African Society, at the North-West University, where he focusses on research and supervising post-graduate students. Grobbelaar is also a member of the postgraduate Faculty of the South African Theological Seminary, Johannesburg. Since the beginning of 2016 he has become involved as a research fellow at the Centre for Contextual Ministry at the University of Pretoria. Over the years he has been involved in various initiatives serving children on continental and global levels. He published several academic articles in peer-reviewed journals and chapters in books, and was the author of the book *Child Theology in the African context* (2012, Child Theology Movement). He co-edited this book. He is married to Marie, a primary school teacher, and they reside in the Western Cape, De Doorns. They have three children, Karlien, Schalk and Jan. He can be contacted at jan@petracol.org.za.

■ Nico Koopman

Nico Koopman received all his degrees at the University of the Western Cape. After serving as pastor in congregations of the Uniting Reformed Church, he was appointed as senior lecturer and vice-rector at the Huguenot College in Wellington. In 2001 he became a senior lecturer and in 2004 associate professor in the Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology at Stellenbosch University. He was the Dean of the Faculty of Theology from 2010 until his appointment as acting Vice-Rector: Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel in May 2015. Since 2010 he was the Dean of the Faculty of Theology until he was appointed as acting Vice-Rector: Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel in May 2015. In May 2016 he was appointed permanently in this position. He is known as an outstanding church and academic leader with national and international acclaim. His research focuses on the implications of Christian faith for moral and public life. From the perspective of Trinitarian thinking he deals with various themes in ethical and public life. As a respected researcher, he has published various articles in South African and international journals and also chapters in books. He has won several awards for his contributions, including the Andrew Murray Prize

for Theological Literature in 2003. He was one of the key role players in the establishment of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology in the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University. Nico is married to Francina and they have two children, William and Marilize.

■ Elijah Mahlangu

Elijah Mahlangu is Emeritus Lecturer, Department of New Testament Studies, Faculty of Theology, Pretoria University. He received the following degrees: BEd (University of the North); BA Honours and MA (University of South Africa) and PhD (New Testament Studies) from the University of Pretoria. He taught Biblical Studies at school level and as senior lecturer at the University of Pretoria. Currently, he is a full-time minister in the Assemblies of God and a part-time lecturer at the University of Pretoria. He held several leadership positions, amongst others: General Secretary of the International Assemblies of God (1993–2005); General Secretary of the Alliance of Assemblies of God Churches in Southern Africa (2001–2005); and Director of the AIDS Ministry in the International Assemblies of God (1997–2006). He is also the founder and Director of South Africa Operation Whole (non-governmental organisation specialising in AIDS prevention, education, training and home-based care) and currently the project manager of the Assemblies of God AIDS intervention project funded by PMU and SIDA (Sweden). He has published several scholarly articles in peer-reviewed journals.

■ Malan Nel

Malan Nel is currently extra-ordinary professor in Practical Theology, University of Pretoria. In 2012 he retired as Director of the Centre for Contextual Ministry, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria. This ecumenical centre, which he founded in 1992, still offers continuing theological training for pastors from a wide range of denominations and other Christian groups. He obtained, in 1982, his DD in Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria with a dissertation on youth evangelism by the Dutch Reformed Church. He specialises in congregational studies, evangelism, youth ministry and Christian education. He authored, or co-authored, more than 50 articles published in peer-reviewed journals, national and international. He also authored 39 academic books or parts of these books. Malan Nel is involved with many congregations in South Africa and preaches almost weekly somewhere in the country. He often consults in processes of missional congregational development. He facilitated analyses and strategic planning in more than 130 congregations.

■ Dirkie Smit

Dirkie Smit studied Philosophy and Theology at Stellenbosch University and obtained his BA, HonsBA (Philosophy), MA (Philosophy) and LicTheol, all cum laude. In 1979 he received his DTh in Systematic Theology. In 2008 he was honoured with a DPhil (honoris causa) from Umea, Sweden. He taught Systematic Theology at the Western Cape University from 1981 and since 2000 at Stellenbosch University. He was a visiting scholar at various universities and seminaries, including the University of Marburg, Duke University, Princeton Seminary, the Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley), Heidelberg University, Humboldt University, Falun University and Umea University. He has published more than 400 articles and chapters in refereed South African and international journals and books, including dictionaries, encyclopaedias and edited volumes. He received Festschriften on occasion of his 55th and 60th birthdays. He was the promotor of more than thirty completed doctoral dissertations. The majority of these students became full-time lecturers or professors, in at least eleven different scholarly disciplines, at several South African universities, and in several countries (including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Namibia, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, the Netherlands, Sweden, Korea and the USA). He has presented several international public lectures and lecture series and is regularly invited to participate in interdisciplinary projects and consultations. He is a member of the Uniting Reformed church of South Africa (URCSA) and is involved in many church activities, commissions, including international and ecumenical task groups. He is especially interested in reformed and ecumenical theology and in the public role of the church. Since 1996 he has written a weekly column in a newspaper. He is married to Ria (Jonker) and they have two children, Lise and Nico.

■ Pieter Verster

Pieter Verster was born in Heilbron, Free State Province, South Africa on 22 October 1954. He went to school at Vrede Primary, Willem Postma Primary in Bloemfontein, and Grey College Secondary in Bloemfontein. He studied at the University of the Free State and the University of Pretoria. He holds two doctorates from the University of Pretoria (in Missiology and Religious Studies and also in Dogmatics and Ethics). At present he is head of the Department of Missiology at the Faculty of Theology at the University of the Free State. He is a member and ordained minister of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 2008 he published a

Notes on Contributors

book: *A Theology of Christian mission: What should the church seek to accomplish* (Edwin Mellen Press, New York). In 2012 he published a second book: *New hope for the poor* (SunMedia, Bloemfontein). He is also a graded researcher of the National Research Foundation of South Africa. He is married to Ern ne (a librarian). They have two daughters, Wanda and Frida, and a son Pieter.

Welcoming children? – On building cultures of trust?

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South Africa

Welcoming children? Building cultures of trust

A secular form of this religion-of-distrust can be found among people living in the slums of some urban areas ... Social workers and ministers at work here tell us that young people in such communities read in their environment of the street the constant message, 'Beware!' If (developmental psychologists are) right, such a world is literally unliveable for human beings. Trust nothing in the world, and you will never grow up. Ghetto youth heed this truth when they form gangs of their own peers, substitute families ... Woe to us if nothing in our environment is dependable! (Shriver 1983:28)

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With these words, the eminent ethicist emeritus from Union Theological Seminary in New York, Donald W. Shriver, once described the plight of children on the streets and in the neighbourhoods of many North American cities. For many and complex reasons, these words may, however, also be true, albeit in different ways and forms, for millions of other children in our common world today, including children in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent of Africa.

Children grow up, such is his argument, in worlds in which they are constantly warned – directly and indirectly – not to trust and never to trust.

To the extent that developmental psychologists are correct in claiming how important it is for children to develop forms of fundamental trust from early on in their lives, this would imply that these worlds become literally unliveable to these children. Children and young people read in their communities and their everyday life-contexts all kinds of signs and messages warning them to beware. They learn not to trust to survive, in order to protect themselves. They internalise these codes and messages. They socialise in ways that heed these claims and warnings. They form their own institutions and follow their own practices that embody these values and virtues. They lose hope – ‘woe to us’, he said – because they experience the worlds in which they live as not dependable, reliable, trustworthy, reassuring and welcoming.

Shriver described this as a secular religion-of-distrust that prevails in these worlds, implicitly contrasting it with a religion-of-trust. In fact, it is no coincidence that he offered these descriptions in his study of the Lord’s Prayer, called *The Lord’s Prayer. A way of life* (1983). Asking what we do when we pray ‘Our Father’, he appealed to Erik Erikson’s well-known theories about the fundamental trust learnt by babies, which forms the first requirement for human maturity and development towards well-being.

Trust, and learning to trust, is at the heart of Christian prayer and, in fact, of Christian faith. Welcoming children into a world, into life itself, in which they learn to trust may therefore be at the heart of the message and ministry of the Church. Failing to welcome children to such a world and to such a life may be a betrayal of the nature and calling of the Church itself.

At the heart of Christian theological perspectives on children may, therefore, be the question of how to welcome children into life in such a way that they develop basic forms of trust, of feeling at home; feeling welcome and being accepted; of experiencing faithfulness and reliability; of knowing reassurance and dependability, of developing towards maturity and well-being. After all, Jesus himself ‘took the little children up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them’ (Mk 10:16) and said ‘whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me’ (Mk 9:37).

The following paragraphs provide brief and superficial reminders of important and well-known ways in which children in our world today receive signs and messages not to trust anything or anyone. Some of these depictions are only applicable to particular children under specific conditions, such as children left orphaned by AIDS or the millions of refugee children in our world, many of them in or from Africa. Other descriptions are more general and involve many, or most, children in the major parts of our globalising world. These messages are part and parcel of the spirit of our times and widespread social, political and economic conditions. In total *ten* such reminders are provided, broadly divided into *three groups*.

The *first* group deals with three social and political contexts in which children find themselves not always welcome and welcomed. The first

context refers to the large varieties of *inhospitable households* (in a broad sense of the word) that in many ways also characterise South Africa and Africa. The second context is constituted by the risky and often *dangerous smaller-scale communities* in which children have to live (including schools, neighbourhoods, streets and everyday environments). The third context finally deals with the *violent societies* of our contemporary world (with violence understood in complex ways, from direct and physical to structural and implicit). The claim is that in these, as it were, ever larger concentric circles – households, communities and societies – many children today may feel abandoned, endangered and threatened, in short unwelcome, in ways that may inhibit the development of their ability to trust.

The *second* group offers equally brief reminders of four different ways in which well-known social commentators analyse and describe the real-life conditions of our times. These descriptions are mostly applicable to general conditions in our globalising world, but for that reason are probably also true of the experiences of some and, perhaps, even many children on our continent, and specifically also in South Africa. These four depictions focus respectively on the wasteful world of *consumerism*, on dark times of *corruption* and deception, on the so-called widespread *cultures of fear*, and finally, the prevalence of what has been called our *lifestyles of status anxiety*. Again, all four these descriptions of our common world suggest that many children today may grow up in worlds where feelings of being unwelcome and redundant reign, causing them to experience distrust, fear and anxiety.

The *third* group offers still more abstract and philosophical perspectives on the spirit of our times, again by way of sweeping yet widely accepted generalisations about life today. The first perspective is represented by respected atheist understandings of life based on convictions appealing to

the natural sciences, arguing that our physical universe is simply all there is and that we all have to accustom ourselves to living in *an empty and meaningless cosmic void*. The second perspective is represented by equally respected contemporary philosophers who argue, and sometimes warn, that the major threat to the human spirit today is deep-seated *nihilism*, no longer knowing any infinite demand, any calling and therefore any meaningful engagement and purposeful life. The third and final perspective is represented by critical thinkers who cynically observe that much of our common life in our globalising world has *lost any sense of future and of hope*, has given up all dreams and all longings, and no longer puts its trust in any kind of tomorrow. Once again, all three views together would suggest, to the extent that they may be fair and accurate, that many of our children can hardly do anything else than feel lonely, lost and disillusioned in a seemingly meaningless and valueless world without hope.

In a way, the three groups with these ten approaches and descriptions – respectively more political, more social, and more philosophical – all seem to suggest, in ever-growing concentric circles, from households in the inner circle to the cosmic void without meaning or future on the outer circle, that many children today may perhaps find themselves in unwelcoming conditions, and in worlds where it is difficult to learn to trust – others, and even life itself. There will be no attempt to provide empirical information or to enter into detailed literature study. In most of the cases only one, albeit well-known and respected, voice will be introduced, to illustrate that kind of approach and conviction. Readers will know these arguments and should judge for themselves to what extent they are in agreement.

For a systematic-theological approach it will be important whether, and to what extent, these descriptions are indeed convincing, because that

will raise crucial issues regarding the way the church welcomes children into life itself and into our world, which means, according to the Gospels, regarding the way we welcome Jesus Christ himself, and the One who sent him (Mk 9:37; Lk 9:48). In a *short final section* some theological and specifically ecclesiological implications will therefore be suggested.

■ The contexts in which children are living

■ Abandoned? – Life in our inhospitable households

Which mental pictures form before our eyes when we think about our children today, about the children of South Africa, about the children of Africa? I write these words on national Youth Day in South Africa, remembering the many children who sacrificed themselves in political and social struggles. These were children who became victims, who in many ways lost their futures, their promises for fulfilled lives; whole generations who paid costly prices so that others, after them, would have better opportunities, would experience freedom, justice and dignity. But do they? Have these dreams been fulfilled, these hopes achieved, these promises kept for our children of today?

Reading official reports and studies – from South African government agencies, non-governmental groups, ecumenical bodies and regional or national church councils, activist groups, research institutions and civil agencies, but also studies and information emanating from the African Union, international bodies, think-tanks, development organisations – and studying available analyses and statistics, following reports in the public media (regional, international and global), considering the comments and interpretations of all kinds of social commentators (from politicians, journalists, observers and scholars), it's hard to claim that we

live in a world, including a society, a region and a continent, but most certainly also applicable to our whole shared world today, which is very welcoming to our children – for many reasons and in many ways.

Other contributions in this volume will hopefully deal with these realities in more detail. It is, however, possible to remind oneself of some common knowledge and widely shared perceptions and generalisations by simply mentioning well-known slogans of our times. In the specific case of South Africa, one is reminded of the enormous challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment and their effects on children. One thinks of the lasting legacy of ‘a lost generation’ resulting from apartheid and the need for the struggle, a generation without much education and training, without employment and adequate skills, largely without vision for the future. One remembers the scourge of AIDS and its impact on so many lives, often those of women and children. In large parts of our region and continent one also thinks of the devastating and ongoing effects of famine and lack of food security. One remains aware of the horrors of wars, often civil wars, often fought by so-called child soldiers. One still sees the terrible images of what is called xenophobia and mob violence and can hardly imagine what this would mean for the children involved. One is repeatedly reminded of the numbers of exiles on our continent and from our continent, fleeing north and fleeing south, migrants, people now without homes, households broken, fragmented and divided. One hears about the realities forcing many to risk the unimaginable consequences of being uprooted and becoming political or economic asylum-seekers. One notes the terrifying accounts of modern slavery and human trafficking, in so many cruel and inhuman shapes and forms. One is aware of disregard for human dignity and abuses of fundamental human rights in so many ways and instances in our contemporary world.

Regarding each one of these slogans, one cannot even vaguely imagine the hardships experienced by the children involved. Reports, studies, statistics, speeches will obviously fail to tell the truth about life under such conditions, particularly the life of being children, small, young, dependent – yet seemingly unwelcome and abandoned by life itself.

Just try to imagine the plight of refugee children. Every year since 2002 the world community declares June 20 as World Refugee Day, following the example set by the Africa Refugee Day. In June 2015, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there were more than 60 million refugees in the world – displaced people, migrants, asylum seekers, war victims, people forcibly displaced through conflict or natural disaster (UNHCR 2015:3). Of these, more than half were children.¹ Eighty-six per cent of these refugees, including women and children, found themselves in the so-called less developed countries of the world.² Of these, an extraordinary number found themselves on the African continent, of course also in South Africa. Every single year their numbers grow at a faster rate. Is it possible even to imagine the plight of such children and their experience of life in the world, of households and adults, of surroundings and possibilities, of threats and dangers, of hope and of the future? Can one even vaguely imagine the uncertainties of daily existence for them – where life is going, where they will stay, where they will ever be welcome, where they will ever belong, where they will ever be safe and at home?

The AIDS-epidemic in South Africa is devastating for families and communities. According to The United Nations Children's Fund

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1. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=558193896&query=less%20developed%20countries>

2. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=558193896&query=less%20developed%20countries>

(UNICEF), the country has the world's largest number of people living with HIV, involving an estimated 3.7 million orphans. Almost half of them have lost their parents to AIDS-related diseases and there are many more children living with sick and bedridden caregivers. Still, according to UNICEF, about 150 000 children in South Africa are believed to be living in child-headed households. Who can imagine the ongoing trauma and terror for such children – their parents dying, the loss of adult guidance and protection, the increased risk of abuse and exploitation, the almost inevitable poverty and hardships, all kinds of responsibilities that should not befall children that age? Many orphans and vulnerable children become the family's main breadwinners, a situation perhaps exacerbated by the fact that the loss of the caregivers could involve losing access to social grants, education and to whatever health care may be available.

Of course, in spite of their enormous, terrifying and ever increasing numbers, such refugee children are still the exception, also in South Africa, and many other children do not experience this devastation. Even taking the shocking inequality, poverty and the devastation of AIDS and their utterly disruptive effects on the everyday lives and experiences of millions of children into account, it is true that there are also many other children who share the experience of growing up in safer and less disrupted surroundings, neighbourhoods and households. However, how safe are any so-called more average households and families in South Africa indeed, for our children? How safe are these surroundings, or how violent? How welcoming are these neighbourhoods, or how dangerous? How reliable and trustworthy are these households, or how broken, fragmented, divided, dysfunctional, sometimes 'literally unliveable for human beings', in the words of Shriver? Are our children truly safe on our streets, in our schools, with our teachers, sometimes in our homes, with their close

relatives and family members and friends, even in our churches and with our pastors and priests?

Of course, there are also other realities and many hopeful statistics and developments, but looking at our social worlds today from the perspective of our children and our youth, from the perspective of the vulnerable and the weak, from the perspective of those whom Jesus called to his company, embraced and blessed as ‘the least of all’, it could hardly be denied that our households in the biblical meaning of *oikoi* – our homes and families, but also our environments and neighbourhoods, our communities and societies, our countries and regions, our social systems, political structures and economic arrangements, even our natural environments and physical realities – could in many ways only be experienced as inhospitable.

It should hardly surprise us if many of our children would feel unwelcome in our worlds, today. We should not be shocked if it would turn out that many children today would feel unwanted and abandoned by life itself – by us and by the worlds we represent, mirror and mediate to them, including the God in whose name the church may wish to receive the children.

■ **Endangered? – Life in our risky communities**

If we broaden our scope from our households to our communities, the picture hardly changes. In fact, the conditions for our children and youth may even look worse when seen in the broader contexts of, say, our streets, schools, neighbourhoods, immediate communities, villages, towns, urban townships and cities. How welcoming are these, and which spoken and unspoken signs and messages do they communicate to our children – about life, about being human, about values, about care, about trust? For example, how safe are they, or how full of risks, threats and potential dangers?

It is impossible even to attempt to provide an overview of the many forms of bonds, belonging, association and community life in which children find themselves – and of course even more futile to attempt to find general comments describing them because they differ so much.

Readers can form their own impressions and opinions. Think, for example, about what happens to our children in schools and in our formal education, how the schools prepare them for their future lives (or fail to prepare them), how teachers serve to protect and empower them (or fail to protect and to empower them). Think about the racial, ethnic, cultural, tribal and language communities in which our children grow up, the discourses with which we teach them to speak about themselves and about others, the forms of inclusion and exclusion we employ. Think about the forms of belonging we establish and the boundaries we suggest, strengthen and sustain. Think about the ways we construct images of ‘us’ and ‘they’ and ‘others’ and ‘strangers’, using language to install and enforce views and values, sometimes from early on dividing our children’s worlds into inside and outside.

South African readers, given the inequalities, divisions and separations of our society, not only of our histories and our collective memories but also of our present communities and institutions and experiences; given the different worlds in which we lived for so long and in many ways still live; given the racism, the prejudice and the fear of others still at work; given the waves of xenophobia and afrophobia that we experienced until recently; will immediately sense the impact of our communities on our children and on their probable perceptions and experiences of the worlds in which they find themselves (cf. Adam & Moodley 2014).

Thinking about the importance for children of growing up, of being accepted and included, of recognition and belonging, of friendship and

free association, of learning to live with difference, otherness and strangers, in short, the importance of a healthy and constructive, welcoming and safe community life, we can most probably sense the potential dangers lurking in our divided and separated life in community, and we can probably speculate for ourselves about the potential future effects on our children.

Our community life is most certainly full of risk, both real and perceived. When this risk is internalised by children, it can most probably contribute to feelings of being endangered, by real or perceived threats from real or perceived others.

■ **Threatened? – Life in our violent societies**

If we once again broaden our reflections from local communities to the South African society at large, similar impressions suggest themselves. Few would disagree if one points to the inherent violent nature of our society today, especially if seen from the perspective of children.

Perhaps it could be instructive to begin with a description by the widely respected black theologian and intellectual Cornel West (1988). Once again it is a description of North American society, in an essay called 'Violence in America', but it takes little imagination to recognise similar traits in contemporary South Africa.

The most striking feature of contemporary American society is its sheer violence and brutality. Civic terrorism pervades the streets of our cities. Sexual violation and abuse are commonplace in our personal relationships. And many of our urban schools have become police combat zones. (Sometime soon) much of America may become uninhabitable – that is, it may be impossible to live here without daily fear for one's life. Such perceived decay in the moral and social fabric of our communities sits at the centre of the rage and despair displayed in recent controvers(ies) ... (Still) our relative silence on the increasing fear generated by pervasive violence can only produce more

negative results. We must acknowledge that people have a right to feel outraged by the rampant violence in our society. (p. 157)

Some people would probably feel that many of these words could just as well have been written about South Africa today. The same is probably true of his (West 1988) analysis of this situation:

The crucial issues are, first, how such outrage can be channelled against the right targets: the established authorities who tolerate the desperate circumstances that facilitate violent acts; and second, how we instil values, discipline, and order in the lives of those who perpetrate such violent acts. (pp. 157–158)

In answering his own questions, West (1988) made two suggestions, both relevant to the way such violent societies respond to the needs of their children:

The first issue is principally a pedagogical and political challenge. Our voices must be sympathetic to the victims of violence while providing convincing accounts of how certain economic and political policies promote and encourage the hopelessness upon which much of present-day violence feeds. (p. 158)

In addition to supporting the victims and understanding and unmasking the causes of the hopelessness underlying much of the violence, he (West 1988) offered a second suggestion as well, directly speaking to the plight of children and the youth:

The second issue is a moral challenge. We must acknowledge and attack the cold cruel amorality that permeates [*our*] society, including the communities of poor people. This can be done best by attempting to resurrect and reconstruct moralities that give people reasons to strive for dignity and excellence. Such moralities are requisite for any form of political struggle. Without them, we have merely analyses of problems and no potential agents for change. Needless to say, such a situation can only lead to our own coffins, be it caused by young hoodlums with misdirected energies or the ruling barbarians with destructive policies. (p. 158)

These comments may already resonate with many in our context today. To understand the plight of our children and the way many experience life

as risky, dangerous and unwelcoming, it is, however, necessary that our analyses of our violent societies should also look deeper than the 'sheer violence and brutality' to which West referred.

One has also to be reminded, for example, of the analyses of Johan Galtung (1969, 1990), the controversial yet influential Norwegian scholar of peace and peacemaking, including his well-known distinctions between direct, structural and cultural violence.

Direct violence is experienced in what is sometimes called our cultures of violence, referring to the widespread, almost endemic, physical, everyday acts of violence. Such violence prevails in the form of crime, abuse, including domestic violence, rape and all kinds of harmful psychological and bodily actions, as well as exploitation, oppression and exclusion of many sorts and in many spheres. This is the 'sheer violence and brutality' of which West spoke. In South Africa, we only have to use very common phrases to remind us of the prevalence of this violence all around us and in the worlds in which children have to grow up. Words and phrases such as gangsterism, drug abuse, extremely violent crime, rape of small children (even babies) mostly by family members or friends, violent murders of farming families and their workers with their families, violence caused by alcoholism and other forms of dependency, come to mind. Everyone following the news in South Africa is sickened and saddened by these stories and these statistics.

Structural violence, a term which Galtung (1969) coined and made popular as an analytical tool, refers to something more hidden and less recognised and acknowledged. Namely, the harm caused in systematic and structural ways, often invisible or at least unnoticed for its violent and violating nature. Examples are poverty, neglect, malnutrition, lack of access, lack of education, empowerment and opportunities, denial of

human dignity and violations of basic human rights, whether individual, social or economic, often even the denial (especially for women and children) of the most fundamental ‘right to have rights’.

‘Cultural violence’ refers to those aspects of a culture, sometimes hidden and invisible, that can be used to justify or legitimate direct or structural violence. These strategies are often part and parcel of religious communities and their discourses and practices. Many churches may be involved in using language, quoting biblical texts, practicing rituals or following guidelines for the church order, adhering to moral codes and convictions, employing ethical arguments, which may all serve to justify either direct and physical (often patriarchal and sexual) violence, or indeed the structural and systemic violence of inequality, oppression, exclusion, privilege and power.

What may even be more disturbing, from the perspective of our children being at risk of violence, may be the contributions over many years by the acclaimed social scientist from Hamburg, Jan Philip Reemtsma (2008). According to him, we are in the last resort unable to understand violence, to provide causes and explanations, because people are simply violent and violence can simply erupt, without any reason or cause at all. In his magisterial work called *Vertrauen und Gewalt*, Reemtsma argued that violence is woven into the very fabric of modern life, in spite of the fact that many may (mistakenly) trust our modern world to be rational, moral and non-violent. In short, our modern world may be more violent than we may understand or wish to acknowledge, and much more threatening to our children than we may care to acknowledge.

Whether we are therefore concerned with the physical violence on our streets and in our cities, the brutal, criminal and sexual violence also found in so many parts of our own country, described by West; or whether we

are concerned with the more hidden yet equally destructive systemic and cultural violence analysed by Galtung (1990) and his followers; or whether we are concerned about the inexplicable eruption of violence even when and where it is least expected, as posited by Reemtsma (2008), the tragic reality remains that this is hardly the kind of world into which to welcome our children.

Redundant? – Life in our wasteful consumerism

Social scientists, cultural analysts, political theorists and commentators on public life, from widely different backgrounds and perspectives and in divergent ways and terminologies, describe contemporary crises in similar manner, with often devastating implications for the ways in which our children probably experience the worlds in which we welcome them. Sometimes these descriptions reach much wider than only concrete communities or specific societies, but rather claim to reflect the globalising world in which we live as such, as it were, the spirit of our times, which impacts on many and leaves few untouched, irrespective of where they may live, or grow up.

The widely respected Polish sociologist working in Britain, Zygmunt Bauman, for example, raised such concerns over many years in his prolific writings, with many of these themes again woven together in the cutting analysis of his public lectures published as *Does ethics have a chance in a world of consumers?* (Bauman 2008). In this account, he paints a fascinating portrait of our contemporary world, calling it in his well-known terminology, 'liquid modernity'.

His argument is far too complex to summarise briefly, so only a few very broad strokes will have to suffice. He also begins his analysis of the (liquid)

phase of modernity in which our globalising world finds itself with a description of its inherent and structural violent nature (Bauman 2008: 78–109). The ‘confidence-building myth of the modern era’ (Bauman 2008:79) was that nature, ‘the major source of uncertainty that haunted human life’ (Bauman 2008:78) would be overcome by ‘the idea of “civilized order”’ (Bauman 2008:79) that humanity would impose on nature, building a new, modern world. In truth, however, this myth, together with its ‘unshakeable trust in human nature’ (Bauman 2008:79), has been shattered through our experiences of collective violence and terror, of marginalisation, exclusion and, what he calls ‘categorical murder’ (Bauman 2008:78–109), the legacy of the 20th century. It means that groups of people are ‘murdered’ in our world (in many ways) not because of anything that they have done, but simply for who they are, for how they are perceived, regarded and evaluated in the eyes of others. Today, he claims, both communities (as self-defined groups) and societies (in the forms of states), rather than providing ‘shelter from uncertainty’ (Bauman 2008:79), often lead to uncertainty and fear. Our ‘logic of cohabitation does not follow the precepts of the logic of moral conscience’ but rather has led to ‘a world forever pregnant with horrors’ (Bauman 2008:90). The lesson which we learnt from the previous century is ‘the right of the strong to do whatever they wish to the weak’ (Bauman 2008:97). ‘In our world of liquid modernity, of fast integration of social bonds and their traditional settings’, both ‘the societal logic’ and ‘the communal logic’ lead to everyday experiences of ‘[d]ivision, separation, and exclusion’ (Bauman 2008:106). Victims of these processes experience such division, separation and exclusion as violence, and often on a very local, immediate, direct and personal level. ‘In such a world, no one, nowhere, feels safe or secure’, he says (Bauman 2008:108). Potential implications for children having to cope with a world like this are obvious and terrifying.

Against this backdrop, Bauman then analyses our changing experiences of what freedom means in such a liquid modernity (2008:110–143). In a discussion which is directly relevant to the life of our children, he describes life today in many societies and cultures as a ‘hurried life’ and focuses on the implications of such a hurried life for education and younger generations (2008:144–193). His description of the hurried life is passionate and almost poetic. He speaks of the need always to be ahead and to stay ahead. He speaks of use-by dates and hurrying because there is no time to waste. He speaks of the imperative continuously to choose and make choices. He speaks of disposing, getting rid of waste (including human waste and ‘wasted humans’) (2008:169). He speaks of a ‘presentist culture’ and ‘the tyranny of the moment’. He speaks of ‘consumer behaviour as indiscriminate, omnivorous gluttony’ (Bauman 2008:165). He speaks of excess (even of information) and redundancy. All these characteristics together, he says, lead to a ‘blasé attitude’, called melancholy in much earlier times, a deep longing and sadness for never being satisfied and fulfilled (Bauman 2008:144–193).

Speed and forgetting go hand in hand, he says, ‘[t]he consuming life is a life of rapid learning and swift forgetting.’ In fact, ‘forgetting is as important as learning, if not more’ (Bauman 2008:146). Given the nature of our world, this forgetting also includes forgetting others, persons, relationships, bonds, forms of belonging – nothing is supposed to last. ‘The consuming life’, he says, ‘is not about acquiring and possessing ... [i]t is, first and foremost, about being on the move’ (Bauman 2008:147). The (only possible) ethical principle of the consuming life is about ‘the fallaciousness of resting satisfied’ (Bauman 2008:148). ‘The major threat to a society that announces “customer

satisfaction” is a satisfied customer’ (Bauman 2008:148). This would constitute a catastrophe because then there is nothing more to chase after and to desire, it would bring the horror of boredom. Rather than creating new needs, says Bauman (2008:148), the driving force behind consumerism is, therefore, ‘the playing down, derogation, ridicule, and uglification of yesterday’s needs.’

The irony is, according to him, that what we may call freedom is actually not freedom at all, because ‘the greater our individual freedom, the less it is relevant to the world in which we practice it’ (Bauman 2008):

The game goes on, whatever we do ... ‘Whether we play the game or not, it is being played with us. Whatever we do or abstain from doing, our withdrawal will change nothing.’ (p. 110)

The game is called consumerism. We may (be made to) believe that we are freely pursuing our individual dreams of happiness, but we are in fact being reduced to (mostly irrelevant) individual life politics, whilst the processes of politics and power are dictating the rules according to which we should dream and search and strive. He describes this as a game where parity is not the same as equality, where wars for recognition are occurring, no longer for a better world, but merely for a better place for us within the world. He describes it as a world of networks without long-standing relationships, where loyalty is no longer regarded as a virtue, where redundancy and waste become necessary, crucial to the system, the very forces that are needed to drive the game forward. The bonds that connect networks are ‘eminently breakable’ (Bauman 2008:121), and all our relations and actions follow that rule. The game no longer has any place or use for values like fidelity, trust, reliability and trustworthiness. Nothing should last, because for the sake of the game everything needs to be replaced, moved, or discarded, including us.

The far-reaching effects of these transformations to a consumer world for our children and the youth are obvious to see. As Bauman (2008) stated it:

Most young people of today, however, are likely to ... shrug their shoulders if advised ... to fix their life's destination and to plot in advance the moves ensuring that it will be reached. Indeed, they would object: How do I know what next month, let alone next year, will bring? I can be certain of one thing only, that the next month or year, and most certainly the years that will follow them, will be unlike the time I am living in now; being different, they will invalidate much of knowledge and know-how that I am currently exercising (though there is no guessing which of its many parts); much of what I have learnt I'll have to forget, and I'll have to get rid of many (though there is no guessing which) things and inclinations I now display and boast about having; choices deemed today to be most reasonable and praiseworthy will be decried tomorrow as silly and disgraceful blunders. (pp. 127–128)

The potentially radical implications for our children and the youth, following from this uncertainty, invalidation, forgetting, and these dramatic changes, are clear. Words like being flexible, becoming redundant, being wasteful and being wasted already describe the world of tomorrow. Sensibilities like feeling uncertain, feeling oneself redundant, no longer needed, no longer adequate, no longer able and no longer recognised, in short, of not feeling accepted and not feeling welcome, already describe the sense of self of many in our world today (Bauman 2008):

What follows is that the sole skill I really need to acquire and exercise is flexibility – the skill of promptly getting rid of useless skills, the ability to quickly forget and to dispose of past assets that have turned into liabilities, the skill of changing tacks and tracks at short notice and without regret, and of avoiding oaths of life-long loyalty to anything and anybody. Good turns, after all, tend to appear suddenly and from nowhere, and equally abruptly they vanish; woe to the suckers who by design or default behave as if they were to hold to them forever. (p. 128)

Who wants to be suckers, caught with long-term loyalties to anything and anybody when good turns may suddenly appear only to vanish again?

Who wants to be caught trusting anything and anybody when they may suddenly betray us and disappear whenever good turns may come their way?

Without going into any detail, we can already appreciate the theoretical background of Bauman's (2008:64) sad and cynical observation that '[t]he world today seems to be conspiring against trust.' Ours has become a culture of 'disengagement, discontinuity, and forgetting', he says (Bauman 2008:187).

How should we educate our children for life in such a 'liquid-modern casino culture' (Bauman 2008:188)? How should we welcome our children in a liquid and hurried world of forgetfulness, waste and lack of long-term loyalties, a world which seems to conspire against trust?

Distrustful? – Life in our dark times

For an equally cutting description and analysis of our contemporary world yet from a different historical context, disciplinary background and methodological approach, one could be reminded of Hannah Arendt's moving comments on 'living in dark times'. She was a political theorist, at the time working in the United States, but originally from Jewish background in Germany until she left Nazi Germany for exile.

She took over the expression from Bertolt Brecht's poem 'To posterity' when she received the Lessing Prize in Hamburg in 1959 and gave her acceptance speech on Lessing, calling it 'Humanity in dark times'. *Men in dark times* later became the title of a collection of her essays on different historical figures (Arendt 1983). The theme was again used for a conference celebrating her legacy on the occasion of her one-hundredth birthday, and then became the title of the rich and instructive edited proceedings,

Thinking in dark times: Hannah Arendt on ethics and politics (Berkowitz, Katz & Keenan 2010).

The way she understood the metaphor was already implicit in Brecht's own moving expressions, for example his lamenting phrases (Berkowitz *et al.* 2010):

Truly, I live in dark times!//An artless word is foolish. A smooth forehead//Points to insensitivity. He who laughs//Has not yet received//The terrible news.//What times are these, in which//A conversation about trees is almost a crime//For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!//And he who walks quietly across the street,//Passes out of reach of his friends//Who are in danger? (pp. 3, 273)

The thrust is clear. There are times in which seemingly innocent acts (a smooth forehead; laughing; a conversation about trees; walking across the street) are no longer innocent, since they are silent about realities crying out for attention and action (terrible news; wrongdoing; danger). Doing these innocent things may be (insensitive, uninformed, perhaps even criminal) forms of maintaining silence about that which we should have spoken openly and publicly. They may even be attempts to avoid the actions needed to protect friends in danger. Such times are dark times, these times in which we do not speak about those truths that are important for human life, but rather hide in the silence of seemingly innocent talk and activities.

The metaphor, therefore, refers – also for Arendt – to the many ways in which we may be involved in silences which are no longer innocent, for they cover up lying and falsehood, betrayal and deception, propaganda and deceit, corruption and evil.

The edge of her political analysis lies in the claim that we are actually not silent, but are indeed talking, also publicly, socially and politically (and acting, publicly, socially and politically), but that we are not talking about

what we should be talking about in such a time. The light of our public discourse itself has become darkness in such times. We are misleading ourselves and others by the seeming light of our thoughts, language and activities. We do not name the horrors and the hungers of our specific time, place and era. We are not outraged about the outrages of our times; therefore, these are dark times.

It is for all of us to consider the relevance of this metaphor for our community, society, continent and world today. However, the extent to which it may be accurate and relevant will also have serious ramifications for our children growing up in such dark times. It would mean that we, perhaps, keep silent about what we should have said and thought about on their behalf. It would mean that we, perhaps, mislead them, keeping them in the dark about the truth of their condition, as well as our own.

If children grow up and have to learn to find their way in a world of falsehood and deception, dealing with a world without integrity, truthfulness, honesty and reliability, finding their own orientation in dark times, then it is inevitable that these experiences will impact on their own formation, identities and future lives. It will be a world in which children will learn to be distrustful, even of public talk, as they may be aware that this talk is (perhaps deliberately) deceiving them, being silent about what they experience and know as real. It may even be a world in which our children learn to be deceitful, corrupt and unreliable, following our example.

■ Vulnerable? – Life in our cultures of fear

It has, of course, become popular to describe our lifeworlds today in terms of ‘cultures of fear’. This discourse has become so widespread and common, used across diverse academic disciplines but also in the public media and political rhetoric that it is not always clear what precisely is meant by this

popular depiction. Everybody seems to agree that ‘culture of fear’ describes our common experience in many societies today, yet they fill this expression with widely different content and think of many different trends and developments when they speak like this (cf. Bell 2007).

In his recent study called *Gesellschaft der Angst* [society of fear], the German researcher Heinz Bude (2014), also from the famous Institute for Social Research in Hamburg (founded by Reemtsma), for example, shows how many different groups and individuals in our societies live with widely different fears, but still share the common feeling of fear, and they can relate to descriptions of their lives in these terms.

He describes a world in which people have the unsettling awareness that they do not fully belong – from the threats to their lifestyles and, indeed, the future of their children, to the fears operative in their intimate spheres, in their worlds of work, on the political scene, in their financial and economic realities, in the lack of transparency of the social media and the electronic information. In every part of their lives, they feel the threat of insecurity, of a lack of belonging, safety, reliability and trust. They fear – something, not so much any specific ‘other’, but perhaps much rather themselves, and the (frightening) knowledge that their lives depend on their own responsibility, but that this has become a responsibility which they must exercise in a world which they no longer fully oversee, understand or feel they can completely trust (Bude 2014).

The influential, albeit controversial, Hungarian-born British sociologist Frank Furedi (1997, 2006, 2007) has also written much about present-day cultures of fear. Fear plays a key role in 21st century consciousness, he observes, because we seem to engage today with various issues ‘through a narrative of fear’ (Furedi 2007:n.p.). It is related to an earlier ‘age of anxiety’ and to the ‘cultures of risk’ described by many (cf. Beck 1992; Giddens

2000), but according to him the discourses of fear are also different, they add new dimensions to anxiety and risk.

Fear has become the content of ‘cultural scripts’, he argues, helping us, for example, to understand ourselves, to experience life and to have feelings, to express ourselves, to relate to others and interact with others, and to know how to respond to our environments. There are even many ‘fear entrepreneurs’ around, making use of the discourses of fear (and thereby of our fears) to make us follow their wishes, rules and instructions. This includes political and economic actors of all sorts, but also the public media. They strive to benefit from our fear.

Our fear is, accordingly, often more the result of these discourses of fear than the result of real experiences that we have made personally. The pervasive presence and danger of fear is communicated to us and internalised by us, often more than caused by our personal encounters with dangers and threat. Whilst previously in history many cultures feared specific events, enemies, threats, or potential happenings, our culture of fear is such that we fear, fear itself. It is to a large extent the product of our imagination and also influences our imagination. Fear itself, as ‘the defining cultural mood in contemporary society’ has become ‘a problem in its own right’ (Furedi 2007:n.p.). According to him (Furedi 2007:n.p.), ‘fear is institutionalised and the fear response is further encouraged and culturally affirmed’, all of which ‘encourages speculation, rumours, mistrust’ (Furedi 2007:n.p.).

For him, this has important implications for our sense of identity, ‘to be “at risk” is about who you are as a person’ (Furedi 2007:n.p.). It describes and defines us. The consequence is that ““at riskness” has become a fixed attribute of the individual, like the size of your feet or hands’ (Furedi 2007:n.p.). Public discourse can even classify people according to their ‘at riskness’,

which is why some (even whole groups) can be called ‘vulnerable’, or ‘more vulnerable than others’, as if these are descriptions of who they are in themselves. Their identities are shaped by these descriptions, which means by fear. This is how others see them and how they understand themselves.

Furedi (2007:n.p.) points out that the term ‘vulnerable group’ is of very recent origin; only since the 1980s has it been used. It can describe many groups, women, the elderly, ethnic minorities, disabled people, but in particular it is used for children. In fact, all children are seen almost by definition as vulnerable; we seem to ascribe identities to them built on risk and therefore on fear:

Children, most strikingly, are automatically assumed to be vulnerable. A study into the emergence of the concept of ‘vulnerable children’ found that, in most published literature, the concept is treated as a ‘relatively self-evident concomitant of childhood which requires little formal exposition’: Children are considered vulnerable as individuals by definition ... Moreover, this state of vulnerability is presented as an intrinsic attribute ... an essential property ... intrinsic to children’s identities and personhoods. (n.p.)

Furedi even speaks about ‘the v-word’ today. “‘The Vulnerable’ captures the sense of powerlessness and fragility that underpins the rising use of the v-word today’ (Furedi 2007:n.p.). It has become a state of mind, an identity. It often has little to do with specific and concrete threats, but rather becomes a way of description, internalised also as self-description, a ‘newly constructed sacred term’ defining who we are, also for our own self-understanding.

Rather than being welcomed in a safe, protecting and secure world, children find themselves defined as vulnerable, as defined by threat and fear. ‘The identity of vulnerability is the flipside of the autonomisation of fear’, Furedi (2007:n.p.) claims. In short, children grow up to believe that being human is to be afraid.

■ Anxious? – Life in our lifestyles of status

For a fourth and final description of our world today, again from a different perspective and in different terms, but with similar implications and consequences, one could turn to the best-selling depiction by the popular author Alain de Botton (2004) in his *Status anxiety*.

In a sweeping but convincing portrayal, he shows the far-reaching effects of what he calls ‘status anxiety’ in our contemporary global world. We no longer live according to former so-called dominant narratives, but according to new, alternative narratives – about life, being human, ourselves, what is of value, how one is respected and valued, how we should accordingly behave. These alternative narratives now dominate our worlds and may affect us unconsciously as the real scripts of our lives.

De Botton (2004) describes some of the desires and therefore the anxieties that inevitably influence our common cultures and therefore our personal feelings in so-called democratic and egalitarian societies. Our common cultures make us long to climb the social ladder and to be recognised, accepted, respected and valued, if possible even admired.

He (De Botton 2004) discusses possible causes, and provides ample illustrations and examples, for such status anxiety in what he calls the lovelessness, the expectations, the meritocracy, the snobbery and the dependence characteristic of the spirit of our times.

His story is a sad, even a tragic tale. Because the highest point of the social ladder can never be reached, and as we are always anxious that we may even lose the status that we have already achieved, this deeply personal need can never be fulfilled. We long for dreams that can never be fulfilled, we reach for ideals that can, in principle, never be reached. This means that we strive for happiness but, precisely because of the nature of this longing, we shall never find the happiness for which we long. Our common

life becomes a self-fulfilling and never-ending dream of stress and anxiety, of competition and loss, of frustration and desire.

Again, the potential effects on our children, living in times like these, hardly need to be spelled out. Stress and anxiety are inscribed in the very script of these stories, as the driving forces of our global culture and our personal lives.

■ Philosophical perspectives on the spirit of our times

■ Alone? – Life in our empty cosmos

Finally, one may turn to three more philosophical reflections on our world today, each one again raising serious questions and challenges concerning our children and how they experience life today.

One important characteristic of the world in which many children today, and indeed also in our society, grow up is the far-reaching impact of contemporary scientific achievements, theories and suppositions on our awareness, on our consciousness, on the implicit views of the world and assumptions about life communicated to us by our everyday reality and practices in this scientific, technological, electronic and media-mediated world.

Indeed, the wonderful developments of scientific knowledge and its increasingly unimaginable applications have indeed changed not only what we think about, but the very way we think. This viewpoint is illustrated by the words of the respected intellectual historian Peter Watson (2013), introducing his fascinating account of the influential intellectual figures and ideas of the 20th century, called *A terrible beauty*:

Our century has been dominated intellectually by a coming to terms with science. The trend has been profound because the contribution of science has involved not just the

invention of new products, the extraordinary range of which has transformed all our lives. In addition to changing what we think about science has changed how we think. (loc. 411–414)

In his similarly intriguing study called *Imagine there's no heaven. How atheism helped create the modern world*, the professor of journalism Mitchell Stephens (2014) describes everyday and mostly unconscious awareness as the joyful acceptance that we live in a meaningless cosmic void without order or purpose, so that we (finally) experience ourselves as completely free – free to construct any order and meaning we may need and want for ourselves, without hindrance and constraint. Once we can truly imagine that there's no heaven, then we are truly free.

We owe our freedom to study, investigate, propose, experiment, challenge, imagine, to 'push ahead with the difficult, invigorating work of creating the modern world' at least in part to atheism, Stephens argues (2014), to '[t]he development and spread of the idea that we live without gods (or God).' For him, atheism frees us to see the void before and around us.

'Humankind is still accustoming itself to facing that void', he says, 'surrendering our naïveté has not been easy.' Perhaps he could also have said surrendering our 'being like children' has not been easy. 'We are still learning', he writes (Stephens 2014):

[T]o dance without a caller, to play without somebody keeping score. We will need to revisit and then revise again the question how humankind might best live together ... not 'under God', but looking how humankind might best live together ... not 'under God', but looking up ... to 'only sky'. (pp. 276–277)

It is no wonder that Peter Watson's (2014) recent account of this everyday world, called *The age of atheism: How we have sought to live since the death of God* in its American edition, was originally called *The age of nothing: How we have sought to live since the death of God* in its British edition. For these

authors, the age of atheism is the age of nothing. For Watson (2014), Nietzsche already diagnosed the 'nihilist predicament' when, with his dictum that God is dead, he described the situation in which some scientific world views proclaim a world with no inherent order or meaning. With theism no longer credible, meaning (if any) has now to be made by human beings ourselves. Atheism (of this kind) and feelings of nothingness (of this nature) may indeed go hand in hand.

This is, of course, not by far the only way to view the everyday world of today resulting from the amazing and exponential contributions of the sciences and their applications (cf. Van Huyssteen 2006), but it is indeed the way in which several leading atheist voices would like to interpret this world and, indeed, also the way in which many people, including children, daily experience this world – that life is nothing but a meaningless and nihilistic void.

This world is, of course, today powerfully mediated for children by popular culture in a multiplicity of ways, from films to music, from science fiction to electronic games in apocalyptic genres, from the internet to all its ranges of social media.

For some this may provide feelings of utter freedom, for others, however, it may also lead to feelings of emptiness, both of the cosmos around us and the worlds within us, and, therefore, feelings of loneliness and of having been left alone; of being lost in a meaningless labyrinth without future or purpose and without meaning, value and worth, including self-worth.

It is therefore not surprising that some of the leading philosophers of our time regard nihilism as the ultimate threat to our humanity and our attempts to find ways of living together.

■ Lost? – Life in our nihilistic accounts

One such philosopher is Simon Critchley (2012), the New York-based British thinker well known, amongst others, for his study called *The faith of the faithless. Experiments in political theology*.

As the subtitle already suggests, his question is something completely different. He is concerned with the question how human beings find ways of living together – which is inevitably necessary, as we share a common world – unless we have some common convictions, beliefs, concerns, values, commitments. On what is the faith of the faithless, or the belief of the unbelievers, based, which alone could make a common life and therefore human communities, politics in the most basic sense, possible? Wherein consists the faith of the faithless of the belief of the unbelievers – which alone could make a common life and therefore human communities, politics in the most basic sense, possible? *The faith of the faithless* is a fascinating attempt to provide an overview of, and critical engagement with, contemporary answers to this complex and challenging question.

This question has obvious and extremely serious implications for our children in our communities and societies as well – there is no need to remind South Africans of this. What do our children believe about the common life they share with one another; what are their deep convictions (with long-term social and political consequences); what are their strong commitments and loyalties (with far-reaching social and political consequences in an unequal, divided, pluralistic, complex society like South Africa); what are their shared values, if any?

For our present purposes, the many possible and contested answers to this question are not important, only the fact of the question itself. This has already been Critchley's (2008) own concern in his study called *Infinitely*

demanding. Ethics of commitment, politics of resistance. If there is no interest in this question at all, if societies do not care about ‘the faith of the faithless’, about the question what those people believe who claim that they do not really believe anything, if no one cares about the common political convictions, values, commitments, assumptions, concerns, beliefs, then these societies stand in danger.

The danger is nihilism, according to Critchley. Nihilism can appear in different, even seemingly contradictory forms and it can function in many diverse ways. He therefore describes and analyses several forms of nihilism, from passive forms (of people who do not care what they allow to be destroyed through their apathy and indifference) to active forms (of people who do not care what they may destroy through their fanaticism). Critchley (2008) says:

The passive nihilist looks at the world from a certain distance and finds it meaningless ... [T]he passive nihilist closes his eyes and makes himself into an island ... The active nihilist also finds everything meaningless, but instead of sitting back ... he tries to destroy the world and bring another into being. (pp. 4–5)

According to Critchley (2008:8–13), both passive and active nihilism suffer from the same ‘motivational deficit’, which means that people with these experiences of meaninglessness do not have sufficient conviction and commitment about anything of purpose and value. They need something ‘infinitely demanding’ in their lives – for that reason, the title of his book – they need a claim, a calling, a conscience, a concern, a community for which and for whom they may live, meaningfully. Critchley (2008:10) therefore intends to develop a notion of ‘ethical subjectivity’, because ‘a subject is the name for the way in which a self binds itself to some conception of the good and shapes its subjectivity in relation to that good.’

Later, in *The faith of the faithless*, Critchley (2012) would explicitly delve into Pauline ideas of vocation and calling, of love and solidarity, of faith and covenant and trust, in order to develop such ethical commitments.

The consequences of all such nihilism may be that societies lose the ability to commit themselves together to worthwhile convictions and to resist together whatever forces may threaten the common life. That is why the subtitle suggests the political need for an ‘ethics of commitment’ and for a ‘politics of resistance’. The implications for the way our children experience the world in which they grow up are manifold but obvious and important.

In fact, the destructive consequences for children and the youth of feelings of nihilism may be very practical, concrete, everyday and well-known. These may include experiences of meaninglessness in their personal lives, feelings of being worthless and without dignity, respect or value in the eyes of anyone, up to the point of willing and self-destructive pursuits of drugs and alcohol. What some praise as a void in which to operate in the fullest freedom may be for others the dark hell of personal loss and being lost.

Disillusioned? – Life in our reality without tomorrows

In his well-known essay called ‘Ideas for a theology of childhood’, the highly regarded Jesuit scholar Karl Rahner (1971) once linked the notion of childhood with ‘hope which is still not disillusioned’. An interesting part of his argument at the time was in fact that such childhood is not merely something that belongs to children, but rather a fundamental aspect of being human and, accordingly, an aspect of our being that adults should also hope never to lose. Hopefully, he said, ‘life becomes for us a state in which our original childhood is preserved for ever.’ Hopefully, he wrote,

we always retain our own childlike ability, namely ‘the power still to be able to play’ (Rahner 1971:42).

How do we retain this original childhood and the power to play? By acquiring, retaining and practising childlike trust, openness (or receptivity) and expectation (or hope). Childhood (Rahner 1971):

[A]s an inherited factor in our lives must take the form of trust, of openness, of expectation ... It must manifest itself in freedom ... as receptivity, as hope which is still not disillusioned. (p. 47)

If our children grow up in a world where they are deprived of this ‘hope which is still not disillusioned’, we allow them to be robbed of their inherent childhood itself, perhaps for the rest of their lives.

The radical implications of such a theological understanding of childhood hardly needs any comment or application in our contemporary world, including our continent today and our own society and communities today.

Perhaps the work of one scholar could again serve as reminder of the importance of this perspective and of Rahner’s suggestion regarding childhood and hope. Almost at the same time that Rahner’s essay appeared in his *Theological investigations*, the Brazilian psychoanalyst and educator Rubem Alves (1972) published his challenging, moving and inspiring study called *Tomorrow’s child. Imagination, creativity, and the rebirth of culture*. Alves, already in 1968, had completed his doctoral dissertation in theology at Princeton Theological Seminary with the title *Towards a theology of liberation: An exploration of the encounter between the languages of humanistic Messianism and Messianic humanism*. According to some, that made him actually the first scholar to use the expression ‘a theology of liberation’. It was published in English in 1969 as *A theology of human hope*.

Shortly after, in *Tomorrow’s child*, Alves (1972) argued passionately and poetically for the need of hope, for the childlike freedom and playfulness

that imagine new possibilities and dream of new futures, rather than being captive to the restrictions of what already is. This leads to new possibilities, to creativity and possibly even to the rebirth of our present realities, cultures and lifestyles, however difficult and almost impossible this may often seem to us.

For him, powerful forces are at work in contemporary (technological) cultures that are attempting to make people believe that the present reality is the only possible approach to life. We are indoctrinated to accept that there is no alternative, that nothing else is possible. We are socialised to live within the given and to rather desire a thousand things than to imagine a radically different future. We are taught to accept the inevitability of our own alienation, he argues. According to this widespread and dominant world view, imagination belongs to the category of illusion and should be rejected out of hand.

For Alves, therefore, helping to allow our children to develop and live as ‘tomorrow’s children’ – filled with hope, imagination and creativity – has become a fundamental challenge to contemporary societies and to our institutions, programmes and activities of learning. If we fail to face this challenge, we obviously leave our children without hope and therefore disillusioned – living, as it were, in a world without tomorrow (Alves 1972).

■ Welcoming children in life?

To be sure, these descriptions – of life in our households, communities and societies; of our cultures of consumerism, corruption, fear and anxiety; and of the spirit of our times as one of void, nihilism and hopelessness – have been extremely eclectic, vague and superficial. They represent nothing more than sweeping generalisations about broad experiences and impressions. They obviously do not apply in every place and to everyone,

or even all of them together (for an instructive analysis of North America, cf. Langford 2012). Some may be more applicable and recognisable in some contexts and others may be true elsewhere and concerning others. Some children may experience some of these more acutely, others may live under completely different circumstance. Detailed empirical work will obviously be needed in every specific situation where one attempts to think and speak about the ways our children experience our life-worlds.

In fact, even ‘trust’ can be understood in many different ways, on a scale from broad and sweeping descriptions to very specific and technical definitions. In his instructive analysis called *The problem of trust* (1997), the respected social thinker from Boston, Adam Seligman, for example distinguishes trust from closely related terms (for example faith, belief, and confidence) and argues that trust – in his technical sense – is only possible under very specific conditions of modernity. Much of what has been presupposed in the previous descriptions would therefore, according to him, rather have to do with other ways of relating to others, but not with trust. It does not speak for itself, for example, that children who learn to trust their parents in early childhood will be able to deal with the uncertainties of role expectation and the unreliability of modern systems of public life. There is simply too much difference between (for example) the psychological and personal trust in intimate relationships, say as described by pastoral theologian Donald Capps (1987) in his study of *Deadly sins and saving virtues* and (for example) the confidence and reliability needed for the proper functioning of free market economies, as analysed and described by the political scholar Francis Fukuyama (2008) in his classic called *Trust. Human nature and the reconstitution of social order*, or (for example) what Seligman calls ‘the dilemma of modernity’ (1997:147–176). Although the word ‘trust’ is used in all these cases, it can simply mean too many different things.

Still, it is significant that ‘trust’ is indeed used in almost all these discussions and from all these perspectives – by West and Reemtsma, by Bauman and Bude, by Critchley and Rahner. In a broad and general sense, it is therefore also possible to use trust as an all-inclusive and umbrella term with which to describe the deep human need to belong and be able to rely on others, indeed on life itself, depending on some form of meaning, value and hope, protecting us from being abandoned, endangered and threatened, from experiencing redundancy, distrust, vulnerability and anxiety, from feeling alone, lost, and disillusioned. Used in such a broad sense, it can indeed raise the question how we can welcome children into our world and worlds by *Building cultures of trust*, in the words of the church historian and public intellectual Martin Marty (2010), also the author of *The mystery of the child* (Marty 2007).

Of course, these diverse descriptions of some lack of trust in our life-worlds are, by far, not the only ways to look at our life-worlds and the ways our children experience life. In no way should these descriptions together be taken as an alarmist and apocalyptic depiction of horrible and terrifying scenarios. Of course, there are also myriads of positive stories to tell. Many children experience our households, communities and societies, the global spirit of our times and the globalisation of our economies and our cultures, as well as the amazing achievements and applications of our science in deeply affirmative, positive and emancipatory ways. Of course, our children in thousands of different ways do learn to trust. The sombre statistics and the terrible realities should not blind our eyes to all these positive cultures of trust.

At the same time, to the extent that these depictions may indeed be true, they do challenge the church in fundamental ways.

They challenge us for deeply theological reasons that belong to the heart of the gospel, the Christian faith and tradition itself.

It is no wonder that Shriver (1983) raised the issue of trust in his discussion of the Lord's Prayer. Prayer has to do with trust, and being invited by Jesus to call God 'Our Father' is an invitation into the heart of the good news itself. We are welcomed in the presence of God and invited to call on God with trust and hope. Christian faith has everything to do with the fundamental trust expressed in the 'Amen' at the end of every prayer and is central in Christian worship, with the conviction that God is faithful, dependable, reliable and trustworthy. It is no wonder that the Reformed tradition, for example, following John Calvin, summarised the Christian life as one of 'belonging not to ourselves but to God' and called this 'our only comfort in life and death' in the 16th century *Heidelberg Catechism*. It is no wonder that the Reformed systematic theologian from Heidelberg, Michael Welker (2002, cf. 2013) describes Jesus' welcoming of the children as one of the major activities of Jesus' ministry, which the church is called to follow.

After all, the words of Jesus that 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me' (Mk 9:37) shows the same structure as his powerful and often-quoted words in Matthew 25 that whoever showed an act of mercy towards one of the least of the brethren did that to him. In the children, we are facing Jesus himself – and therefore Godself, the One who sent him (cf. Gundry-Volf 2001).

These deeply theological convictions obviously have far-reaching ecclesiological implications. What does it mean to be the church believing and worshipping in this way? What does it mean to be the church welcoming the children – and therefore Jesus, yes, Godself – in this way?

This is not the place even to attempt to reflect on any practical ecclesiological implications of these fundamental theological convictions.

Still, it should be immediately clear that much more is involved than merely incidental events when children are 'made to feel welcome' in church or occasions when they are made to feel included and blessed. It much rather has to do with welcoming them in our world and in our worlds, in making them feel welcome in life itself, from our households to our cultures to our cosmos.

Welcoming children would mean inviting them to share in the fundamental trust which is at the heart of the church's faith, worship and life. It means making them feel at home, realising that they are affirmed, that they belong, moreover, that they are safe and secure, that they will be cared for, that they do not have to fear or feel alone, but that they can be children – and therefore play. It means assuring them there is meaning, value and hope. They do not have to be afraid and they do not have to be anxious. They can live with faith, assuredness, confidence and trust. It means that they can be children and grow up as children should, in fact, as human beings should, without ever losing their childhood.

What would therefore be the practical implications for the church? This is for others to develop, but, following social theory, one could perhaps distinguish between values, institutions and practices.

Regarding values, this could imply that the church proclaims the gospel in such a way, speaks about God in such a way, does theology in such a way, brings the message in such a way that children are welcomed – by the content, the convictions, the commitments of this theology and faith. This would also involve that the church contributes to public life, public discourses and public opinion, whether in communities, societies, or even broader, in ways that value and protect children.

Regarding institutions, this could imply that all the different social forms of the church should contribute to welcome children – the liturgy and worship of assembled believers; the life of local congregations including their presence in their local communities; the decisions, programmes, activities, campaigns and protests of denominations and the ecumenical church; the believers themselves, in their many ways of contributing to life in our world, also by being role models and inspiring examples.

Regarding practices, this could imply that the institutional church looks self-critically at its own involvement in the world – its treatment of children, including their abuse by office-bearers; its own priorities and its public positions, the support it provides or fails to provide in civil society. In many ways, the indirect message which the church proclaims through its actions speaks much louder than the message it hopes to proclaim by its words.

One example of a church figure – a minister, theologian, elected leader and educator – who committed his life to welcoming children in our world was the late rector of Stellenbosch University, Russel Botman.

As educator he was inspired by the Brazilian author Paulo Freire and his *Pedagogy of hope* (Freire 1994, reflections on his earlier very influential *Pedagogy of the oppressed*). As theologian he was inspired by the German martyr-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who also deeply cared for children and movingly expressed his own fundamental trust in the poem from his prison cell, written as a gift to his loved ones *Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen* [always surrounded by gracious powers for good].

Over many years, and in many ways, Botman strove to serve ‘tomorrow’s children’ by strengthening values, institutions and practices bringing ‘hope that is not disillusioned’ to the youth of our country, continent and world. These thoughts are dedicated to his memory (cf. Botman 2002, 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013; also Smit 2014, 2015, 2016).

Doing Child Theology: History and methodology

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Introduction

The publication in 2001 of the work *The child in Christian thought* under the editorship of Marcia Bunge ‘has helped to kick start theological awareness of children in the Christian tradition’ (Thatcher 2007a:1). The series editors, Don S. Browning and John Wall (2001:xi), were bold enough to suggest in the introduction to this book that it launches a new field of inquiry: ‘the study of Christian theological approaches to children and the responsibilities of families and society towards them.’ In the past 15 years the academic study

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of the connection between children and theology gained much interest and momentum. In this debate different views on, and approaches to, this field of study were expressed and developed. The debate also wrestled with different questions, including ‘what a “theology for children, by children and with children” could be’ (Korneck 2012:420). In this process different terms and research foci were identified and coined, such as Child Theology, Theologies of Childhood and Children’s Theologies. Although many definitions for these different study foci were formulated, it also became clear that it is not so easy to keep them apart and that they are in a certain sense interrelated with one another (cf. Grobbelaar 2016). Taking this reality into account, the main focus of this chapter will be on what has become known as Child Theology.

■ Problem statement

After more than 15 years of debate, it seems that there is still not clarity on at least the methodology of Child Theology. It is understandable, taking into account that Child Theology is also only a child and still has to grow up. This chapter aims to make a contribution to this important debate. In searching for a possible methodology of doing Child Theology, it will be pretentious to think that there is only a one-size-fits-all methodology of doing Child Theology. What this chapter may achieve is only to identify some important markers to take into account in developing a methodology.

In searching for a workable methodology of doing Child Theology it is important to attend to two aspects that are intertwined in this discussion and will have an influence on the methodology you will follow. These two aspects are, in the first place, your understanding of the biblical witness about the connection between children and theology, and in the

second place, your understanding of the identity of Child Theology. Therefore, this chapter will attend, firstly, to these two aspects before attending to the challenge of a methodology. In a sense these two aspects are a search for answers on two important questions. Firstly, where does Child Theology come from? And secondly, what is Child Theology? An effective methodology for doing Child Theology can only be developed when we have clear answers to these questions. The discussion will start attending to some perspectives from the Old and New Testament on the children-theology relationship. Thereafter, the chapter will focus on two historical facts. The first is the disappearance, or the degeneration, of Child Theology since the years of the early church until very recently. Some factors contributing to this situation will be identified. The second historical fact, the recovering of Child Theology, will then receive attention, and the reasons for this recovery will be discussed. Then the chapter moves on to discuss a preliminary definition of Child Theology and a few questions this definition brings to the fore. This discussion challenges us to change our way of doing Child Theology and expresses some implications for our epistemology and methodology. The chapter ends with an illustrative story.

■ **Some biblical perspectives on the children-theology relationship**

Both the main questions mentioned above can be answered, partly, by attending to some of the biblical perspectives on this topic. The Bible contains many references to children and uses quite a number of children-related terms (cf. Zuck 1996:13–15). It is impossible to attend to all these biblical references to children in this chapter (cf. eds. Bunge, Fretheim & Gaventa 2008). Only a few broad lines will be drawn.

■ A few perspectives from the Old Testament

The Old Testament tells many a story of the birth and life of children. Each birth story, as well as the genealogies included in the Old Testament, serves as a confirmation of God's promise of the generational continuity through history. Each baby was God's 'language' of hope to God's people. The Old Testament also contains narratives that witness to God's willingness to start anew with Israel again and again by making a fresh start through children (cf. Moses, Samuel, David). And each time this new beginning brought a moment of liberation for God's people: liberation from being slaves in Egypt (Ex 1–14), liberation from the iniquities of Eli's house and a time that the Word of the Lord was rare (1 Sm 1–4), liberation from a king that became, in his own eyes, bigger and stronger and more important than God (1 Sm 9–31).

God also revealed Godself in Old Testament times through children such as the slave girl, whom God used to liberate the heathen Naaman from his sickness and bring healing to his life (2 Ki 5). This young, marginalised, slave girl became God's ambassador (Brongers 1970:51) and a source of God's revelation in this heathen country. She was, in a certain sense, God's 'language' in which God spoke to Naaman to start a process of liberation in his life.

There are also many indirect or metaphorical references to children present in the Old Testament (Bunge 2008:xiv–xv). Theological visions of hope and the dawn of a new dispensation for God's people are communicated with the image of children (cf. Is 11:6; Zch 8:5).

Children, directly or indirectly, were already in the Old Testament bearers of deep theological truths. In a certain sense, God had already in the Old Testament put children in the midst as a sign or language of God's revelation. Child Theology is already part of God's revelation in the Old Testament. Many a time, these references to children were linked with the change,

transformation and liberation God initiated through these children. God used real children or the image of children to communicate the essence of the transformation God wanted to achieve in this world. Moreover, the authors of all these stories about children, of the genealogies, and of the metaphors referring to children, were already practising a form of Child Theology.

A few perspectives from the New Testament

In the New Testament God again made a new beginning with this world and all its people with the birth of a child. This time, God placed Godself through the Baby Jesus right in the centre of the history of this broken world (White 2008:358). Salvation came to this world in the Christ Child. The Baby Jesus is God's language of hope, transformation and liberation to the people of Israel. Moreover, it is this incarnation of the Christ Child that the Indian Christian scholar, Jesudason Jeyaraj (2009:49–72), uses as the starting point and foundation for developing his understanding of Child Theology. Jeyaraj (2009:55) states that he made an attempt to relate and incorporate 'the insights of the texts on incarnation in the New Testament' in formulating his thoughts on Child Theology.

Many scholars (cf. Christine 2014:189–200; Constantineanu 2014:134–148; Gundry-Volf 2001:29–60; Jensen 2005:121–134; White 2008:353–374; Willmer & White 2013) wrote about the importance of the story in Matthew 18:1–14, and the corresponding verses in the other Synoptic Gospels about Jesus' action of placing a child in the midst of the disciples to address their theological debate about greatness in God's kingdom, for Child Theology. Some of them see this action of Jesus as the starting point, motivation or even a foundational basis for their Child Theology. According to White and Willmer (2006:5) their Child Theology 'is a kind of extended reflection on and response to what Matthew records in Chapter 18:1–14 of his Gospel.'

And indeed, this action by Jesus is a very important moment in Jesus' teaching to his disciples. The context in which this happens was the struggle for power, position, greatness, and reward amongst the disciples. Jesus uses this child as a sign or a language to communicate a very important theological truth(s) to his disciples. He actually calls his disciples through this child to change, to be transformed, to live according to a different ethic, to become powerless. Jesus' message is that they have to identify themselves with the marginalised people of society, like this child, if they want to enter into God's kingdom. Actually, Jesus wants to achieve much more. He wants to liberate his disciples from their own power surge which could sabotage the very reason for his life commitment: to liberate the powerless and marginalised people. So easy could the disciples become power driven people who would prefer to rule over the marginalised people instead of identifying themselves with each and every one who was marginalised by their society and to serve them.

Of all the many responses Jesus could have provided to his disciples' question, why did he use a child in this circumstance? Why did he not use any other marginalised person? Did Jesus refer to something in the child, to one or another inherent natural characteristic that he wants his disciples to imitate? Perhaps innocence, wonder, simplicity, humility, purity or joy (cf. Bakke 2005:56–86; Estep 2008:65–66; Gould 1994; Konz 2014:27–28)? But can this really be true? What about the more negative 'childish' behaviours such as jealousy, temper tantrums, and plain naughtiness – which are also common qualities of children (Konz 2014:26)? In the context of the power struggle amongst the disciples, the reason for using a child could be that children were the most powerless and least important people in the 1st century Mediterranean world (cf. Botha 1999; Grobbelaar 2008:291–301). Strange (2004) declares:

When Matthew recounted the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, he drew his story to a close with the comment: 'Some five thousand men shared in this meal, not

counting the woman and children' (Matt. 14:21). 'Not counting the children' was a good summary of a widespread attitude. (p. 38)

Children were at the bottom of the status ladder of their society, the least important of everyone, on par with slaves and often overlooked by adults.

This is why Jesus uses a child in this conversation with his disciples. He wants them to realise that they have to change from power seekers to people without any power, like this child, living not at the centre of attention but on the margins of society. It is a change which would transform their whole lifestyle. To say to the disciples that they should receive children was radically contra the Mediterranean culture they were living in (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:77–78). Normally it was the task of the mothers to care for the children. A mother's whole life was lived around her children. It was one of the reasons why men viewed woman as inferior. Now Jesus dares to ask the disciples, men, to change their lives to such an extent that they would willingly start to live contra their own culture (cf. Combrink 2002:39). They would have to lay down the image of power of their masculinity to take up the image of inferiority of mothers by welcoming, by receiving children in their lives (Mt 18:5). Jesus confronts his disciples with a "feminine" model of community' (Herzog 2005:45).

Reflecting on the biblical perspectives

Taking into account all the above biblical references, it seems as if Child Theology is present throughout the Bible. God used children at various times and in different ways to communicate some theological truths to God's people. The exact content of this communication differs in the different contexts. Although it often had a connection with change or transformation or liberation, each different children-related interaction described in the Bible shines light on God and God's kingdom from a

different angle. God used all the authors of these biblical texts to express some form of Child Theology.

Therefore, it can be dangerous to take only one biblical passage as the foundation for Child Theology as if it is the only instance that God used a child as a source of revelation or a sign of God's kingdom. It can so easily become an ideology, especially if you start to think it is the only basis for Child Theology. Taking the whole Bible into account can only enrich our understanding, and our doing, of Child Theology. The sad story is that, through the ages, these rich biblical perspectives had not much influence on theology. It seems as if 'Jesus's point of view disappeared almost immediately and remained eclipsed, except for a few moments in the long story of theology' (Berryman 2007:103).

■ The 'disappearance' of Child Theology

Although there were theologians throughout history that gave some attention to children in their work (cf. Bunge 2001 & Berryman 2009a), it seems that children became very much hidden in theology. Marcia Bunge (2001:3) writes: '[U]ntil very recently, issues related to children have tended to be marginal in almost every area of contemporary theology.' A few years later, in 2006 she (Bunge 2006) states:

Despite the rising concern for and curiosity about children, scholars of religion, theologians, and ethicists across religious lines have had little to say about children, and they have had little to contribute to the growing political and academic debates about children or our obligations to them. Many have not treated childhood as a topic meriting serious attention (p. 551)

What is even more disturbing is that children are also invisible in the different liberation theologies that developed over the years (cf. Botha 2012:10; Thatcher 2004:2). In Latin American liberation theology, the poor and destitute children hardly play a role in the formation of these

theologians' views. Black theology also does not include the experiences of the poor, marginalised, black children in Africa. Feminist theology is rarely informed by the cries of the suffering and marginalised girl child. Also in sexual, gay and lesbian theology, children are not really visible. It is ironic that all these theologies with a focus on the betterment of life for a specific group of people that are excluded by society, contributed to the exclusion and marginalisation of children in theology.

For too long theology has neglected children and made them almost invisible. In any other sphere of society child neglect is a crime 'except, apparently, in theology!' (Thatcher 2007a:1). The reasons for this history of the neglect and exclusion of children is complicated. Different scholars have identified different reasons for this situation. It is important to take cognisance of some of these reasons. It may help us to understand the need for Child Theologies that will transform theology and society by bringing liberation for children. It may even help us to discern which methodology to use when doing Child Theology.

Some factors contribution to the degeneration of Child Theology

It seems as if the process of neglecting children had already entered the theological arena during the early years of the emergence of the church. The first generation of Christians were so focussed on how to reach the pagans that they did not develop a theology on reaching or nurturing their own children (Kasdorf 1980:158). It contributed to the development of an attitude that childhood and children do not need much attention by theologians. Although the New Testament contains, in the Gospels, Jesus' actions towards children as well as his teachings in connection with children, it is a very small part of the Gospels. The rest of the New Testament also does not say much about children. In this regard Gundry-Volf (2001:48) states the following opinion: 'Although

there are a number of metaphorical references to children in the Epistles, they mention actual children rarely, and only in relation to parents.’ Gaventa (2008:324) underlines this view when she says: ‘The references to actual flesh-and-blood children who inhabit the Pauline communities are rare indeed.’ In his book about children in the early church, Strange (2004) seems to agree with the view of Kasdorf (1980) above, by expressing the following opinion:

When Jesus’ followers became a recognisable and organized movement in the first decades of the church’s existence, they were faced with huge and momentous issues: their relationship with Judaism, from which they were emerging; the terms on which Gentiles could enter the movement; forms of leadership and the status and acceptability of particular prominent figures. Among the issues facing the infant church was that of what to do about children. But if we are to judge from the amount of written material dealing with children which we find in the New Testament letters and in the writings of the first couple of centuries of the church’s life, we would have to say that it was not a problem which taxed the first Christians very greatly. Children and their place were not a focus of concern and discussion. (p. 66)

In the early church, other issues were much more important than children. According to Miller-McLemore (2003:xxii) this attitude still exists in contemporary theology because “[r]eal” theology in the last century focused on adults ... the door slammed shut on children as a respectable topic.’ Bunge (2001) echoes the same view, expressing the opinion that:

[A]s mothers took on more responsibility for the care and the moral and spiritual development of children, and as theologians focussed more attention on philosophical issues regarding method, religious education itself became ‘feminized’ and was seen somehow as ‘beneath’ the job of the serious systematic theologian. (p. 12)

Although with a different emphasis, Sims (2005) also expresses the above views by indicating that the subordination of children was the reason why they became marginalised in theology. He states:

First, children are subordinate in their societies and cultures by virtue of their relative dependence, powerlessness and inability to represent themselves. Second, children are subordinate in theoretical conceptualizations of childhood. (p. 11)

Behind the subordination of children, according to Sims (2005:11), lies the view that children are only important in church and society in terms of what they can become in the future. The implication is that children's becoming is much more important for the church and theology than their being. Sims (2005) formulated his view on this as follows:

Children generally have not been viewed as active agents in the process of interpreting, constructing, negotiating and defining their relationships, societies, cultures, families and churches. Theologically they have not been viewed as active, formative agents in their relationships with God, others, themselves, society and culture, but rather as passive recipients of formation for such relationships or as young, immature sinners in need of conversion. (p. 11)

Another theologian, Thatcher (2004:2–3), identifies six possible reasons for the disappearance of children in theology. These reasons are quoted here in his own words, with some of my own comments:

- '[T]he sheer 'power-over' of patriarchy, requiring obedience from children "in all things" (Col 3:20).' It is this 'power over' that led to what Sims called above the 'subordination of children'.
- '[T]he doctrine of original sin and preoccupation with the supernatural remedy for it, is hardly conducive to child-friendly ecclesial policy-making!' In stressing the doctrine of original sin, the many positive statements about children in the Bible can very easily become lost. This doctrine also contributed to many negative behaviours and practices towards children, especially in the Puritan and evangelical traditions. Children were even described as 'filthy bundles of original sin' or as 'young vipers' (Heywood 2001:22). Children were even 'compared to wild animals whose spirit needed to be broken in order that they might develop the humility and obedience which would lead them to be good Christians' (Clarke 2004:8). The dictum of Susanna Wesley in this

regard is well known: ‘In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will’ (in Heitzenrater 2001:279). This view of children resulted some times in very harsh discipline by parents because they wanted to “bend/the twig” into a religious shape’ (Heitzenrater 2001:280). In this regard Cunningham (1995:71) refers to the true story of a father in the USA who locked up his child for 48 hours without any food to convince him to confess his sin.

- ‘[T]he tradition displays an awkward ambivalence towards children.’ Clement of Alexandria viewed children as ‘the apex of Christian perfection.’ According to Aquinas children are ‘pre-rational, a *tabula rasa* to be schooled into the responsibilities and possibilities of adulthood.’ For Augustine children are ‘the prey of original sin and the fruit of the base sexual instincts, a reminder of mortality, and a distraction from the spiritual life.’ These different views do not provide a secure foundation for developing Child Theology. The last two views do not allow you to use children as hermeneutical lenses for interpreting scripture. They also do not allow any room for the agency of children.
- ‘[T]he changing category of childhood.’; If Philippe Ariès (1962) is correct that the concept of childhood only emerged in the 20th century, ‘earlier theologians may not have conceptualised childhood thoroughly because the concept of childhood did not exist to be given attention.’
- ‘[T]he absence of the category of experience ... within the sources of theology.’ It was only late in the 20th century, with the development of all sorts of liberation theologies that the experiences of black people, poor people and woman became a source for doing theology. Doing Child Theology requires that you listen to children’s experiences and take them into account in formulating any Child Theology. It seems that the above-mentioned liberation theologies paved the way for the recovery of Child Theology.

- ‘[T]he uses of children as an extrinsic metaphor for bringing into speech aspects of the adult relationship to God can end up demeaning children further.’ Some examples of this in scripture³ are:

¹But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴For when one says, ‘I follow Paul’, and another, ‘I follow Apollos’, are you not being merely human? (1 Cor 3:1–4)

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. (1 Cor 13:11)

Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. (1 Cor 14:20)

¹¹And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (Eph 4:11–14)

¹¹About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb 5:11–14)

It is impossible to do an in-depth exegesis of these verses here (cf. Aasgaard 2008:260–263; Grobelaar 2008:344–358). But what is clear in the above verses is that in the New Testament letters the metaphor of the child is used in a very different way than the way Jesus used it in the Gospels (cf. Aasgaard

3. The Holy Bible: English Standard Version is used in Chapter 2.

2008:272). In contrast with Jesus, the authors of the letters do not use it as a metaphor for faith and discipleship, but rather for spiritual immaturity, stating what faith should not be. Although the point of reference between these two different uses of the metaphor of the child is different, it is striking that Jesus never used this metaphor in a way that belittles children (Francis 1996:81). It seems as if two different understandings of childhood lie behind these contrasting statements. According to Thatcher (2007b), it seems as if Paul's use of this metaphor in 1 Corinthians:

[A]ssumes that being a child is an unenviable, provisional, and ignorant state to be left behind quickly and gladly. When the child/adult distinction is made into an analogy by being compared with the natural/spiritual distinction, the dismissive attitude to children becomes clearer. (p. 145)

In this, Paul is a child of his time, his view of children formed by his surrounding culture. In this regard, Aasgaard (2008:272) states that 'he sees children from the perspective of ancient patriarchy.'

This is also true of the verses from Ephesians and Hebrews quoted above. The authors use the metaphor of the child according to their surrounding Mediterranean culture. Together, the verses above create the impression that the early church's view of children was influenced more by the views of the society they were living in, rather than the new view of children portrayed in Jesus' life and teachings. Therefore, DeVries (2001) is probably correct with her statement that the early church viewed children as:

[W]eaker, subordinate members of the community of faith, whose physical, emotional, and spiritual immaturity render them objects of adult discipline but not bearers of spiritual insight or models of faith. (p. 167)

The following statement by Strange (2004) rings true:

Jesus invited his followers to look at children with new eyes. The writers of the New Testament letters used the image of the child in their description of discipleship in much more conventional ways. For them, children were persons under the authority

of parents, ready examples of immaturity and of potential for growth. All of these are quite legitimate ways of viewing children, but each one corresponds to the accepted perception of the children in society, rather than, as with Jesus, challenging that perception. (p. 69)

The different reasons for neglecting children in theology identified above, are stumbling blocks to overcome if we want children to take their rightful place in doing theology. Some changes in society and theology during the 20th century paved the way to the recovering of Child Theology in the 21st century.

■ Child Theology recovered

Two important changes that took place during the latter half of the 20th century met each other in the 21st century. The first has to do with the emergence of a new conception of childhood and the second with the growing tendency to do theology from the margins, developing in the process a new hermeneutics of liberation. It was in the meeting of these two strands that the recovering of Child Theology became possible.

■ Conceptualising childhood

Firstly, it was important that the way we think about children had to change, because how we handle children in society, the family, the church and even in theology, is directly linked with how we view children or think about them (Wyse 2004b:211). As a way of ordering our knowledge and understanding of children, we develop the social construct childhood (Archard 2004:25). As a social construct, it is not static, but dynamic; it changes over time and can differ from community to community and between different cultural and ethnic groups (Heywood 2001:4, 9); it varies 'culturally and historically' (Asbridge 2009:2). Mercer's (2005) opinion is that:

[E]very society, culture, and historical period constructs and embodies its own peculiar understanding of childhood. Amidst competing perspectives of what a child is certain understandings rise up when they find support from dominant social, political, economic, and religious trends that reinforce them. (p. 4)

With regard to our thinking about children, Archard (2004:27–29) makes the very important distinction between ‘concept’ and ‘conception’. Archard (2004) explains the difference between these two terms as follows:

In simple terms, to have a concept of ‘childhood’ is to recognise that children differ interestingly from adults; to have a conception of childhood is to have a view of what those interesting differences are. I have the concept of childhood if, in my behaviour towards children and the way I talk about them, I display a clear recognition that they are at a distinct and interestingly different stage of their lives from adults. I have a particular conception of childhood in so far as my treatment of children and discourse concerning them reveals a particular view of what specifically distinguishes children from adults. (pp. 27–28)

The implication is that there exists a universal concept that children are different from adults. According to Asbridge (2009:4–5), childhood is usually defined in terms of what children are not in comparison to adults. Children are ‘not-yet-adults’ or ‘adults-to-be’, and inevitably this model leads to a view of children emphasising how deficient they are when compared to adults. The norm for personhood becomes adulthood, and the result is that children are seen as people with less ‘worth’ than adults.

In different cultures, social and historical contexts, diverse *conceptions* of how exactly this difference(s) between children and adults can be described, developed. For example, Clarke (2004) describes the difference between the conceptions of the Middle Ages and modern times as follows:

Put simply, in medieval society young people about the age of seven moved out of the protection of the family into a broader adult society where they acted as smaller versions of the adults around them. By contrast, in modern society the age of seven marked a gradual move from infancy to childhood, which was a special state of

transition, neither infant nor adult, around which the whole structure of the family revolved. The modern world was characterized by a separate isolated family unit which was centred on the needs of the child. (p. 4)

In this transitional stage, the education of children in the family and schools was emphasised. It was especially the English philosopher John Locke who had a huge influence in establishing the conception of children as *tabula rasa* or 'Wax, to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases' (Heywood 2001:23). With the publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* in 1762, the conception of children as innocent was introduced. The influence of Rousseau led to a growing positive interest in children and an understanding of childhood (cf. Cunningham 1995:65–69; Van Crombrugge 2004:717–719). This conception of childhood grew under the influence of the Romanticism to one of the dominant conceptions of childhood in history.

Behind this conception lies an agricultural image. Children are seen as growing plants. Although they have to receive some care, they have, like a seed, the inherent potential to grow and develop according to their own natural dynamic (Elkind 1989:23; Osmer 2000:514). Actually, the care does not influence this process of growth. It only creates the space for the potential to unfold and to grow naturally.

The Industrial Revolution challenged this conception because it differed so much from the brutal reality children were exposed to. Child labour practices were harsh, and the realities of the living conditions of their poor communities that developed in the growing industrial cities were not easy (Clarke 2004:8–9; cf. Cunningham 1991). But it was actually this romantic conception of childhood that started the new era of 'child-saving' activities. It was driven by 'a new concern to save children so they might enjoy childhood' (Alaimo 2002:12). It led to many new programmes of reform

(cf. Cunningham 1995:134–162) and pressurising of the government to protect children with new laws (Cunningham 1991:5). ‘By the end of the nineteenth century ... the idea of child-centeredness as a key focus for policy development had firmly taken root’ (Clarke 2004:9–10). During the 20th century this idea contributed to a growing interest in children’s rights and various initiatives to establish the rights of children legally. It culminated in the acceptance of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* by the United Nations in 1989. Cohen (2002:49) states about this historical moment that after ‘centuries of being dismissed, ignored, manipulated and looked upon as “objects”, children were finally granted legal recognition as “persons”.’

Alaimo (2002) gives a very good description of the changes that took place in our conceptions of childhood up to this point, when he states:

In early modern times (1500–1750) the image of children as wilful and tending toward sinfulness supports a climate of strict discipline and punishment that afforded only the barest form of protection against gross abuse. As the image of childhood innocence and dependency deepened in the nineteenth century, adults made extensive efforts to protect and care for children, going so far as to use public and private organizations to intervene in the close world of the family. In the later twentieth century, awareness of the evolving capacity of children (in contrast to a fixed state of dependency and assumed incompetence) has led to a more liberal view of their autonomy and rights-bearing potential. (p. 3)

In the initial phases of the children’s rights approach to the conception of childhood, the protection rights of children were hugely stressed. However, gradually more and more emphasis was placed on children’s rights to participation. In this process, children are more and more recognised as social actors in their own right and their agencies are acknowledged. The implication of this new conception of childhood for theology and the church is clear: Children should also be accepted as agents of faith and as participators in doing theology.

All the conceptions of childhood discussed above are still based on ‘what adults think of children rather than how children experience childhood’ (Asbridge 2009:17). The first national independent research into childhood in the UK based on the experiences of children was undertaken in 2006, and children from all walks of life, including many marginalised groups, took part in this research.⁴ It was the beginning of an ongoing collaboration research project between the Children’s Society and the University of York consisting of cycles of research and the publication of regular reports. The research focussed on children’s understanding of the most important factors contributing to having a good life. Asbridge (2009) states the initial findings of this research in its early phases as follows:

Looking at childhood *through the eyes of a child* we see a model of the child as a complete person (‘self’), although still learning and growing. They see themselves as active participants in relationship with adults (as well as their peers) in a variety of environments. They have a sense of self, values and an understanding of their relationship to the environment and others that is not necessarily dependent upon the instruction, interpretation or mediation of adults. (p. 18)

In the first report on this research, Dunn and Layard (2009:152) say that it became clear that ‘[c]hildren are not “incomplete adults”.’ They see themselves as people that can make their own important contributions to life and the relationships in which they stand.

Doing theology from the margins

The conception of the agency of childhood and the participation rights of children was an important step in the direction of recovering Child Theology. However, another important change was needed for the actualisation of this possibility: a change in the way we are doing theology. A new hermeneutics was needed. It is a fact of history that ‘a new

.....
4. <http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/good-childhood-inquiry>

hermeneutic has always arisen with the foregrounding of marginalised categories of people and issues' (Botha 2012:4).

For a very long time the Bible was read and interpreted for people. Under the influence of modernism with its strong positivistic orientation, theology became the enterprise of only the 'learned' and 'professional' theologians. They performed theology in a rational and academic manner, giving expression to their ideas in a critical, scientific way in books and dissertations stored in libraries. This type of theology had less and less relevance for the laity and their everyday struggles (Mead 1991:56). It was performed mostly by male Euro-American academics who dominated the theology and church domains with their theological 'wisdom'. They used their interpretation of the Bible to create social structures that turned their biases into societal norms which justified and legitimised oppression (cf. De La Torre 2013:loc. 121–122). In some places, like South Africa, they became so powerful that they motivated and formed the whole apartheid system and regime. Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz (in Adamo 2006:3) said that this type of theology 'is carried out abstractly and therefore leads to abstract results and truths, which are not related to any context.' In a sense, 'theology has become a classroom exercise' (Mead 1991:56) with less and less relevance for life outside the classroom.

The truth is, however, that Euro-American theology was not done without any context. Their specific social location, or cultural experiences, which formed their personal identity determined their approach to the Bible (cf. De La Torre 2013:loc. 131–132). The scientific academic theology they created was the result of the modernistic context in which they operated. Rightly, West (2006) states:

All interpretations of the Bible are contextual ... readers always bring their concerns and questions to their readings of the Bible, even if they are scholarly questions and concerns. Our contexts, therefore, always shape our reading practice. (p. 399)

The problem with Euro-American theology was rather that it became, in many ways, an ivory-tower academic and scientific theology which was not linked to the everyday realities and challenges of the people. In the process they lost sight of the disenfranchised and oppressed people who were seeking liberation from the very power structures which Euro-American theology kept in place. It became theology 'from-above' (Bosch 1991:423), handed down autocratically to the people.

What was needed in this situation was more contextual Bible reading that operated with a contextual Bible hermeneutics (Adamo 2006:3). Or, as Botha (2012) described it:

A theology from below which is inductive in nature, breaks with the dominant epistemological approach of Western science, philosophy and theology that are aimed at legitimising the status quo and protecting the interests of the West. (p. 9)

Eventually, the turn came. More and more, theology was raised from another angle, from below, or perhaps better expressed as 'ground-up', to avoid any hierarchical structure working from above or beneath (Van den Berg & Pienaar 2005:98–99); theology on the part of the marginalised, the voiceless and oppressed. Liberation theology. Black theology. Feminist theology. In this process, doing theology changed dramatically.

Children and theology meet each other

It was in this changed context of doing theology and thinking about children, that theology and children met each other at the beginning of the 21st century (White & Willmer 2006):

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. (p. 19)

Although, as discussed above, it was not a new type of theology but recovering a theology already present in the Bible, a new terminology was born: Child Theology. Or, as Jerome Berryman (2007:103) puts it: ‘An old and spare genre of theology has reappeared with energy and insight.’

■ Defining Child Theology

■ A preliminary definition

The question now is: Precisely what is Child Theology? It is not so easy to define this new concept. One definition, according to White & Willmer (2006) and associated with the Child Theology Movement (CTM), is:

Child Theology is an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology – historical, biblical, systematic – in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of his disciples. The child is like a lens through which some aspects of God and his [*sic*] revelation can be seen more clearly. Or, if you like, the child is like a light that throws existing theology into new relief. (p. 6)

This view of Child Theology is echoed by Marcia Bunge (2006:574) when she states: ‘The lens of the child ... can also help re-examine central beliefs and practices of a religious tradition and expose some of its neglected or distorted elements.’

The implication of these definitions is that Child Theology is, in essence, an endeavour to think afresh about God and God’s involvement in this world by taking children into account in formulating, or reformulating, theology. It seems as if the central question in this definition is: In what way do we have to change and reformulate our current theological views and faith practices when we revisit them through the eyes and life experiences of children? What new insights do we gain? From this interpretation of the above definition it is clear that the focus of Child

Theology is God and not the children. And that is the correct focus. All theology is about God and God's revelation.

■ A nagging question

However, a nagging question remains: What about the children? This is not just an academic question. It is also not just a question about definition. It is question about identity. What *is* Child Theology?

Without making a caricature of Child Theology, there are a number of factors to take into account in answering this question. Moreover, let me state it clearly that I am immensely indebted to CTM in my personal thinking, as expressed in my first work on Child Theology (Grobbelaar 2012). I have the highest respect for people taking the lead in this movement such as Marcia Bunge, Sunny Tan, Bill Prevette, Keith White and Haddon Willmer. When I ask questions or make remarks that sound critical of Child Theology as expressed in CTM, they are questions and critique that I put to myself.

□ 'The child' as lens

The first factor to attend to is the formulation that 'the child' is a lens, or light, or even a pointer when doing Child Theology. There is room for such an approach, for example in Biblical studies, by keeping in mind the 21st century concerns, struggles, contexts, challenges, questions concerning children and childhood in the interpretation of biblical texts, both directly linked with children but also all other biblical texts (cf. Bunge 2008:xviii). However, what does the expression 'the child as lens' really mean? Where does this 'the child' exist? Using 'the child' seems to create the impression that 'the child' is only an abstraction, a child that does not exist. The use of

words like lens in connection with ‘the child’ contributes to this impression: ‘The child’ tends to become only an object or instrument, an analytical tool, a utility in the hands of adults to serve, hopefully improving and liberating, their own thinking about God and God’s kingdom. In the process, children tend to become only a means to achieve a goal: a better understanding of God and God’s kingdom. But the important question to ask is: Can such a theology really be called Child Theology if children are only lenses? Is it not, in a sense, degrading for children? They are, and can offer, so much more than only being lenses to be used by adults in their own theological thinking for merely achieving a better understanding. In the process of becoming only an intellectual tool, the real children are again sidelined.

□ **Similarity with liberation theologies**

Another factor to take into consideration is that, although Child Theology is sometimes described as, in many ways, similar to liberation theology and feminist theology (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:9–19; White & Willmer 2006:18–19), this description does not really fit. In liberation theologies, it is usually the people to whom this particular liberation theology desires to bring liberation who are the subjects of that theology. In liberation theology in South America it is the poor people who are doing feminist theology. In Black theology it is black oppressed people who are doing Black theology in reaction to colonialisation and some aspects of the mission history in Africa. In feminist theology it is women who are doing this type of theology to overcome gender bias in church and society. The moment one uses the concept Child Theology, it creates the impression that it is similar to other liberation theologies and is thus theology done by children. However, at this moment in time, this is seldom the case.

Child Theology is mostly used for describing theology done by adults who try to take children, in one way or another, into consideration in their theologising. It is adults 'playing thought games', theologising with each other about another, in this case, children. It is an adult exercise in which the actual voices of children are silent, and any new perspectives come only from the worlds of adults.

This situation confronts us with an important question: How does one take children and their real contextual realities and experiences into account if they are not present and part of the process of doing theology? It is a very difficult questions to answer. Some options have been considered since the beginning of Child Theology. One option to consider is that we were all children at some stage and have diverse experiences of being a child. The only problem is that we are no longer children and our memories are very selective, have faded and cannot always be trusted. Another option is to rely on the fact that we all have, more or less, experiences with children in our everyday lives. However, the moment we use our day to day experiences in our process of doing theology it is our subjective interpretations of what we have experienced with children, and not their authentic voices that become part of the process. A third option is to use true life stories about children, for example the experimental methodology developed by CTM (ed. Collier 2009:179–219; Willmer 2007). Although these stories can have a good influence on our theology, it is still second-hand, influenced by our memory and filtered by our own interpretations of how we think children experience their life situations. This situation raises another important question: How do we prevent Child Theology from becoming adult theology that is only informed by adults and not by children? White and Willmer (2006:19) admit that '[h]ow children and young people have been, are and will be engaged in the process is one of the more pressing issues CTM faces.'

□ Child Theology and the lives of children

A third aspect to attend to is the question: How does Child Theology influence, or change the lives of children? Does it in any way touch the lives of children? It is true that Child Theology is not children's ministry or childcare, and does not even provide a theological basis for children's ministry or childcare. However, it seems that if one takes Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18:1–14 into account in one's thinking about Child Theology (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:307–335; Willmer & White 2013), one cannot stop at the interpretation that Jesus used the child just as a sign of his kingdom. What happened here is much more than that. Jesus also wanted to change the lives of the vulnerable and oppressed children in his surrounding society. To achieve this goal, he wanted to use his disciples.

The role of the child as a model of discipleship in Matthew 18:3–4 changed in verse 5. The child became an object of action, or service, or care. The disciples had to look after the children who had been mistreated and ignored by society, and who were marginalised and unimportant human beings in their society at that stage of their lives. Children's importance for the adult society in the here and now was determined by the labour they could provide for the family to survive amidst the everyday challenges they had experienced as poor subsistence farmers (cf. Botha 2000:67; Malina, Joubert & Van der Watt 1995:12). In actual fact, the real importance of children was vested only in what they could become in the future, 'in the promise of maturity (as heir, producer of wealth, defender of the nation, or bearer of more children)' (Maas 2000:457), and especially how 'they could support their parents in old age and attend to their burial' (Carroll 2001:122) According to Matthew 18:5, Jesus encouraged his disciples to receive and to welcome these not valued and marginalised children in Jesus' name.

To receive the children in Jesus' name, means much more than just saying 'welcome' to them. In this context 'welcome' implies hospitality, to be hospitable towards the children (Hagner 1995:522; Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:92; Weber 1979:50). Strange (2004:54) is of the opinion that 'welcome' in all probability implies that the disciples had to serve children willingly and, therefore, to attend to all their needs. They had to do it in the name of Jesus; that is, as Jesus' representatives. They would have to treat the children in the way Jesus would serve them. Even more so, they would have to treat the children as if they were Jesus, because when they welcomed such a child they welcomed Jesus into their lives.

In Matthew 18:6–9, Jesus stated the same principle in the negative form. He underlined the importance of welcoming children by stressing what the disciples should not do to them. Welcoming the children implies that the disciples should not be a stumbling block for the children. They should be very careful not to let them sin. They would even have to change things in their own lives if they, in any way would influence children to sin. Although the text does not say it explicitly, it would not be far-fetched to deduce from these verses, in conjunction with Matthew 18:5, that the disciples were also called to prevent or even change those things in society which could be the cause that children could stumble and sin.

In Matthew 18:12–14 another dimension is added to the act of welcoming children. According to Van Aarde (2004):

[T]he metaphorical use of 'sheep' in Matthew 18:12 correlates with the expressions ... 'the little children' in Matthew 18:3–5, as well as with 'the little ones' in Matthew 18:6, 10, 14. (p. 136)

Here, it is correct to accept that the sheep that wanders away refers to the children that the disciples have to welcome according to Matthew 18:5.

The implication is that Jesus cares so much for the children that he does not want one of them to become lost. It is this same care towards children that Jesus expected from his disciples. Therefore, welcoming the children also implies that when one of them wandered away or went astray, the disciples should also search for them. They should return them into the welcoming safety of the fold.

From the above it is clear that Jesus expects his disciples to do at least three things for children (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:341):

- welcome or receive them
- protect them against sinning
- not allow anyone of them to become lost.

To live in their society with children in this changed way, it was necessary that the disciples had to oppose their culture's accepted view of children and establish a new way of handling children. It seems that in Matthew 18:1–14 Jesus did not only want to change his disciples and save them from their longing for power, but that he also wanted to teach them to liberate the children from the oppression they experienced at the hands of the adults in their society. From this we can deduct that Child Theology cannot only be a search for a better understanding of God and God's kingdom, but should always have a liberating effect for children in their various contexts. Child Theology and activism goes hand in hand. Correctly, Willmer and White (2013:36) warn against activism that 'becomes a workaholic fanaticism, despising and rejecting anything not directly useful to the project.' Such activism lacks theological reflection (Willmer & White 2013:37). However, it is equally dangerous merely to reflect theologically about children in your armchair without being involved in some action on behalf of, and with, children. It seems as if theological reflection and theologically motivated liberating action are weaved into each other in

Matthew 18:1–14, and that the one cannot exist without the other. In that sense, Child Theology is liberation theology. Rightfully, Sturm had already said in 1992:

Given their condition throughout the world, children are deserving of their own form of a theology of liberation as a means of giving voice to their suffering and, in turn, articulating the character of their rights. (p. 1)

But do children want liberation? Liberation for children is not something that adults can dish out for children. Gustavo Gutierrez (1973) underlines this view by stating:

We will have an authentic theology of liberation only when the oppressed themselves can freely raise their voice and express themselves directly and creatively in society and in the heart of the People of God, when they themselves ‘account for the hope’ which they bear, when they are the protagonists of their own liberation. (p. 174)

The implication is that liberation theology can only be genuinely liberative if it is formulated and performed by people that wish to be liberated. In the case of Child Theology, as long as adults are doing and controlling Child Theology, it is inauthentic. It can only become real liberating theology for children if children are personally involved in doing Child Theology. Therefore, Child Theology has to become doing theology, not just about or for children, but with and by children. As long as it is done only by adults it will tend to be only self-centred adultism.

■ Changing our way of doing Child Theology

Before we can do theology with children another big transformation has to take place in the lives of adults: we will have to overcome the view of the inadequacy of children to be theologians. Botha (2012) describes this change as an epistemological break.

■ A changed epistemology

Doing Child Theology requires us to understand and accept an entirely different way of knowing and of obtaining knowledge, especially of God and God's kingdom (cf. Botha 2012:1). This requires us to accept children as agents of faith and as sources of revelation as illustrated in Matthew 21:12–17 (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:306, 307).

All the Gospels contain the story of the cleansing of the temple. However, Matthew is the only one that adds Jesus' healing of the blind and the lame and the shouting of the children: 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' (Mt 21:15). Matthew describes that the reaction of the chief priests and the scribes was indignant, and they said to Jesus: 'Do you hear what these are saying?' (Mt 21:15–16). Jesus' reaction was: 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise?"' (Mt 21:16). These words of Jesus can be interpreted, as did Zuck (1996:216), that 'rather than the children's praises being impertinent, it was entirely fitting – far more appropriate, in fact, than the squabbles of the religious elite!'

With his pronouncement Jesus is, in fact, referring to Psalm 8:2 where the poet says: 'Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.' It is interesting that the babies and infants are here doing what we usually think they are not capable of doing. They sing the praises of the Lord; they establish God's strength. The Old Testament (OT) scholar Kraus (1988) says the following about this strange expression:

The content of this verse is in the OT without even the remotest parallel passage. Therefore, it does not surprise us when this statement is regarded as strange, sometimes even as a foreign element. But all emendations are of no avail. We must hazard an interpretation. (p. 181)

How must we understand the words ‘babies and infants’? According to Mngqibisa (2006:130), the Hebrew words are synonyms because ‘both of them carry the same meaning, namely, *children, nursing infants, sucklings*.’ Old Testament scholars also differ over the interpretation of these words. Some interpret it as being literal and other as figurative speech (Mngqibisa 2006:130). The Reformed Church Father, John Calvin (n.d.:120), previously said that these words cannot be understood allegorically, as referring to the faithful. God really uses babies (sucklings), who are not able to utter any understandable words, to sing God’s praises. Calvin (n.d.) wrote:

[T]hat God, in order to commend his providence, has no need of the powerful eloquence of rhetoricians, nor even of distinct and formed language, because the tongues of infants, although they do not as yet speak, are ready and eloquent enough to celebrate it. (p. 120)

The children’s tongues have a remarkable influence. It ‘still [*sic*] the enemy and the avenger’ (Ps 8:2). Calvin (n.d.:122) was even convinced that the Hebrew words should be translated much stronger, namely as ‘the military phrase, *to put to flight*’. He (Calvin n.d) even wrote:

These are the invincible champions of God who, when it comes to the conflict, can easily scatter and discomfit the whole host of the wicked despisers of God, and those who have abandoned themselves to impiety. (p.121)

Faber van der Meulen (1996:379) says that the implication of this verse is that even a child can be a partner of God and can serve God with power and influence. God does not need powerful and influential people to obtain the victory over the enemies of God.

Through the weakness of babies and infants God can overcome his strongest enemies, even infants, who hang upon their mother’s breasts, can bring down to the ground the fury of the enemies of God (Calvin n.d.:122).

It is exactly what happens here at the temple. Against God’s enemies, the children proclaim the praises of Jesus.

In this proclamation, the children show tremendous insight. They reveal who Jesus really is by praising him as the Son of David. It is, in fact, very ironic (Gundry-Volf 2001; cf. Thatcher 2007b:62):

The chief priests and scribes, who, of all people, are in a position as religiously trained Jewish adults to see the significance of Jesus' deeds, recognize him as the Messiah, and lead the people in acclaiming him, do not do so; rather, the children, who are ignorant and untrained in religious matters and the least likely to play this role, in fact take it up. (p. 47)

Jesus' words of thanks to his Father in Matthew 11:25–26, became literally true here at the temple:

[I] thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. (Mt 11:25–26)

Children, who are not inevitably wise and learned, confess over and against the religious wise and learned leaders who Jesus is because God reveals it in and through them.

In this story, an important perspective about God and his work in this world comes to the fore (Thatcher 2007b):

Children have a capacity for knowledge of God and Matthew knows this. He depicts them as intuiting who Jesus is, and he depicts their intuition as prophesied by scripture and warranted by God. (p. 63)

In modern times, adults usually see and treat children as people who they have to teach about God and scripture instead of accepting and treating them as people who are also servants of God's grace and teachers of God's Word to adults. Children are also ministers of the Gospel and God can use them to reveal Godself to adults and other children. Maybe, as Prevette (in Botha 2012:5) expressed it, they could 'be pointers to something we have yet to understand in the Kingdom of God?', as in the case of the disciples in Matthew 18:1–14 and for the religious leaders in Matthew 21:12–16.

This is precisely what we need in Child Theology: A new epistemology in which children are fully accepted as God's agents of faith and sources of revelation, as Jesus' representatives in our lives (Mt 18:5), on par with adult believers. (cf. Bunge 2011:26–28).

To accept this new epistemology with its accompanying methodology of doing theology requires a very deep spiritual and intellectual conversion (cf. West 2006:401) from theologians and every other adult person, just as Jesus expected from his disciples in Matthew 18:3. A part of this call to conversion is repenting. Adults, especially academic theologians, have to repent and turn away from the historical tendency to value the interpretations made by adults as the most important theological truths. All children, especially the many marginalised children of our world, have to be included as an integrated part of our doing theology. In reaching this goal adult academic theologians also need a role conversion. They have to be schooled from being academic teachers to facilitators that enable participatory theological thinking between children and adults (cf. West 2016:245).

Botha (2012:7) suggests that such an epistemology can only develop if adults will join children where they are, in their everyday real world. The truth is that we can only join children in their world if we are properly prepared and committed to listening to them and learning from them (cf. Botha 2012:7), to allow them to self-determine their theological insights, reflections and formulations. Adults, Botha (2012:7) suggests 'should learn to see through their ears.' For this epistemological break to succeed, Botha (2012) discusses the following requirements:

We shall have to develop a theology 'which is inductive in nature' and 'breaks with the dominant epistemological approach of Western science, philosophy and theology that are aimed at legitimising the status quo and protecting the interests of the West' (p. 9).

We shall have ‘to perceive of the world not as a static object only to be explained, but as a reality to be changed’ (p. 9).

We shall have to commit ourselves to practice a theology from below in which children are always the ‘interpretive key’ (p. 9).

We shall have to accept that ‘a theology from below is a “doing” theology, i.e. a theology informed by a hermeneutic of the deed’ (p. 9).

Maybe, the most important and difficult change that has to take place is adults’ view and use of power. It is a fact of life that, in relation to children, adults are sitting in the power seats.

The adult, merely by being an adult, dominates the discussion’s questions and answers by his or her physical size, perspective taking ability, experience, emotional authority, cognitive development, physical control, and in other ways – many of which work at an unconscious level. (Berryman 2013:loc. 4258-4260)

Berryman (2013:loc. 4260) is of the opinion that this power difference is experienced as a ‘double bind’ by both adults and children. On the adults’ side, this binding involves teaching. Berryman (2013) states:

What the adult says about God teaches both by its form and content, even when the adult does not mean to teach and values children’s freedom to express themselves in their own terms. At the same time the adult has an ethical duty to teach the art of how to use the best language possible in the best possible way for such discussions. (loc. 4261–4263)

From the children’s perspective, this binding involves language. Furthermore, (Berryman 2013):

[I]f children acquiesce to the adult’s language, whatever it may be, they will have to give up not only the language that they are attempting to make meaning with, but also the immediacy of God that has been experienced. On the other hand, if children do not acquiesce to the adult’s preferred language they risk alienating the adult. (loc. 4264–4266)

Therefore, the big challenge to the adult theologian is to handle both these respective double binds in such creative and constructive ways as to create

a conversational atmosphere that will express ‘as much equality and truth as possible’ (Berryman 2013:loc. 4255–4256). Berryman (2013:loc. 4277–4308) discusses some practical strategies to cope with this power difference, which include the following:

- Always sit in a circle to create community.
- Use physical artefacts which children can move around with their hands to express their ideas.
- Theologising with the children is seen as a spiritual, not an academic, practice for the benefit of both children and adult(s).
- Asking wondering questions which no adult can answer on behalf of children instead of Socratic questions.

There is also another aspect of this power-relationship between children and adults that needs consideration. Adults can very easily use their power to rule over others, to oppress them, to better their own situation and privileges. Alternatively, they can use it in another way: To give away the power by empowering others, to empower children to take up the opportunity to do their own liberating theology. This is a liberative use of power. About this type of power Wartenberg (1991) says that:

[A] dominant agent exercises power over a subordinate agent for the latter’s benefit. However, the dominant agent’s aim is not simply to act for the benefit of the subordinate agent; rather the dominant agent attempts to exercise his power in such a way that the subordinate agent learns certain skills that undercut the power differential between her and the dominant agent. The liberative use of power is a use of power that seeks to bring about its own obsolescence by means of the empowerment of the subordinate. (p. 184)

To this description of Wartenberg, Isasi-Diaz (1996) adds the following explanation:

In a liberative use of power, the learning of skills by the subordinate agent is a matter of taking power, of becoming self-defining and self-actualizing. It is precisely because

of this that the power of the dominant agent becomes obsolescent, non-operative.
(loc. 1759–1760)

One of the most important skills children have to learn is to find their own voices and to express themselves in relevant ways to communicate theologically. As part of the exercise of their power adults have, for too long, kept children trapped in a ‘culture of silence’ (cf. Freire 1985:72; Frostin 1988:10) when present in worship services and other church meetings. They have to be silent in our worship services, or, because we think their voices are only disturbances and we adults do not need their voices, we take them out of our worship services. This is a misuse of power with detrimental effects for both adults and children. It is one of the biggest challenges for Child Theology: To liberate children by teaching them the skills to break out of this culture of silence, to take the power and to grow to self-actualising, and in the process liberating adults from their self-centredness and the endangerment of their spiritual growth.

The big challenge is to express this liberative use of power in a changed methodology of doing Child Theology, which can truly be liberative for both children and adults.

A changed methodology

Taking all the above into account, attention can now be given to the challenge of developing a methodology for doing Child Theology that will concur with this new epistemological paradigm. One way of exercising it is to give attention to the work done by Gerald West (1999) on reading the Bible with the poor. One can also pay attention to the different worldwide initiatives to connect the various contexts of the marginalised (poor, black, women) readers of the Bible with the different contexts of the Bible, for example in community-based Bible study (West 2006:400–401). In an

article published by West (2016:237–242), he identified the core values of contextual Bible reading. Some of these values will now be discussed as core values, or pillars, for a methodology of doing theology that can also shape adults' reading of the Bible with children.

□ **Community**

Reading the Bible and performing theology with children begins and ends with community. Building community between adult theologians and children is essential for reading the Bible together; it is the fabric of the whole process. Without a good relationship with adult(s), children may not feel free to really express themselves truthfully and may hide their real thoughts and experiences. It may be true that '[t]he questions we pose to children shape their responses and adult preconceptions about children color the interpretation of these responses' (Bunge 2008:xxii) and makes it difficult to discover 'objective' facts or truths. However, if this is the only truth concerning the interaction between children and adults, then adults cannot do any research with children in any other scientific domain, for example in the social sciences. The implication is also that all adult ministry to, and with, children, even Christian education, is not possible because there is always the possibility that children's expressions of their thoughts will be tainted by the presence of an adult(s). The challenge is rather to find ways to overcome these possible problems. The best way to achieve this is to create meaningful community by building good relationships between children and adult theologians.

To enter the world of children by establishing a good relationship, it is of immense importance to learn and use the language of children. Landreth (2002:16) stated clearly that play is the language of children and toys are like words for them. Most academic, adult theologians are used to

expressing themselves verbally, logically and argumentatively. Children lack this capability and are unable to fully engage in verbal exchanges that require abstract thinking and reasoning until about the age of 11 (cf. Piaget 1962). For children play is, according to Landreth (2002:17) what verbalization is to the adult.

It is a medium of expressing feelings, exploring relationships, and self-fulfilment. Given the opportunity children will play out their feelings and needs in a manner or process of expression that is similar to that for adults. The dynamics of expression, and vehicle for communication are different for children but the expressions (fear, satisfaction, anger, happiness, frustration, contentment) are similar to those of adults. (p. 17)

To restrict reading the Bible and exercising Child Theology with children ‘to verbal expression is to deny the existence of the most graphic form of expression – activity’ (Landreth 2002:17). If this is true, then there are more activities to create community with children and to help them express their theological reflections. Therefore (Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2013):

[P]lay is not the only mode of communicating and connecting with children. Stories, music, humour, touch, protection, encouragement – in short activities reaching out to the hearts of children showing respect and fulfilling their needs – are all expressions of love that strengthens [*sic*] relationships and enhances growth. (p. 811)

Drawings may also be a very helpful way in this regard.

For many adults, and specifically for academic theologians who are used to practice their trade through good verbal skills, this communication transition may be very difficult. Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2013) are of the opinion that to make this communication transition:

[I]t requires freedom from adult preoccupations and reservations and a willingness to really humble yourself and become like a child. Social convention and cultural norms often make this difficult for adults. Adults are made to believe that they have outgrown childhood and that it is shameful to return to its habits and behaviour. This notions [*sic*] need to be challenged, however. (p. 811)

In fact, it is not so difficult to enter the world of children, because we have not really left the world of childhood behind us. Augustine (1991:40) expresses in *Confessions* 1.19 the opinion that adults only traded ‘nuts and balls and birds’ for ‘money and estates and servants.’ Therefore, it can be possible for adults to enter the world of children very naturally through the activity of play to create community and a safe place for children to express their theological thoughts and insights.

□ Collaboration

Reading the Bible with children is always a collaborative process. It is, in the first place, a collaboration between children and biblical scholars and theologians. They each bring a different way of reading the Bible to the table. Children (West 2007) have:

been ‘trained’ by their primary (for example, the family) and secondary (for example, the church and school) communities, whereas the scholarly reader has been trained by a tertiary community, the academy. (p. 2)

It may also be true that some of these children have not read the Bible before. Acknowledging this difference and handling these different interpretative skills in a constructive collaborative way can lead to creative and transformative interpretations and actions (cf. West 2007:2). It is important for the scholarly theologian to remember that the primary role of the scholar is not education but facilitation of a collaborative process of reading the Bible. The reading process is not to transfer the trained scholarly way of reading the Bible to children, but rather biblical reflection on their contextual issues.

The collaboration efforts in this reading process should stretch even further. Other adults from the community should also become involved in this liberative movement. Especially those involved in the daily struggles

of the children: teachers, social workers, business people, church members. The collaborative reading and interpretation of the Bible should lead to collaborative action in children's local struggles. All readers are engaged in what West (2007:5) calls an 'other-wise' reading of the Bible.

□ Contexts

Stability is not a characteristic of contexts. Contexts are very dynamic and change over time, sometimes dramatically. Moreover, in each context God is already present and working. In that sense, scripture is also already present in any context we enter. This fact makes every context always religious (cf. West 2016:241). With this view it is possible 'to avoid the false binary scripture/context. Theology never begins with scripture; it always begins with context, but a context that embodies particular interpretations of the Bible' (West 2016:241). In reading the Bible with children, who are the 'experts' of their context, we should allow them to analyse their context regarding their everyday experiences. Adults have to learn the different cultural, economic, political, religious, educational and social aspects of children's context, including the struggles, oppression, marginalisation and exclusion, as seen through the eyes of children.

Reading the Bible with children then becomes, in a certain sense, a reading against these realities, confronting the societal prejudice and oppression to which children are exposed. It is a reading, in a word coined by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012), against childism. In this regard, Young-Bruehl (2012:6) asks a very important question that one has to confront: 'Why have we refused to recognize prejudice against children as a prejudice; why have we refused to name that prejudice as we have named other prejudices – racism, sexism, ageism?' It is to confront all the prejudices against children in the different societies that Young-Bruehl (2012:8) uses

the word childism, in a sense as ‘an umbrella concept, a heuristic, and a synthesizer, and it can function as a guide for political action. It can help researchers connect a lot of dots.’

Young-Bruehl (2012) also raises the question:

How might we go about listening to the victims of childism as researchers [*theologians*] looking into racism, sexism, and homophobia learned to listen to the victims of those prejudices – including themselves? (p. 12)

Young-Bruehl’s (2012:12) clear answer is: ‘By consulting children and considering their viewpoints, we can help them understand their own experiences and prepare them to participate in the struggle against childism and other prejudices.’ That is exactly what collaborative reading of the Bible with children from a specific context in the safety of community desires to achieve: ‘[T]o look at all these prejudices from the side of God and the light the Bible can shed on it.’ It rereads and “wrestles” with the biblical text to bring forth life’ (West 2016:242) in the midst of the context the children are living in.

Methods and practical procedures to implement the above methodology

The goal of this chapter is not to formulate all methods and procedures to give expression to the methodology outlined above. More research has to be done on this topic. Rather, three possibilities to explore further are indicated here:

- The communal spiritual practice of dwelling on the Word through repeated reading and listening to a specific text in the Bible (cf. Keifert 2006:163), may be a good starting point for developing the spiritual (and research) practice of reading the Bible with children. The positive

influence of this method on the Southern African Partnership of Missional Churches is discussed in detail in an article by Marius Nel (2013). Although this method was used mostly with adult members of congregations with the specific goal to enhance the missional transformation of congregations, it seems that this method, with a few adaptations, could be very helpful in reading the Bible with children to stimulate their theological reflection and, in the process, develop Child Theology.

- Another possibility that needs our attention is the method of Christian education that was developed by Jerome Berryman (cf. 1995; 2009b), and which became known as Godly Play. Berryman (2013) describes the goal of Godly Play as:

[T]o nourish the spiritual practice of children and adults for the spiritual maturity of both and the theory of religious education upon which the method is based encourages ‘playful orthodoxy’, which deepens children’s roots in a particular religious tradition and at the same time stimulates them to be open to new experiences, new people, and new ways of thinking. (loc. 4274–4276)

According to Keith White (in eds. Campagnola & Collier 2004:27), Child Theology and Godly Play ‘have much in common, including a careful reading of children, childhood and child development, theological reflection and awareness, and a rooting of activity in social context, including church.’ White (in eds. Campagnola & Collier 2004:27) highlights that there are also important differences between the two, the most important being that the focus of Godly Play is children’s Christian education, whilst Child Theology, especially as practiced in CTM, rather focusses on gaining new insight into theological themes and practices by using the child as hermeneutical lens. Does that mean that the methods developed by Godly Play cannot be of value in doing Child Theology research with children? In the light

of the methodological approach for doing theology with children discussed above, it seems that Godly Play could be a very good method to develop for doing theology with children.

- In searching for applicable methods and procedures for doing Child Theology with children, we also have to give attention to the developments on doing research with children in the social sciences. There is much to learn from the social sciences, especially from participatory research with children. Considerable time was spent in the social sciences on the conversation whether or not it is necessary to develop methods of doing research with children that differ from the methods used with adults. More and more the view is emphasised that the guiding principle in all research is that methods ought to be appropriate for all research, and also for all participants (Punch 2002). The implication is that there is a movement more 'towards person-centred, rather than child-centred, methods' (Groundwater-Smith, Dockett & Bottrell 2015:103). Whilst child-friendly methods (Groundwater-Smith *et al.* 2015):

[S]eek to meet the interests and preferred communications modes of children and young people, it remains critical that researchers explore the benefits and challenges of any method, ensuring that those chosen are neither tokenistic nor patronising in their assumption that traditional methods are inappropriate. (p. 103)

The implication is that from the social sciences there are many methods available that can be considered in doing Child Theology with children. In choosing a method to use, the theological topic chosen to be investigated with children and the methodology described above, should be taken into account.

■ An illustrative story

I want to conclude this chapter by sharing a story based on a real experience: A story about children and adults doing theology together (cf. Grobbelaar

2008:17–18). Some people may think the story is not about doing Child Theology with children, but rather about ministry. I tend to differ. What happened in this story is deeply theological. It changed the theological thinking of the adults and the children. Moreover, through it we all gained a new understanding of God and God's kingdom.

It was a Sunday afternoon. As on most Sundays, our family looked forward to the meeting of our cell group. On our way to town, the three children giggled and whispered the whole time. They were very excited. In all probability my wife and I looked very funny to them. The children of the cell group had requested that we dress like children. That afternoon they would lead the meeting.

I wondered about what was lying ahead. Will the children be able to lead our meeting? Will the smaller children, really be up to it? What do they plan to do? Will it really be a spiritual blessing for the adults?

When we walked into the sitting room of Walter's house, everybody started laughing. I also started to laugh. How funny! Paul's cap was lopsided. Susan had strings of plaited hair. Elsa had even a painted freckled face. What a silly lot of adult-children.

All of us sat in a circle on the floor. Gerrit, one of the younger boys in our group, did a prayer. Then Willempie opened his Bible and started reading. It was like a fist hitting me in the face. Through Willempie's soft voice I heard God speaking to me:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' ²And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³and said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven' ⁵'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for

him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.’ (Mt 18:1–6)

It was a very confrontational moment. Sitting there, dressed like children, God confronted us through the children: ‘unless you turn’ (change) ...

Rina stood up: ‘Let us praise and worship the Lord. We are going to sing songs with movements. Everyone has to do all the movements with me.’ Then the music started. The children urged us to get up. We tried to do all the movements, but it was a struggle. We just could not keep up with the children. Our feet moved too slowly. Our arms and hands could not keep up with the rhythm. Slowly there was some progress. The movements became easier. It even became enjoyable to praise the Lord in this playful way. Could it be that God was smiling at us?

After the praise and worship, they gave us a piece of paper, face down. They also handed out crayons. Then they told us to turn the papers around and colour in the picture. When I turned my paper around it was as if I looked into the eyes of Jesus. It was a picture of Jesus, surrounded by children. We started to colour in our pictures. Then Kobus got up and opened his Bible. Whilst we were colouring in our pictures, he read:

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁵Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it’. ¹⁶And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them. (n.p.)

Hearing the text, whilst colouring in the picture, touched my heart. A new awareness of what happened in this story grew inside me. And suddenly I made a connection between the two biblical texts: I can receive the blessing of the Lord only after I have changed and become like a child.

Then we were asked to show our coloured-in pictures to each other. We had a good laugh, especially the children. It was clear: Mom and Dad's colouring-in skills are not as good as they always pretend them to be. Spontaneously we started talking about the pictures, the colours we used, what we experienced whilst listening to the text and colouring in the picture. We even started to share with one another with whom in the picture we could identify. Gradually, the realisation dawned upon me that we no longer just heard each other, but that we heard the voice of God.

Then someone asked: How can we as a group receive and bless children like Jesus? A few interesting suggestions were made. At the end we decided that we wanted to bless the sick children in the hospital. Each family undertook to buy or make a few presents for these children. We agreed together to take them to the hospital 3 weeks later and hand them out in the children's ward.

Whilst we were driving home, I felt ashamed about my thoughts during the week that we had taken a big chance in asking the children to lead the cell group meeting; that I had even thought that the meeting would probably not be much of a blessing for the adults. I had underestimated the agency of children and the grace of God. It was definitely a blessed meeting which changed some of my views of God and God's way of doing things in this world. Then I heard an excited voice from the back of the car: 'Daddy, do you also think it was a *cool* afternoon?'

Child theology in Africa: A new hermeneutics?

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■ Introduction

The thrust of Chapter 3 is to determine or answer the question whether Child Theology in Africa constitutes a new hermeneutics. By way of introduction, it could be appropriate to consider the position or status of a child in traditional Africa. In traditional African society the birth of a child is both physical and religious. In fact, the significance of this birth commences long before the real birth. The pregnant mother receives

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special treatment from family, relatives and even the community. Indeed, in most African societies, marriage is not fully recognised until the woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child⁵ (cf. Mahlangu 2014:33).

Having children in Africa is considered a validating factor in a marriage. A married woman who does not have children feels very miserable. The agonies of being childless are so immense that the woman stops at nothing to help herself bear children. Mbiti (1975) posits and captures the depth of such misery, pain and despair in the prayer articulated by a childless woman in Rwanda:

O *Imana* (the creator God) of Rwanda
 If only you would help me!
 O *Imana* of pity, *Imana* of my father's home (country)
 If only you would help me!
 O *Imana* ... if only you would help me just this once!
 O *Imana*, if only you would give me a homestead and children!
 I prostrate myself before you ...
 I cry to you: Give me offspring,
 Give me as you give to others
Imana what shall I do, where shall I go!
 I am in distress: where is the room for me
 O merciful, O *Imana* of mercy, help this once. (p. 86)

.....

5. In some societies, once the man discovers that the woman is pregnant he may not sleep with her until a few weeks or months after birth. Obviously this has little to do with physical considerations, but the woman is regarded as religiously or ceremonially unclean at this time. To the Ingessana people of Sudan – once a woman is pregnant she goes back to her home until a few weeks or months after delivery. This is a religious affair ... the firstborn baby must be born at his or her mother's place. For the Mao people of Kenya – once a woman is pregnant there is no direct communication between husband and wife (Mahlangu 2014:34). All these beliefs and rituals indicate the significance of the birth of a 'child', and the fact that even before a child is born 'religious' ceremonies are observed. Thus the birth of a child and the process of growing-up in Africa are religious processes in which the child is constantly flooded with religious activities and an attitude starting long before it is born. A child not only continues the physical line of life, but becomes involved in intense religious activities. Hence, the physical aspects of birth and the ceremonies that accompany pregnancy, birth and childhood, are regarded with religious feeling and experience – that another being has been born into a profoundly religious community and religious world.

Furthermore, Uka (1985) also maintains that childlessness is a huge problem in traditional Africa:

Hence every newly married couple look forward to having a child or children shortly after nine months of marriage, believing that they extend their life and immortalise their names especially through their male children. Children are the glory of marriage and in most African societies with a rural agricultural base, having many children is a highly prized achievement. This is one of the potent reasons why marrying more than one woman was upheld. Also providing many children provided a man with an enhanced social stature and much needed labour force. In fact, parents laboured to train their children in order that they might support them when they became old, weak and incapable of looking after themselves.⁶ (p. 190)

To further underscore the importance and centrality of children in Africa, amongst the Northern South Sotho (the Pedi) people of South Africa, the birth of a child is an event of great importance. Not only does it initiate a new member into a group, but in the case of a first child it confers on the mother (ostensibly on the father too) the status of parenthood which, for this tribe, is synonymous with attaining the full status of a woman or man. The birth of a child also concludes the obligations of the mother's group to the father and his group; it proves the manhood of the father and perpetuates his line. The rites connected with birth centre around the mother and the child. The mother is invested with a new status, and the child is accorded the status of a new member of the group (cf. Mahlangu 1999:53; Mönnig 1967:98).

6. Breutz (1991:75) discusses the child in relation to status. For instance, a man who is unmarried and has no children cannot assume the leadership of an extended family or a tribe, even if he is the legitimate successor by virtue of his birth. Mahlangu (2014:34) further alludes to the centrality of children in African traditional society. He contends that in Africa the ideal of life is to be venerated by one's own family members. The woman is not the only one stigmatised by childlessness, but the entire family. There is no way that the woman can redeem herself from this situation. This is unlike a man, who can redeem himself by marrying another woman who will bear children to him – provided the problem of procreation does not lie with him. Even then, his parents will agree with his wife that one of his brothers or a close relative should raise his family without him (the husband) knowing anything about it.

In the foregone introductory discussion, the author attempted to state that ‘child’ in traditional African society occupies a very important place and space. As a result of this, the researcher of this chapter intends to submit that ‘Child Theology’ can be a hermeneutical procedure and paradigm through which the biblical text can be read and interpreted. The crucial question in this case is: How should we understand the African conception of childhood? In the next section, the African understanding of childhood is discussed. In the process it will also be pointed out that though the child is important in Africa, children today face unprecedented abuses and hardships. Such a phenomenon cannot and should not escape the attention and focus of biblical critics and exegetes in Africa. Historically African scholars have always read scriptures in the light of current issues encountered by Africans – ‘Reading and interpreting the bible [sic], whether as an “ordinary” or “critical” reader, has always been strongly influenced and shaped by a person’s unique character and life-story’ (Kitzberger 1999). This is also applicable to the current situation of African children: Scripture should be read in the light of the contextual issues children encounter in everyday life on the African continent.

Thereafter, the authors will contend that ‘child’ as part of the family (reality and metaphor) is also a hermeneutical tool to read, interpret and analyse the biblical text in Africa. Stressing the importance of family in biblical criticism, Van der Watt (1997b:1) says: ‘The family imagery is the major way in which the relationship between God, Jesus and the believers are described.’ Lassen (1997) also contends that the family has played a significant role in the shaping of the Christian faith:

The family metaphors played an important role in the formation of early Christianity. Christian theology was centred upon filiation: God is the Father, Jesus the Son, the converts were the brothers and sisters of Christ and the true heirs of Abraham. (p. 103)

These pronouncements underline how important it is in biblical hermeneutics to take into account that a ‘child’ is part of the family.

In the last part of Chapter 3 an illustrative text (Jn 3:1–8) from the viewpoint of a Child Theology hermeneutics will be considered.

■ **Excursus – African traditional conceptions of ‘child’**

Child and childhood is historically, culturally and socially variable. It is a truism that ‘child’ and childhood are best understood within a cultural context and to attempt to universalise the concept child is a misinterpretation of the world of the child. Children and the notion of ‘child’ have been regarded in different historical epochs, in different cultures and in different social groups (cf. Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:233). This is also true of Africa. Africa has its own peculiar concepts of a ‘child’.

An important question in this regard is: How do we understand the concept ‘African’? Countless books, conference papers and articles about Africa, Africanism and Africans, were written without a clear attempt to state who, or what an African is. It is ostensibly taken for granted by the presenter or writer that the listener or reader share the same definition of the conception with him or her (Mahlangu 1999:30; 2014:4).

Several meanings and definitions could be advanced: the traditional indigenous people of the African continent; anybody who is committed to Africa; those who want to see the United States of Africa (Pan Africanists); black Africans; those living in Sub-Saharan Africa and having citizenship in Africa (the list can still continue). In his attempts to identify who an African is, Sundermeier (1998) states that:

[A]nyone encountering Africans will find that they are passionate lovers of life. They are not influenced by the philosophy of Plato, who questioned the phenomenological world that gave real ontological value only to the invisible. The philosophy of Descartes, who put a distance between human beings (*res cogitans*) and the world (*res extensa*) do not influence them. This led to the domination of nature and animals,

which were held in such contempt that in the end the cry of an animal was not valued more highly than the noise of the machine. Africans turn to this world in order to experience wholeness. (p. 9)

Anyanwu (1981) indicates some of the problems encountered when trying to define who an African is:

To define an African as a person born and bred of African stock is really a secular definition, because one then has to define African stock. On the other hand, by African we mean a person born and bred in the continent of Africa, then we have Africans of various types: Bushmen, Pygmies, Nilotics, Bantu, Berbers, Arabs and even Whites, and others. It is a biological fact that these physical types differ from each other in easily recognisable bodily characteristics. (p. 180)

The above-mentioned points suggest that the identity of who an African is, is not simplistic.

Writing more than a decade ago, Oosthuizen (1991:35) observed that 'although less than a third of Africa is considered to be urbanised, the process of secularisation or modernisation has been intensified.' Even before Oosthuizen, Mazrui (1980:8) pointed out that forces such as Christianity have tremendously impacted Africa (cf. Mazrui 1980:47; Tienou 1990:24). African philosophers and observers agree to the reality of this phenomenon. But another African reality is that the African people are still hanging on to their traditions and customs. Temples (1959:17f) maintains that even though the Africans are westernised or Christianised they 'will revert back to their behaviour whenever they are overtaken by moral lassitude, danger or suffering.' Oosthuizen (1991:35f) says that urbanisation is more of a 'mental construction than a material phenomenon.' Rauche (1996:21) states that concepts such as black consciousness, black power and black theology are important indicators that Africans are resisting Western influence and attempting to preserve their own identity. The African traditional community obviously has not yet transcended its 'mythological thought' patterns.

The belief in mystical powers is still a dominant phenomenon in Africa. For instance, the inauguration of Nelson Mandela as the first black State President of the Republic of South Africa in 1994 is a classic example. The first part of the ceremony, which included the oath by the President, gun salute and formal speeches, was observed according to Western standards, but the second part at the Paul Kruger Square in Pretoria was characterised and crowned by African traditional ceremonies and rituals.

In view of the above, our understanding is that an African is a person, whether living in the city or village, who is culturally and historically attached to Africa, who is committed to, and identifies with, Africa.

In the light of the above definition of who or what an African is, what, then, are the conceptions of 'child' amongst traditional Africans? Their view is closely linked to the African concept of personality and community. Menkiti (1979) contrasts the Western and African concepts of personality as follows:

[W]hereas most Western views of man abstract this or that feature of the core individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic which entitles aspiring of the description 'man' must have, this or that physical, psychological characteristics of an individual. Rather, man is defined by reference to the envioning community. One obvious conclusion to be drawn from this dictum is that, as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of individual life histories, whatever these may be and this primacy is meant to apply not only ontologically but also in regard to epistemic accessibility. It is in rootedness in an ongoing human community that the individual comes to see himself as a man. (p. 157)

Regarding community, Mahlangu (2014:52ff) states that a sense of community plays a very important role in African society. People are not surrounded by things but by beings. Their metaphorical world is loaded with beings. Humanity is basically family and community. From birth to

death and life hereafter, people are bound as communal beings to everyone around them, those still to be born, the living and the living dead. Therefore, ontological harmony is very important. The person is the centre of existence, not as an individual but as family and community. The conceptual link between self and community is the strongest force in traditional Africa. All people within a tribe ought to be related to each other. If two strangers meet, it is their duty to determine how they are related to each other. In South Africa we are acquainted with the so-called 'ubuntu ethic'. This is an important element in the African concept of self and community. It is the capacity to express compassion, justice, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building, maintaining and strengthening community. It is about the self being so rooted in the community that your personal identity is defined by what you give to the community – 'I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.' This can also be explained in terms of the expression or saying, '*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu – motho ke motho ka batho*', that is, it is through others that one attains selfhood.

The Shona (of Zimbabwe) greeting in the morning and at lunch time is an expression of this view:

Mangwani. Marara sei?

[Good morning. Did you sleep well?]

Ndarara, kana mararawo

[I slept well, if you slept well.]

Maswera sei?

[How has your day been?]

Ndaswera, kana maswerawo.

[My day has been good if your day has been good.]

The Zulu concept of self and community is also very interesting. It is informed by the belief in the origin of human beings. It is believed that

humankind originated as a group or family. As a clan they originated from the reeds. Therefore, the interests of the community come first, more importantly than those of the individual. This view of people is far removed from the Western individualistic view. Persons only become people within their cohabitation with others (cf. Boakye-Boateng 2010:107; Fayeni 2009:167).

The above view is also applicable to the conception 'child'. The traditional African conception of 'child' is thus located within a string of kinship and relatedness in community relationships. In Africa, a child is everybody's child. Characterised by a communalistic philosophy, traditional African communities place the child in close contact with a larger group, socialise the young within the group, and the group, in turn, has the responsibility towards the child. The child, in turn, responds by offering a duty towards not only the immediate family members but also the larger community. Thus, a reciprocal relationship prevails. The reciprocity principle entails values such as sharing resources, burden, and social responsibility. It also stresses mutual trust, mutual aid and caring for others and further includes interdependence, solidarity, reciprocal obligation and social harmony. The community demands that the child forsakes individual good in order to submit to the collective interests. This is opposed to the Western world view that attaches great importance to individual interest, autonomy, universality, natural rights and neutrality. The African communalistic world view rather stresses the common good, social practices and traditions, solidarity and social responsibility (cf. Daly 1994; Fayeni 2009; Hansungale 2005; Muyila 2006; Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:235; Oyeshile 2006:104).

Gbadegehin (1998:292) maintains that in order for one to comprehend the African conception of a child, it is useful to trace the coming-to-be of

the new member of the family, that is, birth. The new baby will arrive into the waiting hands of the elders of the household. The experienced elderly women in the household will see to it that the new baby is delivered safely and that the mother is not in danger after delivery. They introduce the baby into the family with cheerfulness, joy and prayers. From there on the new mother may not touch the child except when breastfeeding. In all these events, the importance of the new arrival as a unique individual is reconciled with his or her belonging to the family which decides his or her name but also has a duty to see his or her birth as a significant episode in its existence. Gbadegesin (1998) continues to state:

The meaning of this is that the child as an extension of the family tree, should be given a name that reflects his/her membership thereof, and it is expected that the name so given will guide and control the child by being a constant reminder to his/her or his/her membership of the family and the circumstances of his/her birth. (p. 292)

The African concept of 'child' is therefore closely tied to the concept of self and community.

Doing Child Theology in Africa, the above understanding of the conception child should always be taken into consideration. It is true that children come in an assortment of shapes, sizes and colours (Kilbourn 1996:5). They have different joys, expectations, hopes and dreams. God has uniquely designed each child in his own image and likeness – creating each one as an exciting bundle of potentiality. God has also intended the gift of childhood to be a special time for nurturing children's God-given gifts and abilities. With the help and encouragement of family, friends and extended family members, children should find childhood a time to discover the person God created them to be. Unfortunately, this is not the case with many children in South Africa and on the African continent. Piliyesi (2014:208) for instance brings to the fore the plight of the girl-child in Malawi. Girls in that country are inundated by issues such as

gender discrimination, domestic violence and sexual abuse. Adoo (2005) states that this problem is not only encountered in Malawi but throughout the African continent:

A girl in Africa faces a double sword from within and outside cultural values. In the past and even today she experiences multidimensional forms of discrimination. When a girl does not go to school her rights are abused under the veil of preservation of cultural values. When she is educated, her rights are criticized under the pretext that she does not fit into the cultural context or she is a feminist. Thus, new forms of marginalization continue to haunt the girl child in Africa. (p. 67)

In the article, *Karabo ya kereke mabapi le ditšhiwana le bana bao ba lego kotsing ka lebaka la HIV AIDS: Maikutlo a sedumedi sa ka pebeleng* [The church's response towards orphans and vulnerable children as a result of HIV/AIDS: A theological biblical perspective], Mahlangu (2011) contends that one of the most tragic and difficult challenges is the growing number of children who have lost their parents to HIV-related diseases. This crisis is both enormous and complex, affecting many millions of children (cf. Piot & Bellamy 2004:4ff). Maqoko (2006:iii) maintains that AIDS has done great damage to families and their children. In most cases, after their parents have died, these children remain under the care of the extended family and, in many cases, it is their grandparents who care for them. Children left orphaned by AIDS are too many and their needs have saturated the existing pool of community-based support. Deaths caused by AIDS leave children vulnerable, in great distress and poverty. Matteson (2008) has observed about orphans:

[W]e did not know that a child can grieve. We thought they were too small to understand what happened. We did not know that children go grieving for a long period. I never used to understand the behavior of orphans. (p. 11)

Research on orphans and other vulnerable children shows that many programmes have not adequately addressed their physical, cognitive,

emotional and psychological plight. Worse still, very little has been researched and published on the philosophical, theological and biblical basis for the church to respond to the needs of the orphans and vulnerable children (OVC).

■ Child Theology – An African contextual hermeneutics

As stated above, the history of biblical interpretation in Africa shows that it has always been with cognisance of the African context. Justin Ukpong's (2000:3ff) publication on the development and history of biblical interpretation in Africa is undoubtedly regarded as epoch-making for reading and interpreting the Bible in Africa (cf. Van Eck 2006). In this particular article, Ukpong (2000:3–18) surveys biblical studies in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly regarding the encounter between the biblical text and the African context. The article plots its developments since the 1930s in three phases. The first phase (1930–1970s) is characterised by a reactive and apologetic mode of engagement with its missionary history and the western academy. During this phase various African scholars attempted to legitimise African religion and culture through comparative studies. In a subsequent phase (1970s–1990s), the mode of interpretation took a more proactive tone, whilst still remaining within a reactive paradigm. In this phase the African context was increasingly used as a resource in the hermeneutical encounter as manifested in inculturation-evaluative methods and liberation hermeneutics (black theology and feminist hermeneutics). Ukpong refers to the period after 1990 as a proactive stance leading to the development of contextual Bible studies and inculturation approaches, which recognise the importance of the ordinary reader and make the African context the explicit subject of biblical

interpretation. Loba-Mkole (2007) is of the opinion that Ukpong's work launched the application of the method of inculturation biblical hermeneutics in Africa. Biblical interpretation in Africa, thus, has made bold strides which can be said to place it at the threshold of maturity.

In his article, Ukpong (2000) also contends that Africa can rightly be referred to as the cradle of systematic biblical interpretation in Christianity. The earliest such attempts can be traced to the city of Alexandria. He mentions names such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen and others who lived and worked in Africa (cf. Trigg 1988:21–23). Another equally significant publication is the book, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, trajectories and trends* (eds. West & Dube 2000). This was a culmination of a project that started in 1995 which seemed to have worked a major turning point for hermeneutics and exegesis in Africa. This collective book indicates not only the vitality of African biblical scholarship but its particularity in a variety of ways that link the biblical text to the African context (cf. Ukpong 2000:11). African biblical scholarship emphasises the 'inclusiveness in regard to interpretative communities in Africa (scholars, non-scholars, male and female, *children* [authors' insertion], rich and poor, clergy and laity, Christian and non-Christian)'. On the other hand, this 'inclusiveness' involves an extensive range of interpretative methods (historical-critical as well as literary approaches). In this variety of methods, inculturation hermeneutics or 'theologies of being' and liberation or 'theologies of bread' emerge as the main trends and constitute the most persuasive paradigms of African biblical scholarship (Le Marquand 2000:86; Loba-Mkole 2007:8; Loubser 2000:117; West 2000:34–35).

Another important milestone in studying hermeneutics in Africa was the publication of *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (Getui, Maluleke & Ukpong 2001). This publication was a first outcome of the

Hammanskraal Conference, which took place as a post-conference to the 54th General Meeting of *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societis* (SNTS) that was held at the University of Pretoria in August 1999. Peder Borgen (2001:1), a former President of SNTS, described this conference as a ‘necessary and important step’, which set in sharp focus the basic question of the relationship between the gospel and culture. Borgen underscored that the gospel must be noted in the culture of a people, which, theologically speaking, refers to an incarnation aspect of the Christian message. He (Borgen 2001:1; cf. Lategan 2001:295) continued to say:

[T]here was an awareness not only of this encounter between the Gospel and a particular culture, but also a realization of the universal perspective of the Gospel. There is a basic aspect of ‘givenness’ of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its interplay with culture and context. (p. 1)

A further development from the Hammanskraal conference was the publication of *Text and context* (Mugambi & Smit 2004). At this particular time, African contextual hermeneutics was enhanced by specific methodological approaches such as reconstruction hermeneutics (Farisani 2004:63–64), rainbow hermeneutics (Cloete 2004:170–175) and *ubuntu* hermeneutics (Punt 2002:90,101). Beyond this book, different African biblical hermeneutics are also investigated with regard to hermeneutics of liberation, hermeneutics of engagement, Afrocentric hermeneutics, *semoya* (spirit) hermeneutics, womanist hermeneutics, developmental hermeneutics, postcolonial hermeneutics and story-telling hermeneutics.

A further development of these paradigms is what Loba-Mkole (2007:20) refers to as ‘intercultural exegesis as a constructive dialogue between the original biblical culture and the culture of a receptive audience, taking into account cultures of Christian traditions as well.’ The epistemological privilege is not given only to the receptive audience but equally shared by the three sets of cultures involved in this dialogue. A

unique epistemological privilege is granted to the original biblical cultures because of their canonicity; the cultures of Christian traditions benefit from their particular elderliness; and the current target cultures are entitled to a peculiar epistemological privilege because of their present livingness in blood and flesh. Intercultural exegesis can also be better conveyed by the expression 'intercultural mediation' as the dialogical process under consideration involves not only literary works but also artistic symbols and human heroes who ensure the transmission of the gospel from one culture to another (Loba-Mkole 2005:2). In Africa, the epistemological value of intercultural mediation needs to be measured against authentic messages of Jesus and those of church traditions. This particular intercultural exegesis will first deal with some current understanding of the text before proceeding to its linguistic analysis and the study of its historical context. Finally, it should be stated that intercultural biblical exegesis has become a reality in Africa since the introduction of inculturation biblical hermeneutics by Ukpong (1996). The African context and people are not used just as a field of applying 'exegetical' conclusions, but they stand as a subject of interpretation, equipped with genuine epistemological privilege.

In this regard, it is also important to take cognisance of the work done by Antoine Chilumba (2001). He uses and applies, the concept of *Interkulturele Exegese* [intercultural exegesis]. Chilumba develops this method as a 'logical consequence' of his involvement in a school of intercultural theology at the Catholic faculties of Kinshasa. On the epistemological side, he grounds his intercultural exegesis on the philosophical hermeneutics of H-G. Gadamer and P. Ricoeur. In the process of understanding a text, both philosophers include the steps, precomprehension of the reader, fusion of the horizon of the reader and that of the text by the reader (Chilumba 2001:13–16). Besides, the Bible

itself is a living example of an intercultural hermeneutics between the Word of God and human cultures. Chilumba's mode of intercultural exegesis combines the study of literary structure, tradition and redaction, interpretation of the text and the analysis of the target context.

From the above discussion it is clear that African theologians never hesitated to address issues affecting sections of the population, such as the oppressed, women, HIV-infected and affected and the poor. It is in this context that it is argued that the plight of children in Africa presents a challenge to biblical scholarship in Africa. Despite the staggering magnitude of the crisis faced by children in Africa, there has been little theological reflection on children. Maluleke (2003:59) uses words such as 'theological impotency' and blames Western-orientated theological education which does not prepare African theologians for the day to day realities faced on the African Continent. When referring to the problems besetting Africa, Musa Dube (2001) symbolically portrays Africa as the bleeding woman.

Mama Africa has been struck by a new disease: HIV/AIDS. She is now a nurse. She runs home-based care centers, for her dying children and people. She washes them, feeds them, holds them in her arms, and rocks them, singing a little song while she waits [*sic*] their death. And when they finally die, she rises to close her eyes, to wrap them and bury them. Mama Africa bears it in her own flesh, the wounds of their suffering. And they die in her loving arms. (pp. 50ff)

Whilst biblical scholarship in Africa should remain true to its methodological practice and remain true to scientific objectivity, the plight of the African child cannot be ignored in its theological reflection. Therefore, Child Theology provides a new hermeneutics for the African scholar.

In developing this new hermeneutics, it is important to take cognisance of the fact that the study of the family in the classical period (Graeco-Roman) is gaining momentum and continues to engage, amongst others,

biblical scholars. This mounting interest by biblical critics and exegetes is indicative of the fact that the family as reality, but also as metaphor, could be a hermeneutical procedure, paradigm and methodology through which the Bible could be read and interpreted (cf. Mahlangu 1999:290) and which can enhance Child Theology. Sources about the 'child' in the Roman family were mostly generated by the male elite. The general attitude towards children was as contained in the sources written from an adult male perspective. Thus, the physical as well as the scholastic needs of the children were not determined by themselves but by the adult community and the state (Dixon 1992:98, 214; Rawson 1991:7). A premature baby and child did not have any significant legal status. This was seen even before the baby was born. Contraception and abortion methods were known and practised in the Roman society (Osiek & Balch 1997:65; Rawson 1991:9). The fact that the mother did not abort the foetus was no obvious guarantee that this child could live or survive. There was yet another hurdle to cross – a fitness test to pass. When the actual time of delivering a baby came, the father was involved in determining the fitness of the child. If the child was found to be unfit, deformed or sickly the umbilical cord was cut (without tying it first) and subsequently the baby bled to death. In the case where the baby was unwanted, where parents were unwilling or unable to raise the child, he or she was exposed in a public place, doorsteps of temples, crossroads or rubbish heaps, either to die or be adopted (Homblower & Spawforth 1996:321ff.; Osiek & Balch 1997:65ff.; Rawson 1991:10f; Weaver 1992:172).⁷

7. The fact that children were treated like this in the Roman family does not show that they were not important, but indicates that the Graeco-Roman world was the man's world. The 'significance' of children could be discerned from the following fact: The manner in which adoption procedures were fully developed, proves that a family which was childless and did not wish to divorce, had to have children (Dixon 1992:108).

Unlike their Roman and Greek neighbours, the Jews valued children as a gift from God. Du Plessis (1998:311) says that a Jewish couple's greatest desire was to have many children. Safrai (1976:750) states that it is important to realise that the ideal of marriage was the perpetuation of the family line, and therefore the number and survival of children was seen as the family's chief blessing. As a matter of fact, if after 10 years the marriage was childless, the man was required to divorce his wife and marry another. Hence, Roth (1966–70:118) is of the opinion that the greatest misfortune that could befall a woman was childlessness. Although some of the laws applicable to children in the Roman world did not exist in the Jewish world both Botha (1999:316) and Balla (2003:109) is of the opinion that in daily practices the families in these two cultures differed only in minor ways. Because the Jews regarded children as a blessing from God, infanticide and abandoning of children were not practiced by the Jews to the same extent as in the Roman world, but it was not totally absent. Upbringing was highly esteemed. Hence, Barclay (1997:69) maintains that the Jewish tradition is distinguished by the care it devotes to the instruction of their children. The children who were disobedient, failing to follow in the ancestral ways were bringing great shame to their parents.

The Jews regarded the male child as more important than the girl. For instance, a boy was circumcised and named on the 8th day (Lk 1:59; 2:21; Phlp 3:5), whilst a daughter was named only after a month. Archer (1990:17) says that the birth of a son was not only significant but regarded as a special blessing from above, more often than not the direct result of divine intervention. Thus, having given birth to the first child, Eve triumphantly said: 'I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord' (Gn 4:1). The promise of God to Abraham and Sarah was not to give them a child but a son: 'I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her' (Gn 17:16). Safrai (1976:50) also maintains that male children were seen as particularly important in the building of families, as a 'baraita' rules: 'with both male

and female children the world could not exist but blessed is he whose children are male and love to him whose children are female.’

■ Illustrative text – The metaphor of birth (Jn 3:1–8)

Against the backdrop of the discussions above, an illustrative text (Jn 3:1–8) will be considered from the viewpoint of a Child Theology hermeneutics.

The discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus (the expression of faith through the symbol of the new birth) contains some of the most significant metaphors in the Johannine corpus. Hence, Van der Watt (1997b:l) maintains that one of the most important ‘family imageries’ and ethically powerful statements in the Johannine writings is the fact that ‘no one who is born of God will continue in sin’ (1 Jn 2:29; 3:10; 4:7; 5:1–2, 18). In this regard, Malina, Joubert and Van der Walt (1996:21) state that birth in the 1st century Mediterranean world was the most important way of becoming a member of a family. The New Testament uses this image to say how a believer becomes part of God’s family. The Holy Spirit is responsible for this experience of a person being made a believer – a child of God, to be part of the divine family of God. This family metaphor of being born into the family of the Father permeates throughout the discourse, even beyond.

Jesus ignores Nicodemus’ confession or flattery, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him’ (Jn 3:2). He rather confronts Nicodemus with a stunning statement, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again’ (Jn 3:3). Right from the onset, Jesus uncompromisingly states that humans, as they are, are excluded from salvation, that is, from the sphere of God. Yet, he states that salvation may be possible for Nicodemus by becoming another man – a new man.

The terms ‘born from above’, ‘born of the Spirit’ appear to be used interchangeably and are virtually synonymous. The dualistic framework of John’s Gospel is also encountered in this pericope. The Spirit and flesh are mutually exclusive; as flesh begets only flesh and only Spirit can beget spirit (Jn 3:6; 6:63). The flesh is, in this context, not necessarily regarded as evil but it is incapable of effecting salvation (Jn 6:63) (cf. Miller 1976:44). Lindars (1972) also says that:

The Spirit is not a component part of man, but the influence which directs the whole man once he has been reborn. This influence is analogous to the wind (verse 8). The man born from the flesh is a man as he is by nature, impelled by the forces of his own natural endowment. The man born from the spirit is man as he is when open to the influence of God, with all his natural forces brought under the control of the Spirit. (p. 153)

The most important expression in this dialogue is γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν [you must be born again]. The word γενναω [born] appears some 90 times in the New Testament, 28 times in the Johannine corpus. This word and the related concepts such as ‘beget’, ‘bear’ and ‘become’ are used literally and metaphorically (Brown 1975:176ff). The expression ‘born again’ can be understood as meaning ‘being born from above’ or ‘born new’. Here Jesus explains the origin of the believer. The believers’ true origin and existence does not belong to this world – their beginning and end are in God through Jesus Christ. The references of being born from above mean that man must receive a new origin. He must exchange his old nature for a new and be born again. This is an act of God (Brown 1975:179). Jesus meant to impress upon Nicodemus that he descended from God’s presence to raise man to God. Jesus, therefore, transposes the topic to a higher level. Whereas Nicodemus is on the level of the sensible, he must be raised to the level of the spiritual.

The fourth evangelist uses the family metaphor of the birth to express a spiritual reality of faith. The word γενναω [born] implies that another birth has already taken place. Van der Watt (1997a:4) maintains that the

family in the Mediterranean world was generally regarded as the basic social structure. Birth into a family therefore meant to become part of the family with everything that it involved, especially on a social level. Pursuant of this notion, Blasi (1997:259f) says that in the 1st century Mediterranean world to be a child of someone meant to participate in an identity and in a particular nexus of the parents' social networks. Just as one acquires family, friends, relatives, neighbours and a name from the parents, the Johannine church acquired these by being born into God's family. Birth was therefore an important way of determining one's identity. This birth metaphor suggests the social orientation of the Johannine community. Blasi (1997:257) states that the discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus, as recorded by the evangelist, is meant to describe the separation of the Johannine Christians from the community of the local synagogue.

Still on the question of the social features of the Jesus-Nicodemus dialogue, Rensberger (1989:25) maintains that the determinative factor in the milieu of the Johannine church was a conflict with the synagogue. He says that in visualising the Johannine community, one must think of a group of Christians still entirely within the fold of the Jewish community. Its confession of Jesus as the Messiah, however, brought them into growing tension with the authorities of the Jewish community. Unlike Paul, who describes the experience of being children of God in legalistic terms such as adoption, the fourth evangelist employs a simplistic metaphor, 'to be born (begotten) by the Father.' Also noting the simplistic nature of the Johannine rendering of the spiritual reality of rebirth, Brown (1966:138) observes that, according to this community, humans take on flesh and enter the kingdom of this world because their earthly father begets them. In the same way, people can enter the kingdom of God only when the Heavenly Father begets them. Whereas life can come to a person from his or her father, eternal life comes from the Heavenly Father.

The Johannine church, therefore, appears to have affirmed its identity regarding its election by the Father: ‘whoever received him, he gave them power to become children of God (Jn 1:12) ... from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace’ (Jn 1:16). Blasi (1997:258) acknowledges that even if the notion Christians ‘being born of God’ did not necessarily start with the Fourth Gospel, but was perhaps grounded in the Pauline corpus, the Johannine church took this imagery and made it their own. Howard-Brook (1994:87) maintains that the Johannine community’s heartfelt desire was to bring the synagogue and its religious leaders to a commitment to Jesus. The Jesus-Nicodemus dialogue is actually a reflection of this ideal.

An attempt has thus far been made to investigate John 3:1–8 by way of raising questions pertaining to the cultural, social and religious location of the Johannine community. In this process, it has been illustrated that there is a connection between the Johannine ecclesiology and the first historical readers of the Gospel. In other words, the text of John’s Gospel contains an ‘ecclesiology’ and Christological ideology, which has encoded and replicated the community’s cosmology. Jerome Neyrey (1988:115–150) illustrates this assertion in his applications of a theoretical model of a cultural anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1984:34–41) to the Gospel of John. Mary Douglas has developed a model whereby she maintains that, in a community, the interaction between a sub-group and its larger social matrix is measured. She plots such an interaction as a graph with horizontal and vertical axes. In the horizontal axis, group positions range from strong to weak groups. The vertical axis is used to illustrate the correlation between the community’s experience and expectations of the surrounding social group ranging from low to high grid.

Neyrey (1988:1, 18ff.) endeavours to show that the cultural and social cues of the Johannine community are embedded in the text. He maintains that, during the time of Jesus, the overall system of ideology, values,

structures and classification were characterised by purity. Furthermore, Judaism was characterised by factionalism that manifested in different social configurations such as priests, Qumran volunteers, scribes, Sanhedrin. Each of these groups claimed to adhere legitimately to the system of Judaism. Thus, the grid was low, or failing, as shown by the emergence of these competing sects and parties.

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus regarded himself as a member of the Jewish covenant community (Jn 1:45; 5:39; 7:40–44 & 52). He, however, challenged the manner in which the Jewish faith and scriptures were interpreted particularly by the Pharisees, as for instance the Sabbath (Jn 9:21–24, 5:16, 9:16). Thus, the controversy between Jesus and the Jewish leaders further indicates that the grid was low and failing (cf. Neyrey 1988:128).

Malina, Joubert and Van der Watt (1996:12) maintain that one of the distinctive features of the ancient Mediterranean world was the distinction between group and outsiders. The ‘Jesus group’, though initially operating within Judaism, was gradually establishing itself as a separate group. It developed its own rituals, which were to serve as boundary lines to strengthen the structure or system of the group. Neyrey (1988:128) claims that, unlike Matthew’s ‘inheriting life’, the fourth evangelist’s language suggests grouping, ‘crossing’ and entering (Jn 3:4–5, 4:38, 10:1–2). The ritual of water baptism, (born of water and the spirit – Jn 3:5) makes one to be part of a group. Jesus makes Nicodemus feel that he belongs to another group, an outside group, ‘that which is born of flesh is flesh, that which is born of the spirit is spirit’ (Jn 3:6).

■ A Child Theology perspective on John 3:1–8

From a Child Theology perspective, John 3:1–8 confronts each and every leader in the church in Africa with a very important question: To which

group do you belong? The fact that you are a leader in the church does not mean that you are automatically part of Jesus' in-group, Jesus' new fictive family. Nicodemus was a religious leader, but he was not part of the group following Jesus. Therefore, Jesus challenges him with the call to be born again, to be born from above, to become again a baby that starts life right from the beginning. Van Zyl (1983:45; cf. Francis 2000:235; Herzog 2005:42) is of the opinion that the Johannine metaphor to be born again and the Matthean expression in Matthew 18:2–4 that the disciples have to change and become like children to enter God's kingdom, actually have the exact same change in mind. To be reborn, or to become like a child, acquires here soteriological meaning: it brings salvation; it transfers you into the Jesus-group; it brings the new life of becoming part of the kingdom of God; it creates a new community. Pais (1991:13) even states: 'The child is the key to the salvation of all of us.'

That is also true of each and every African baby and child: they are the key to the salvation of all adult Africans, to all people in the world. The HIV-infected babies, the abused children, the malnourished children, the child prostitutes, the child soldiers, the poverty-stricken children, the handicapped children, the traumatised children, the marginalised children, the vulnerable children, the orphans of Africa are reminding us as African church leaders, as African adults, as inhabitants of this world to be reborn, to become a new baby, to become a new child to enter the kingdom of God. That is the only way to salvation. In the kingdom of God there are only children.

It would have been a great shock for Nicodemus, the 'important' religious leader, to hear that he has to be born again. In his surrounding Mediterranean culture children had no status and no power. In many ways, African babies and children find themselves in the same lowly, powerless position in their societies. Johannes Malherbe (2004) states:

It seems that churches and theologians on the African continent had been very slow in discovering its children. We may say that in many cases children have until now not even become a focal point ... The development of an indigenous African theology of childhood (or child theology in Africa) is further limited by the lowly position that children generally assume within African society. We may say that in many parts of the continent children have not yet been discovered – at least not in the sense that they are given prominence in community life or in people’s attitudes and beliefs. It seems as though it had been different in traditional, rural Africa. The clan and village generally knew how to cherish and raise its children. But much of this had been lost in the radical social transition in Africa. (n.p.)

In African societies, many children, especially those who are seen as Children at risk, have a lowly status. In many modern Western societies, many children do not find themselves in this same position. In these individualistic cultures that place a huge emphasis on the development and performance of children, the inclination is not to raise children as it is expected of them to be lowly and without any status in their communities. That is why the lowly position of children in many African societies (Grobbeelaar 2012):

[M]ight be a crucial advantage for doing CT on the African continent: It means children are seen in Africa in much the same way as children were seen in the Mediterranean society when the Gospels were written ... CT in line with Jesus in the Gospels depends on being able to point to a child who is not prominent in the ordinary course of society. That is exactly what can happen when we put a contextualised African child into the midst of our theological reflections: we see and give prominence to the usually unnoticed. That act should change our theology. (pp. 38–39)

To be reborn, and to live a reborn life, we always need children around us. They have to remind us what our identity is as members of the new group, the new family that God made us part of. That is the challenge to the African church: to live out this new ethos that is part of the life of people that have been reborn from above. Therefore, children have to be seen in a new way in the African church in general. They have to become more

important in the church, an integrated part of the life and ministry of every local church. To be reborn, to start our lives afresh, implicates that our view of babies, of children will have to change radically. In this regard, we can learn much from the Coptic Orthodox Church (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:58–62). Father Tadros Y. Malaty (1993), a highly regarded theologian in the Coptic Orthodox Church stated:

The source of the Coptic Church's strength since her inception in the first century until now, is her care for children who should realise their membership in the church and play a vital and effective role in her performance. (p. 337)

According to Malaty (1993:329, 339) the care for children in the Coptic Orthodox Church is based in the Church's belief that priesthood is actually a calling to compassionate and spiritual fatherhood. They do not see the priest as 'an employee of an institution who has to perform certain tasks, nor is he a mere preacher, teacher or a theological researcher' (Grobbelaar 2012:62). He is, first and foremost, a father. It is through his fatherhood that he provides 'security and satisfaction to children' (Malaty 1993:339). However, actually much more. '[T]hrough it God's fatherhood and the Church's motherhood are apprehended' (Malaty 1993:339).

Can it be that Jesus' statement to Nicodemus that he needs to be reborn to become part of Jesus' new family, can be seen as a call to Church leaders in Africa to be reborn, to be liberated into a leadership role that shows, through their care for the many vulnerable children in their community, what church leadership and the church as God's family is really about? What a challenge!

■ Conclusion

Child theology is relatively speaking not an old movement, but its impact and significance in the hermeneutical landscape, especially in Africa, is

very promising. This article is indicative of this assertion. In the foregone narrative and discussion, the author attempted to respond to the question whether Child Theology in Africa is a new hermeneutics. The authors' answer is in the affirmative in two ways: Firstly, it has been indicated that the majority of children in Africa are facing abuses of unprecedented proportions. Historically and traditionally, African scholars always read and interpreted the Bible through African lenses. The African Bible critic and exegete should be part of the church, the body of Christ, which ought to be a lotus of healing. Theologising in the context of the crisis of the children in Africa is a fairly new development and needs to be aggressively pursued. The second aspect of this authors' response is that, when Christianity entered the Graeco-Roman, as well as the Jewish milieu, it used the family symbolism such as father, brothers, love, house of God and children of God. The New Testament authors, therefore, used family as reality and metaphor to proclaim the gospel. The African theologian, critic and exegete is, therefore, in this article challenged to make a significant contribution using the African context in that, 'the African concept of child, family and community appears to be closer to *ecclesiology* than the western concepts' (Mahlangu 2014:33ff).

Holistic Children's Ministry: History and Challenges

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■ Introduction

Children's ministry is 'the single most strategic ministry in God's kingdom.' (Barna 2003:14), but it seems as if the global church is struggling to minister effectively to children in the different contexts we are living at this moment in time (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:144–168). Various factors worked together to create this situation, but it seems that one of the major factors that has influenced the current state of children's ministry is a lack

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of enough theological reflection on the theological foundations of children's ministry (cf. Dean 2011; Nel 1998:9; Strommen & Hardel 2000:195). Although knowledge acquired from the social sciences is of great importance for children's ministry, focusing exclusively on this may lead to theological reflection not reaching its full potential (cf. Beukes 1995:18; Grobbelaar 2008:11–12; Senter 2001:31; Westerhoff 2000:1–23). Kenda Creasy Dean (2011) said about this situation:

What we mean is while the practice of youth ministry has been with us for quite a while now (70 to 120 years or so, depending on how you count), it has not always been concerned with theological reflection. This is not to say that theology wasn't happening or that youth workers didn't care about theology. But it is to say that youth workers' actions and self-conceptions were rarely informed by significant theological reflection. In fact, when I started to write about youth ministry nearly twenty years ago, theological reflection with and for young people was rare and awkward. (pp. 15–16)

But how did it happen that youth and children's ministry reached a point in which theological depth was missing? Andrew Root's (2012) answer on this question is:

[T]his perception is not because youth ministry has been too fixated on ministry; rather, it's because youth ministry has often failed to reflect deeply on God's own ministry, on God's action with and for young people. But because it has not given the same attention to understanding God's action, it has lacked theological depth. (pp. 58–59)

This is also true of children's ministry, as part of the umbrella concept youth ministry. We did not reflect deeply about God's action with and for children. In children's ministry, we should also learn how to move 'beyond managerialism' to the practice of a 'reflective ministry' (Van der Ven 1998). Rightfully, Beckwith (2004:16; cf. Strommen & Hardel 2000:16–18) pleads 'that we need to be thinking about new paradigms' for children's ministry or, as Root and Dean (2011) put it, that we have to make a 'theological turn' in children's ministry.

Against this background, Chapter 4 focusses on the following question: What is children's ministry, especially in the African context? Or, to put it

in other words: What is the identity and purpose of children's ministry in the African context? In the process of answering these questions, the first part of Chapter 4 will give a historical oversight on children's ministry in Africa. This historical overview can only draw some broad general lines. It is impossible to be specific regarding the different experiences of Christianity and Christian education on this vast continent. It is not the goal of Chapter 4 to discuss in depth the history of Children's ministry, which includes Christian education for children, and the different experiences of it in the different parts of Africa, and the different churches that came into existence. Therefore, the historical picture drawn here can be seen as simplistic. Nevertheless, it gives some background to the challenges children's ministry are facing on the African continent.

After this broad historical picture, a theological reflection on children's ministry will follow that takes into account the view of Malan Nel (2005) that one should:

[R]eflect upon the ministry with regard to knowledge, insight, competency and attitude as to what we do, why we do it, how we do it, and with what attitude we do what we do. (p. 17)

In these theological reflections children's ministry will be investigated from the angle of a practical theological ecclesiology which views children as an inclusive part of the congregation (cf. Dunn & Senter 1997:673–674; Nel 2003:79). In the process attention will be given to the biblical concept of 'hospitality' as a possible alternative theological paradigm for holistic children's ministry. The importance of a holistic view of children and children's ministry as part of a hospitable paradigm for children's ministry and being church will be stressed and described with reference to different processes that are important and should be included in holistic children's ministry. In this discussion, the importance of the integration of children into all the ministries of the local church will be stressed. Although

attention will be given to some practicalities of holistic children's ministry, Chapter 4 is not a 'how-to-do guide' for holistic children's ministry, but rather a theological reflection that wants to challenge other theologians (lay as well as professional) to join this journey of theological reflection.

■ A historical overview of children's ministry in Africa

■ The early history

Religious education for children was always part and parcel of African life. In this regard Mumo (2013) declares:

Different cultures have always had different ways of imparting religious education to children ... Africans likewise had an elaborate system of imparting religious ... education. The entire African way of life was interlaced with different types of education. There were proverbs and wise sayings which had profound message to pass to society on all aspects of life. Rites of passage were loaded with education dealing with all aspects of life such as morality, spirituality, relationships and life skill. (p. 794)

When Christianity arrived in North Africa during the 1st century AD, the church continued the tradition of educating and initiating children into the faith community. Church fathers like Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius and Augustine clearly stressed the vital importance of education in the lives of children (Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2013:806). Education became part of the ministry of the church in Northern Africa.

There is a fascinating story about how the Ethiopian church was founded. It all began with what can be called Christian education (cf. Rohrbacher 2002; Wace 2013: loc. 15470-15488). Two Phoenician brothers, Frumentius and Edesius, accompanied their uncle Metropius in 316 AD on a voyage on the Red Sea to Ethiopia. The king of Aksum bought them as slaves. Just

before his death, the king set both of them free. But the widow queen asked them to keep on serving her. Her son, Erazanes, was still young and he needed a good education for his future role as king. Therefore, the queen asked the two brothers to help educate her son. They did that with dedication and also led him to Christ. Through their influence, they spread the gospel in Ethiopia, where some of the people came to faith in Christ. When Erazanes finally became the king, the brothers were set free from their commitment to the queen. The brothers started their journey back home together until they reached Alexandria. Frumentius decided to stay behind. At some stage, St. Athanasius appointed Frumentius as the first bishop of Axum, and he returned to Ethiopia. Edesius kept on travelling until he reached his home town, Tyre, where he was ordained as a priest.

This story is an illustration of the influence Christian education had in the early stages of the church in Africa.

The period of the missionaries

It took more than a millennium before the rest of Africa was to be evangelised on a significant scale. The missionaries from Europe and America brought the Bible and the church, but not without Christian charity (albeit in terms of the Western culture). Church planting and the building of mission stations went hand in hand with the establishment of health care facilities like hospitals, mobile clinics and dispensaries. They also started schools, to be followed by other educational institutions (Mbae 2012:6) and eventually, with the onset of colonialism, industries and civil services. According to Mbae (2012:6) the missionaries ‘set out to save not only our souls but also our intellects, our bodies and our psyches.’ In their approach to ministry they were able to keep evangelisation and education and health together.

From the onset, the missionaries acknowledged the vital importance of children. Because of the phenomenal growth and huge influence of the Sunday school movement in the UK, USA and Europe (cf. Luumi & Becker 2008:229–231; White 2012:loc. 1326–1356), many of the missionaries started Sunday schools as a tool for evangelism and faith formation. Many times Sunday schools were used as the first missionary activity in a new area. Mumo (2013:795) states that the establishment of successful Sunday schools often preceded church planting.

The missionaries that came to Africa were also influenced by the growing demand in the 19th century to provide Christian education on a larger scale. There was especially a drive for the mass provision of Christian education for the children living in poverty. The establishment of schools became an important part of the strategy to Christianise and educate Africa. In almost every village there was a church and attached to it a primary school. It grew to a secondary school and even to other educational institutions such as colleges and vocational schools (Omotoso 2008:1). From the beginning, the Christian religion was part of the school curriculum. 'So much did the early mission schools emphasize religion that these schools have been called "prayer houses"' (Bogonko in Churu & Mwaura n.d.:5).

The church schools had a significant impact on many parts of the African society. Churu and Mwaura (n.d.) made the following statement about the benefits the Catholic school and church had for Kenya:

Efforts of missionaries to initiate, and run schools for Africans, before and during the Colonial period were a major contribution to the development of the people of Kenya, even with the major caveat of the cultural erosion that resulted. Missionary-educated African persons were in the leadership of the movement to free the country from colonial rule ... In addition, Catholic schools played a central role in deepening the Christian faith of young people ... By their own admission, the graduates of Catholic

schools learnt precious lessons for life, which helped them embrace their civic and family responsibilities with commitment. Many graduates of Catholic secondary schools of the 1950s and 60s have been champions and leaders in many fields of Kenya's development, displaying heroic commitment to service of society. (p. 24)

The true impact of the church-initiated schools and institutions has to be assessed within the larger picture of colonialism in Africa, but the holistic approach of the missionaries (faith, health, education) certainly contributed to the changing face of the continent.

■ The postcolonial period

Postcolonial Africa followed the global trend of national states, increasingly taking responsibility for education, health care and social welfare. The secular era dawned upon the world, and Africa was not excluded. The church was left to focus on religious issues, occasionally filling gaps in education, health and welfare through charities of various sorts. In the presecular era it might have been easier for the church to maintain a holistic view of children, as the church took responsibility for the spiritual, physical and intellectual needs of the communities they served. The secularisation of services divorced the spiritual from other needs, posing a threat to an integrated approach to ministry, including children's ministry. Up to today, the church seems to struggle to integrate the different dimensions of being human in its ministry. Even where Christians commit to 'fill the gaps' in education, health and welfare, it often becomes the task of specialised Christian agencies, or para-church organisations, rather than an integrated part of the ministry of the organised church.

One of the results of these tendencies was that the church lost its influence over the education of children. For many churches, the Sunday

school remained the only tool left to exercise a direct influence on the lives of children. Not surprisingly, as Mumo (2013:793) stated, 'nearly all Church denominations and local churches in Africa have a Sunday school programme.'

Unfortunately, the reduction in integrated, holistic ministry with children cuts even deeper. The activities of Sunday schools are generally referred to as 'Christian Education'. Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2013) are of the opinion that churches came to reduce 'education' to activities aimed at the intellect. Children are 'taught' Bible content, dogma, history and morals with a view to recite from memory rather than integration into their lives. In many African churches Sunday school is little more than 'a carbon copy of a standard public school ... The style, the strategy, even the classes are based on the public school matrix.' (Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2013:807).

The transfer of knowledge became the highest priority in many Sunday schools because the beliefs, approaches, morality and behaviour of a person are viewed as a direct result of the knowledge acquired (Prins 1990:73). The result was that the affective dimension, the actions and experiences of children, became less important than the cognitive aspect (Beukes 1995:13; Roberto & Pfiffner 2007:1). Furthermore, this exercise played out in a classroom, far away from the realities and struggles, the decisions and conflicts of real life. In evaluating this situation, Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2013) wrote:

The result is a fragmented life where spiritual growth becomes a temporary, isolated process determined by a one hour information download once a week, measured by performance in cognitive examinations and rewarded with certificates and graduations. With this type of 'educational' foundation, it is difficult to bring adult church members to an integrated life of faith and commitment to God and his Kingdom. (p. 807)

There is also another detrimental effect of this situation. Taking cognitive development as norm, the generations are separated from one another and children are sidelined in the local church. The noble argument is that their different needs can now be addressed in an appropriate way, on the level of their own cognitive capabilities. But the result of this differentiation is that all unity is lost. The children are removed from the corporate worship of the church. They are even excluded from the spaces where corporate teaching exists. The result is that the whole life and ministry of the church, the different age groups, become more and more separated from one another. It even takes children and parents away from each other. Just as in the world, children become the victims of social exclusion and marginalisation. What is alarming, is that it even happens to them within the faith community.

This segregation, or differentiation, of age groups and the resulting fragmentation of local churches are also the result of what Greener (2016:164) labelled 'a hermeneutics of restriction'. She (Greener 2016) explains this hermeneutics as follows:

By that I mean that when we consider a segment of labelled humanity, such as 'child' or 'child-at-risk', we can fail to notice children as fully a part of the household of Christ and, thus, rely on scriptures where they are explicitly mentioned, which marginalizes, over-simplifies, and minimizes their full humanity. If we remove the restriction of limiting ourselves to scriptures where children are specifically mentioned, we move toward a posture of consulting all of scripture *and* looking to those specific scriptures for clarification within the entire biblical context. (p. 164)

With the diminishing holistic influence of the church on the lives of children, as described above, the vulnerability of children became more and more evident.

■ The period of globalisation

□ The exploitation of children

Through all the ages children were exploited and oppressed. In our time, according to the sociologist Manuel Castells (2001a:18, 2001b:158), children's exploitation is in certain aspects even worse than before. The reason for this situation, as described by Castells in his trilogy (cf. Castells 2000a, 2000b, 2004), is the influence that the uncontrolled characteristics of information capitalism in the global information-driven network economy and society have on the lives of children. Child exploitation is part and parcel of the new global system. The system causes their social exclusion on a large scale. Moreover, many African children are suffering as a result of the sins of this system. Castells (2000b) describes this situation as follows:

At the roots of children's exploitation are the mechanisms generating poverty and social exclusion throughout the world ... With children in poverty, and with entire countries, regions, and neighborhoods excluded from relevant circuits of wealth, power, and information, the crumbling family structures break the last barrier of defence for children ... The supply of children provided by this weakened family structure, and by this impoverished childhood, is met, on the demand side, by the processes of globalization, business networking, criminalization of a segment of the economy, and advanced communication technology ... To both sets of supply and demand factors, we must add, as sources of children's over-exploitation, exclusion, and destruction, the disintegration of states and societies, and the massive uprooting of populations by war, famine, epidemics, and banditry. (pp. 163–164)

As a result of the influence of the globalised mass media and social media, more and more people became aware of the situation of Africa's children. A growing secular concern about children, and an emphasis on children's rights put Africa's children in the focus of the agendas of many global humanitarian and compassionate agencies. Some of them are global

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) or agencies, for example World Vision, Compassion International and Tearfund, whilst local initiatives to serve vulnerable children are found all over the world, including Africa.

□ Two recent concepts

In this milieu two concepts in connection with children developed: Children at Risk (CAR) and Holistic Child Development (HCD).

□ Children at Risk

The CAR concept is relatively new and in use, especially in the circles of the Christian agencies, only since the 1990s (Willmer & Prevet 2016:197). To date, there is not a universal accepted definition of the concept CAR. Perhaps the Lausanne Consultation on Children at Risk (2015) formulated the best workable definition:

Children-at-risk are persons under 18 who experience an intense and/or chronic risk factor, or a combination of risk factors in personal, environmental and/or relational domains that prevent them from pursuing and fulfilling their God-given potential. (p. 1)

All children are, to some extent, exposed to various types of risks: physical risk; social risk; psychological risk; spiritual risk; intellectual risk; ecological risk. It is when risk factors, like poverty, violent conflict, sexual exploitation, diseases, lack of education and lack of access to the gospel start to play a role in a child's life that risk becomes reality. The presence of poverty, especially extreme poverty as present in many parts of the African continent, is the one clear and outstanding factor that shows that children are at risk. In this context, they can even be exposed to multiple and complex risk factors that influence their lives negatively.

The key purpose of the term CAR, according to the Lausanne Consultation on Children at Risk (2015), is:

[T]o highlight and prioritize those situations where children are experiencing great unmet needs and where outside engagement is most urgent. In fact, the potential to consider diverse unmet needs everywhere (both the poor and the non-poor, the non-west and the west) across all aspects of human experience (spiritual, physical, emotional, environmental, and social) is one of its great strengths. (p. 1)

It is mostly the Christian agencies that focus their ministry on these children. Amongst them are orphans, children infected or affected by HIV, sexually exploited children, children affected by armed conflict such as child soldiers, street children and child labourers.

Many churches are struggling to reach out to these socially excluded children and to welcome and include them in the faith family. The challenge for the local church is to be a community which is able to include CAR (Greener 2016).

[I]n all stages of development to be welcomed and blessed by Jesus. We stand with Jesus in indignant resistance through advocacy and action toward anything or anyone that keeps children from Him – be they haughty or ill-informed adults, broken and sinful systems, or cultural beliefs that devalue children. And we embrace children as kingdom representatives, who truly have something to teach and to offer to us. (p. 167)

In every context, not only are there risk factors present but also some factors that can enhance resilience. They can be personal, environmental, or relational resilience factors. These resilience factors can even overcome the destructiveness of some of the risk factors present in a child's life. Identifying, fostering and strengthening these resilience factors may be the best way in which local churches can help CAR (Lausanne Consultation 2015:3).

Holistic Child Development

Holistic Child Development (HCD) is a term that is rooted in the social sciences with its emphasis on human development. The term is mostly

used by the Christian agencies as the umbrella concept to describe their ministry intention as reaction to the challenges posed by CAR. The theory is that the HCD emphasis will engage with all four facets of child development, the physical, spiritual, cognitive and socio-psychological, to address their needs holistically and to provide these children with the opportunity to grow and flourish. In this sense, HCD has much in common with Christian education (White 2014:50). Usually, the concept 'best interests of the child' is used as the guiding norm for all HCD efforts and projects. Although this concept is critiqued from various perspectives it is still used worldwide as evaluating principle for HCD efforts.

Bringing the whole gospel to the whole child implies that different acts of intervention, such as health services, evangelism, formal education, feeding and clothing projects will be combined and integrated as necessary to attend holistically and simultaneously to all the developmental aspects of CAR, rather than focussing on just one developmental area in isolation from all the other areas. To be effective in HCD, it is important to achieve synergy between the different actions addressing the various developmental areas. Together they can achieve more effective change and growth in each developmental area than when the focus is only on one specific area (cf. Greener 2016:162).

It is also important that CAR will not be treated as passive receivers of handouts or charity or the actions and influence of adults. To confirm their human dignity and to enhance their self-worth, CAR have to become active participants in their own development (cf. Jayakaran & Orona 2011). What the agencies are planning to do will affect their lives, and they certainly have a say over their own lives. Therefore, adults have to listen carefully to the needs they express, the solutions they envision, the contributions they want to make. Moreover, only after carefully listening can they together make decisions on the way forward.

In this regard, Greener (2016) expresses that a holistic approach will be an approach 'to, for, and with children'. She explains this approach as follows:

It may help us to think of 'to, for, and with' in this way: When we engage in holistic mission *to* children, we are turned toward them, offering what is needed for healthy and abundant living in all areas of human development in context. When we engage in holistic mission *for* children, we stand at attention, placing the children behind us to shield them from harm as we engage the abusers, exploiters and systems that do them harm, even unto death. And when we engage in holistic mission *with* children, we stand side-by-side, welcoming them as full members of the whole Church – we face into mission together. (p. 165)

Holistic child development – A critical analysis

To involve more churches in HCD, not only as donors, but as active participants in HCD programmes in their local communities and even wider, it may be necessary to revisit the HCD concept critically. There exist many different frameworks of stages of development, such as biological and evolutionary theories, learning theories, psychoanalytical theories, cognitive-developmental theories (cf. White 2003:50–51). 'In practice, the philosophies of most of those who work with children exhibit some degree of "pick and mix"' (White 2003:50). It is important, nevertheless, to take cognisance of each one of them as they broaden our knowledge and understanding of the different aspects of human development, but we have to be very careful in using them. Developmental theories do not provide a sound basis for holistic child development.

All these frameworks imply that children are 'underdeveloped' objects that have to ascend to a place where they eventually will become what they have to be. In one way or another, these frameworks seem to work

with the notion of an ideal type of adult into which children have to develop. To advance to this ideal type, they need adults that can guide them to develop towards a higher level of ‘maturity’ or ‘wholeness’, as decided upon by adults. To create some understanding, each one of these frameworks works with generalisations, creating the impression that all children worldwide, irrespective of gender, cultural differences, or changing childhoods, move automatically through all the stages as predicted without any modification, the whole time progressing to a higher and better level of being human. It inevitably leads to the perception that the ‘becoming’ of children, the development to a higher level, is more important than their ‘being’. This notion is seriously challenged by Matthew 18:3–2:

²And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’

This brings us to another serious question: What is the relationship between theology and all these theories of child development? It is a question that probes into the possible influence the Christian view of human development, or a theological anthropology, will have on these different developmental frameworks originating from the social sciences. White (2014) is of the opinion:

[T]hat the Christian element (religion, theology) is rarely integrated with the main studies of child development, where secular theories dominate ... Theology (in the widest sense) may be put alongside development studies, but it does not begin to transform them. (p. 54)

White (2014:55) adds that it seems that the child development frameworks are ‘satisfied with the secular models and theories on offer and in fashion.’

Sometimes people (cf. Brewster 2005; Greener 2016; Miles 2003) use one of two verses or both from Luke 2 as a possible basis for holistic child development. These verses are:

And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.⁸ (Lk 2:40)

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Lk 2:52)

In referring to the above two verses from the Gospel of Luke, Miles (2003) express the opinion that:

[I]f this is how a perfect human being developed, then every human being should follow the same pattern. If any of these areas of human growth and development is neglected, then the individual involved will be damaged. (p. 33)

Brewster (2005:13) says about Luke 2:52 that 'God's expectation is that all children will develop as Jesus did.' Greener (2016) makes the following statement:

We do not know a great deal about Jesus' childhood, yet we do know that he developed through the normative stages of life and that he developed holistically in all facets of humanness (Luke 2:52). Jesus lived as a body (he grew in stature) and a mind (he grew in wisdom) and a spirit (he grew in favor with God) and as an emotional and social being (he grew in favor with those around him). (p. 161)

But is it a correct interpretation to understand these two verses as normative, or as a model for every person to develop along the same pattern, or that God expects from all human beings to develop as Jesus did? To answer these questions, we will have to look closer at Luke 2:40–52 to understand verses 40 and 52, not on their own or by taking some concepts and interpreting them according to our knowledge from the social sciences, but as part of the story that Luke is telling. What is Luke's purpose with this story and the summaries in verses 40 and 52?

8. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* is used in Chapter 4.

⁴⁰And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

⁴¹Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. ⁴²And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. ⁴³And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, ⁴⁴but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, ⁴⁵and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. ⁴⁶After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, 'Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress', ⁴⁹And he said to them, 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' ⁵⁰And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. ⁵¹And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

⁵²And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man. (Lk 2:40–52)

Before Luke starts portraying Jesus' public career, he presents a snapshot of Jesus' youth (cf. Carroll 2012:83). This snapshot brings Jesus' visit to the temple in focus. It is the only canonical Bible story about Jesus as a young person. Structurally it is part of Luke's infancy narrative. Actually, it is the concluding part of Luke's infancy narrative (Lk 1:5–2:52), ending it in the temple where it all began (Lk 1:5–23) (cf. Stein 1992:120). In that sense, Luke states what has happened with Jesus up to this moment: his growth from childhood up to the threshold of adulthood. But Luke also looks forward and foreshadows what Jesus will become, preparing the way for his future ministry. In fact, Luke 2:52 is a summary of what happened between this temple incident and Jesus' baptism (Stein 1992:123).

The structure of the text serves this purpose. It begins (Lk 2:40) with a summary statement on Jesus' growth as a child and it ends with almost the same summary statement (Lk 2:52), giving the reader a short preview of what is going to happen in the future. These two summary statements 'form an *inclusio* around the account of Jesus' visit to the temple' (Green 1997:153) or a frame around this last story of Jesus' childhood. The function of the *inclusio* is to draw the attention of the reader to the importance of the theme within the *inclusio*. It also informs the reader that the material within the *inclusio* explains the content of the *inclusio*. It was a literary technique used in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, especially in biographies. When describing their heroes' childhoods, it was customary to portray them as already possessing the qualities, character and virtues displayed in the heroes' later public life (cf. Aasgaard 2009:89; Carroll 2012:83; Green 1997:154). It is as if the authors looked from the future backwards to the adult's childhood years and assigned to the child all the qualities that the author had already experienced in the adult's life, as well as performing similar deeds as were displayed by the adult (cf. Aasgaard 2009:91).

Both the summaries in Luke 2:40 and 2:52 stress the boy's unusual wisdom and his relationship with God, described as one of 'favour' (cf. Edwards 2015:91; Green 1997:153). These summaries accentuate the importance of the two themes within the *inclusio*. It also informs the reader that the story within the *inclusio* will explain the two themes of wisdom and Jesus' relationship with God (Green 1997):

Importantly, these two matters serve as focal points in the illustrative account, for at issue here is Jesus' remarkable understanding (2:47), and the implications of his particular relation to God (2:48-49). (p. 153-154)

According to Green (1997:157), the emphasis in verses 40 and 52 on Jesus' wisdom 'may be rooted in the Isaianic notion of a coming Davidic ruler endowed with wisdom' (cf. Is 11:1-3).

This is exactly why Luke includes this story at the end of the infancy narrative. He is not interested in Jesus' development to understand how and why he developed into the person he became (Stein 1992:120). He uses the descriptions of Jesus' development to achieve a totally different goal (Stein 1992):

He sought rather to show that Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, was already aware of his being Christ and Lord, or better yet the Son of God, when he was twelve. (p. 120)

He already knows 'that God has claimed his life' (Carroll 2012:86).

This view is confirmed in the form of this story. Stein (1992:120) describes this story as a pronouncement story. According to Stein (1992:120) the story's 'goal and culmination come in the concluding statement or pronouncement by Jesus in 2:49', when he said: 'Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?' With these words Jesus acknowledges his real identity and vocation.

It is confirmed in the conclusion of the infancy narratives. The final perspective on Jesus is provided by God (Edwards 2015:97). 'Finally, to the perspectives of angels, shepherds, Simeon, Anna, and many others in Luke 2, Luke adds God's own point of view concerning Jesus. He enjoys divine favor' (Green 1997:158).

The main theological focus or purpose of this story is Christological (Stein 1992:124). The summaries in verses 40 and 52 were not meant as anthropological pronouncements. The purpose of these verses was never to provide us with a normative model for the development of children. It can never be, because Jesus was the Son of God. In his development, his godly and human nature played a role simultaneously. Rather than to interpret these summaries with regard to our developmental knowledge

today, we have to interpret them according to the theological function they play in this story. In this story Luke wants to reveal that '[l]ong before Jesus began his public ministry ... he was aware of his unique relationship to God' (Stein 1992:124). That is why he 'demonstrated a higher allegiance to his divine sonship than to Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:49), although, because he kept the law he would be obedient to them (2:51)' (Stein 1992:124).

With this story, Luke provided the ideal bridge between the infancy narratives and the adult life and public ministry of Jesus.

Holistic children's ministry

Against the background of the above discussion of HCD and CAR, I prefer to use the concept 'holistic children's ministry' instead of 'holistic child development'. Ministry is a biblical term with a broader, more inclusive and less one-directional application. It is widely used in the church as a description of all the many things the Church is doing. It also contains the important aspect of service: ministry is to serve the other. To be really holistic children's ministry, the challenge for the local church is to become more dedicated to serving the many CAR in their context and not to leave it, mostly, in the hands of the Christian agencies.

The influences of agencies from outside Africa

In his book *Saved by the lion? Stories of African children encountering outsiders*, Johannes Malherbe (2012) investigates the influence of foreign people on the children of Africa, from ancient times up to the 21st century. By reflecting on real life stories of African people he tries to find an answer to the question: Did the children benefit from the interventions of outsiders (the metaphorical 'lion' in the title of the book), or did these outsiders,

including those with good intentions, cause them harm? Some of these visitors made huge sacrifices to come to Africa and to live out their calling on the African soil. But what happened to the children of Africa? Malherbe (2012) observes:

Despite centuries of outside involvement supposedly improving life for Africa's children, the majority of them still grow up under appalling conditions. They are the poorest, least educated, most affected by deadly disease, most often cut off from family, more involved in child labour, more often hit by conflict and crime. (See Chapter 2). This raises the question whether the lion really saved Africa's children. (p. 3)

Indeed, had the focus on holistic child development and humanitarian aid really brought salvation for the children of Africa? When you read all the stories Malherbe is sharing, the only conclusion you can draw is that there are more than enough reasons 'why the answer should be negative' (2012:332).

■ Searching for a new theological paradigm

■ The paradigmatic challenge

From the above discussion, it is clear that there are enough reasons to reflect theologically about the underpinnings of both the church and the Christian agencies' involvement with Africa's children. It is necessary to look critically at the paradigms they both are working with.

What is the difference between holistic child development and children's ministry, especially as expressed in the Sunday school movement? It seems as if the difference possibly lies in the focus of each approach.

Children's ministry originates from a more educational and evangelistic approach. During the missionary period on the African continent, the goal was the evangelising and faith or spiritual development

of children. Through the years the evangelising aspect of the Sunday school moved more and more into the background. Christian education became the main purpose of the Sunday school. This educational intent of Sunday schools is clear in Tioye's (cf. 2013) summary of the objectives of this ministry:

To bring children to Christ and impart a personal knowledge of God to them.

To provide Bible teaching to gain understanding of God's word.

To develop a vibrant Christian life by relating Bible teachings to daily life.

To develop appreciation for and loyalty to their Christian heritage.

To prepare them for church membership. (p. S-53)

Although this approach includes an element of evangelisation, the focus of children's ministry is mostly on children already within the church, and on enhancing their continuous spiritual growth.

The holistic child development approach originates from a more missional and compassionate paradigm. It focusses more on lost and broken children or children at risk, who are socially excluded and living mostly in a culture of poverty. More specifically, it will attend to minister to child labourers, street children, children affected by armed conflict, sexually exploited children, children infected or affected by HIV, orphans and children affected by disability and various diseases, for example malaria. Their priority is to reach out to CAR (cf. 'Children at Risk'). Segura-April (2016) mentioned that:

[F]or some of these children, the church has been a place of refuge and love, where they are able to find restoration, community, and support to thrive. For many, however, the church is yet another place where they feel unwelcome. The church is often unclear about how to deal with children who attend alone, who might not be clean or dressed well, who have needs the church is unable to meet, or who have participated in immoral activities. These children may experience the church as a place of judgment rather than love. (p. 171)

Therefore, many of the children at risk live outside the influence of the church and Sunday school. It is mostly the Christian agencies that reach out to them through social action projects for the betterment of their everyday lives. Key actions in this approach are justice, service and mercy towards children and their circumstances. Keller (n.d.) explains these concepts in the following way:

‘Justice’ means we have to be ‘prophetic’ and speak on behalf of the poor and demand equity for them. ‘Mercy’ means to be ‘priestly’ and to move toward the poor with compassion and deep sympathy. ‘Service’ means to be ‘kingly’ in that we are to be most practical and concrete in meeting needs. (p. 5)

A holistic approach attends to the most basic needs of a whole child in a way that will affect all the child’s relationships as well as the whole community to which the child belongs. ‘Holistic ministry is to meet needs through deeds, out of a heart for justice and a heart of compassion’ (Keller n.d.:5). Both sides of the spectrum falter very easy at exactly this point. The one group concentrates mostly on the personal needs of children and, thus, on their spiritual need of salvation with almost no regard for the contextual needs that children experience. The other group concentrates so much on the context in which children live and the addressing of their contextual needs that they tend to ignore their spiritual needs and thus the need of salvation.

It seems that these two paradigms reflect the old dilemma or tension between evangelism (education) and social action. It is not just an African problem; it is a global problem. In his research on the FBO-church partnership for children’s ministry in Romania, Prevette (cf. 2012:xii–xiii; 1; 299–300) experienced exactly this same tension and divide. The churches primarily focussed on conversion, and addressing the social needs of children was secondary. The FBOs primarily focussed on caring for the marginalised and suffering children because of the urgency of their needs

and did not give much attention to evangelising these broken children. This situation is a dichotomy that we should find ways to overcome because our different paradigms and focusses can hinder our involvement with, and impact on, the lives of children. In this regard, Greener (2016) states:

We cannot separate children from context by focusing on personal salvation apart from addressing sinful systems that oppress children. We are to remove obstacles and reduce risk by bringing justice to broken contexts while simultaneously caring for the whole child, building resilience to meet challenges and empowering children to join the Church in bringing forth kingdom realities until Jesus Christ returns ... Thus, ministering 'to, for, and with' CAR entails salvation as liberation from personal sin, but also freedom from risky contexts that are embedded in historical, economic, social, political and cultural systems or 'social sin', acknowledging the power of the reign of Christ to overcome the injustices faced by CAR. (p. 163)

For enhancing partnering with each other and for the effectiveness of our ministries with children, we have to reflect theologically on developing a more inclusive theological and ministerial paradigm which will include all children with all their needs and all relevant ministry actions. A paradigm that will view child evangelism (education) and social actions by, and on behalf of, children as equal partners in reaching out to children, so related to each other as husband and wife are supposed to be (cf. Huñát n.d.:7, 11). Maybe it will be helpful if we can develop an understanding of children's ministry that is wider and deeper than the view of ministry with children as evangelism (education) and/or social action. In this process, we will have to develop language and concepts that will overcome this old tension and, at the same time, create new passion and energy and commitment to children's ministry. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to establish good collaboration and mutual theological reflection between child care workers, those who practice advocacy on behalf of children in the public

sector and the church, the members of the faith communities and also the children themselves (cf. Greener 2016:163).

■ An inclusive theological paradigm

□ Where do we begin?

A tricky question is where to begin with the development of a ‘new’ inclusive theological paradigm for children’s ministry and holistic care. There exist many different understandings of children’s ministry amongst academic theologians. These different understandings are expressed by using different metaphors, for example Chap Clark (ed. 2016) uses the metaphor of adoption, or by formulating different approaches such as ‘The inclusive congregational approach’ of Malan Nel (ed. Senter 2001:1–30), ‘The Ecclesial approach of Fernando Arzola’ (ed. Clark 2015:112–125), ‘the Strategic approach’ of Senter (ed. 2001:113–148), ‘the gospel advancing approach’ of Greg Stier (ed. Clark 2015:1–14) and ‘the missional approach’ of Chap Clark (ed. Clark 2015:40–59). All these views originate from a more developed context.

There are not many resources containing deep theological reflection about children’s ministry, especially on the African continent. There are various reasons for this situation. One of them is that many publications focus on the how-to-do aspects of children’s ministry with not much reflection on the theological underpinnings of ministering with children. Another reason is that most of the resources available focus rather on theological reflection about youth ministry (cf. ed. Clark 2015; ed. Senter 2001) than about children’s ministry. Some of these theological thinkers even express it explicitly, in one or another way, that they focus their theological thinking only on youth ministry. The fact that children’s ministry is still part of the academic subject of youth ministry implies that

it is necessary that theological reflection on the underpinnings of youth ministry should at least take children's ministry into account. Although there exist good reasons for differences in the ministry practice of these two ministries, it is just untenable that they can operate with total different theological underpinnings. Therefore, as starting point, an inclusive theological paradigm has to be inclusive, not only of the educational and holistic development approaches, but also of both children's ministry and youth ministry.

Children's ministry will always focus on children coming from and living in a specific historical period. They are also living in a specific geographical area. Moreover, these factors influence who they are, how they live and what their needs are. Therefore, children's ministry always has to be contextual children's ministry (cf. Hendriks 2004:27–28). When reflecting theologically on children's ministry, we always have to take the specific context of children, globally as well as locally, seriously into account. In our quest for a theological paradigm for children's ministry we have to bring their context in conversation with the Bible by using a correlational hermeneutical approach (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:29, 42; Ploeger 1999:69–93). In the process various perspectives will be correlated in a sensitive dialogue between Word and world.

If you examine the context in which children are living in the 21st century, as discussed above under the period of globalisation, the one outstanding factor is the suffering of Africa's children because of social exclusion. Even in the church children experience, at times, exclusion by adult believers. If you reflect theologically on this contextual factor in the lives of children, the immediate question is: What does the scripture say about the 'exclusion' of children, as well as of the very opposite, the 'inclusion' of children?

There are many relevant texts in scripture that can help one to answer the above questions. Two of the most important texts come from the Gospels. In telling these two stories each author has his own version on what exactly happened. I decided to focus on the versions of the Gospel according to Matthew. Although it is impossible to do extensive exegeses of these two texts, I build my arguments here on my earlier, more extensive, exegesis of the two texts (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:301–341).

Both texts address exclusion as well as inclusion in relation to children. The first one is Matthew 18:5–6 together with verses 10–14:

⁵Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

¹⁰See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹²What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish. (Mt 18:5–6; 18:10–14)

There are very clear indications of the inclusion and the exclusion of children in the above text. The receiving of children in Matthew 18:5 aims to encourage the disciples to include children in their communities of Jesus followers. This instruction was in direct contrast with the custom in their surrounding Mediterranean culture where children were socially excluded because they were seen as the least important people. Matthew 18:6 is a warning to the disciples against excluding children from their communities of believers by leading them to sin, and the implications of such a deed for their own lives. Matthew 18:10a continues the warning against excluding children. The disciples should never despise children.

In Matthew 18:10b Jesus again stresses for his disciples the importance of always including the children by using the image of the angels in heaven, which demonstrates the inclusion of children in the godly realm. In Matthew 18:12–14, through the parable of the lost sheep, the disciples are again warned not to exclude children when they go astray, but rather to do their best to include them by going after them and bringing them back to the fold. God does not want any one of the children to perish through exclusion.

To receive or welcome the children can be interpreted that Jesus wants his disciples to practice hospitality towards the children (cf. Hagner 1995:522; Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:92; Weber 1979:50). According to Strange (2004:54), “Receiving” here probably means serving someone and seeing to their needs, and the child is taken as a ready example of the weak and powerless.’ The disciples are called here to let go of their eagerness to become more powerful people, but rather to serve the children, the least important people in their society, by deeds of hospitality. They have to do it in the name of Jesus, as his representatives, as his hands and feet and ears.

The second text is:

¹³Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked the people, ¹⁴but Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.’ ¹⁵And he laid his hands on them and went away. (Mt 19:13–15)

This text is a practical demonstration of the exclusion and the inclusion of children. In spite of Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18:5–14, the disciples did not want to include the children amongst the group of people around Jesus. They and their needs were not important enough for the disciples to include them in the circle of people around Jesus. According to Matthew 19:13, the disciples tried to keep the children away from Jesus, to exclude

them. In Matthew 19:14–15 Jesus did the exact opposite. In verse 14 Jesus teaches his disciples again that the children should be included in the community of people around him, because, in spite of their inferiority in the eyes of the adults, they are included in the kingdom of heaven, in God's kingdom. In verse 15 Jesus confirmed his teaching by a deed of inclusion: He blessed the children.

■ Hospitality as an alternative paradigm

In the discussion above it is clear that Jesus expected from his disciples to practice hospitality towards children. In light of this interpretation above of the two texts in the Gospel according to Matthew, the question is: Can the metaphor of hospitality perhaps help us to develop a new inclusive understanding of children's ministry? Already in 1997, Kitching (1997:4–6) suggested that the biblical concept of hospitality could help us in developing a more inclusive view on youth ministry. With this suggestion Kitching did not take children into account because he was in search for a way of thinking to overcome the generational gap between adolescents and the older generations. However, children are also in the process of developing their own generational identity that has all the potential to alienate them and the older generations from one another. Therefore, it is important that the older generations learn to apply the principle of hospitality in their relationships with both adolescents and children. Children's ministry is in all its facets a ministry of hospitality. Hospitality is a basic attitude and practice that should be developed in all local churches as well as in the Christian agencies serving youth and children. Even the churches and the agencies should practice hospitality to one another. It may be extremely difficult to establish this paradigm in local churches because it is so different from the educational paradigm which is operative in so many local

churches. The challenge is actually to change the culture of local churches to more of a hospitality culture. Moreover, the agencies should also reflect on how hospitality can influence their actions and projects for the better.

It is essential for all Christians, local churches and Christian agencies to realise that showing hospitality to people who are different from you is partly at the heart of the Christian message (cf. Vosloo 2006). Hospitality towards children is actually rooted in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament an important emphasis is placed on showing compassion towards orphans (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:213–214, 268–271).

The motivation to be compassionate towards the orphans, who experienced oppression and exclusion many times in their societies, is the fact that being compassionate towards orphans was part of God's character.

⁵Father of the fatherless and protector of widows
is God in his holy habitation.

⁶God settles the solitary in a home. (n.p.)

In light of the fact that God showed compassion to Israel whilst they were slaves in Egypt, Israel has to show compassion to the vulnerable people like the orphans. They have to reflect God's character in the way they handle orphans by creating for them a supporting life space which will protect them from oppression by the powerful people. This care for the orphans included the instruction to include them in some of Israel's religious feasts (cf. Dt 16:11 & 14).

May *et al.* (2005:133) define biblical hospitality as 'the practice of welcoming strangers, particularly the vulnerable, the poor, and the needy into a safe place as guests being served by welcoming hosts.' But what is the meaning of the concept 'strangers'? For Pohl (1999), strangers:

[A]re those who are disconnected from basic relationships that give persons a secure place in the world. The most vulnerable strangers are detached from family, community, church, work, and polity. This condition is most clearly seen in the state of homeless people and refugees. (loc. 183–184)

From the above discussion it seems as if we can deduce that God's compassion towards the strangers and vulnerable orphans in the Old Testament can be applied to all the vulnerable and the children at risk of the 21st century. God cares for the marginalised and excluded children today as much as he had care for the orphans in Old Testament times. Therefore, God is calling the churches and the Christian agencies to live out God's heart of compassion through deeds of compassion, service and hospitality towards all the vulnerable children in our midst.

There are two metaphors about the church that can help us to create a better understanding of the hospital community. In her book, *Church in the round: Feminist interpretation of the church*, Letty Russell (1993:12) asked the following question: 'What might a church that struggled to practice a sharing of authority in community look like?' Her answer is: A round table. There is no position of power around a round table. Everyone sitting at the round table is equal. Furthermore, in many cultures the round table is a place for being together, for eating and informal conversation, for joy and laughing (cf. Russell 1993:17). Russell (1993:17) states: '[T]he round table is a symbol of hospitality and a metaphor for gathering, for sharing and dialogue' (cf. Dingemans 2000:276–277). At the round table everyone is welcomed and included as equal in the community around the table. With this metaphor, Russell wants the church to become a space where all the marginalised people of society, including the marginalised children, will be welcomed and accepted as equal members of the round table community.

Although Russell did not apply this metaphor to children or children's ministry, the application of it to children and the ministry with children is very relevant. At the round church table adults and children meet each other. They interact and share with each other as equals. Moreover, they always have to be open to receive new guests, especially the excluded and marginalised children of their community and even wider. They have to experience that they are really welcomed in the name of Jesus at this round table. Here they can express all their needs, the life challenges they are struggling with, the questions they have, how they experience God's presence or not in the life realities of every day.

Another useful metaphor for understanding the hospitable church is used by Dingemans (2000:272–273): The church as inn or hotel. In this milieu, all guests are welcomed hospitably. They are served by the staff with the utmost care. All their needs are addressed in the best way possible. That is how it has to be for all children in the church, even for those who suffer under the consequences of social exclusion. Here at the inn, everyone is included.

The inclusion of all children and their various needs in a ministry of hospitality towards children, calls for a strategy that will implement this paradigm into practice. To achieve this goal, six important aspects of such a strategy have been identified.

Relational

Hospitality is all about relationships. All human beings have been created as relational beings. God is in essence relational (Butin 2001:90) a community, the perfect relationship between God the parent, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In this regard Volf (1998:204), refers to the 'communion of the divine persons.' Created in the image of God, the implication is that

we share in the relationality of the Trinity. Therefore, it is our calling to reflect the relationality of God in all we do. 'God intends the divine *koinonia* to be reflected in human *koinonia*' (Butin 2001:90).

What is important in these relationships is that we do not build individual relationships for using them to achieve something else in the lives of the children: to accept some moral behaviour, to become spiritual, to accept Jesus as saviour (cf. Root 2007:15). Rather, it is just to be present, to be alongside the other, to be connected to one another. It is (Root 2007):

[A]bout sharing in suffering and joy, about persons meeting persons with no pretence or secret motives. It is about shared life, confessing Christ not outside the relationship but within it. (p. 15).

In this sense it becomes incarnational ministry.

In practice this approach implies that you spend time with the other (Vosloo 2006:25–35), and make space or room for the other in your life (Vosloo 2006:36–43). When we bring this in association with the words of Jesus in Matthew 18 that those who receive children in his name actually receive him, time spent with children and making space for them in your life becomes a godly and kingdom moment, a moment of meeting Jesus.

To enter the world of children it is essential that we communicate with them on their level and in a language that is understandable for them. Landreth (2002:16), renowned play therapist, made the observation that 'play is the child's language and toys his words.' To really connect with children, adults will have to learn the language of play, to be able to express themselves understandably to children, but also to understand the children's communication with them. The only way to do it, is to spend much time with children.

Although play is a vital way to communicate with children and participate in their world, it is not the only way to connect with them. Stories, music,

humour, touch, protection and encouragement also form part of effective communication with children. In short (Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2013):

[A]ctivities reaching out to the hearts of children, showing respect and fulfilling their needs – all are expressions of love that strengthens relationships and enhances growth. Hospitality speaks the language of love. (p. 811)

Intergenerational

An important aspect of practicing hospitality is to establish intergenerational relations and interactions. For many years, the educational paradigm of doing children's ministry was built on the principle of differentiation. Under the influence of the theory of the developmental phases, hugely influenced by the work of Piaget, each age group was separated from all the other groups with the motivation that children could learn the best when the teaching is appropriate to their own developmental phase. The result was that the local churches were fragmented into many different groups without much cohesion between them.

Since the 1970s there is a growing tendency to emphasise the necessity of developing an intergenerational approach to children's ministry. These resources vary between those concentrating on the theoretical and conceptual framework, the more pragmatic literature that focusses more on practical issues and programmes, and the empirical ethnographic studies (cf. Allen 2002, 2004, 2005; Allen & Ross 2012; Amidei, Merhaut & Roberto 2014; Burnham 1978; Carroll & Roof 2002; Foster 2012; Glassford 2011; Griggs & Griggs 1976; Grobbelaar 2008; Harkness 1996, 2012; Nelson 1971; Parsley 2012; Prest 1992, 1993, 1996, 1999; Rendle 2002; Ross 2012; Walker 2013; Westerhoff 2000; White 1988; Whitesel & Hunter 2000).

It is important to take notice of the fact that (Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2013):

[C]hildren are not the only ones to lose out in a segregated church. Adults need the children as much as the children need them. Jesus' instruction to 'welcome the little

ones' held a blessing not only for the 'guests', but even more so for the 'hosts', because it would be an opportunity to receive Jesus!' (Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2013:812). (p. 812)

An intergenerational approach is much more than doing activities together and sharing the same space in the process. '[I]ntergenerationalism goes deeper than various age groups of people simply being together. It insists on a definite interaction, relationship and conversation between the three or four generations present' (Prest 1999:1). In the process, all the generations serve one another. Together they become a learning community in which they learn from one another and help one another to discover more about their faith. The implication is that children should not be welcomed just passively but also actively as models and agents of faith, as sources of revelation and representatives of Jesus in the lives of adults and other children. In the process, adults have to learn to be served by children and to receive from children whatever they have to give.

Narrative

People sometimes act inhospitably towards other people. One of the reasons is that they struggle to understand one another (Vosloo 2006:18–20) because they use different languages. But this is not always true. Bonhoeffer has already indicated that it can happen that you experience the people nearest to you, those who speak the same language as you, as strangers (Vosloo 2006:21) sometimes the children in our midst, in our homes and local churches, are the most difficult to understand. Therefore, hospitality has to include an openness for the otherness of those who live very close to us, who even look and act in many ways just like us (Vosloo 2006:21).

This same principle is also applicable to our local churches. Adults have to develop a bigger sensitivity for the limited language abilities of children,

especially when it involves religious language and abstract theological concepts. That is why children sometimes feel unwelcome in worship services: they do not understand the language. And we seldom create a 'language space' for them. We rather move them out of the worship service to their own children's service. Part of the language problem is that we do not contextualise our dogmatic truths with regard to age. Seldom do we ask ourselves: How do we have to interpret and apply this dogmatic formulation in the world of children? Which needs of children are addressed by this dogmatic truth (cf. DeVries 2001:167–173)?

The best way to communicate with children is through stories. Children love stories. And the Bible is the story of God's involvement in this world. It contains many episodes of the story of God's relationship with God's people. And we have to tell these stories to our children. Stories are a form of play (cf. Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2013:813). Although the body is not active, the mind is 'playing' with the characters and their actions, with what is happening in the story, with the choices that are made, with the emotions involved in the story, and they stir the imagination of children. They become part of the story in a world that is less threatening to them than the difficult situations they have to face in their everyday world. The value of stories for children is emphasised by Coetsee (2010), saying:

The remarkable thing is that because of this distance between the world of stories and the real world, the child can come closer to his true emotional world when listening to stories. Therefore, stories have the power to change his world of feelings and beliefs. Because he can identify with the heroes in the stories, he can start living a new life in his imagination, from where it can be transferred to his real life. (p. 148)

In being a hospitable church for children, the narrative plays a very important role. We have to create many story moments in our ministry with children. However, it has to go beyond that. The life and ministry of the local church is also a story, a story that God is telling to the world.

When children experience that they are becoming part of the story of the local church, they will feel welcome and will live in the story.

Narrative children's ministry means allowing children to live inside the stories God is telling, to hear and see and copy and borrow from others' stories and to become storytellers in their own right (Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2013:813).

■ Missional

Theological reflection on hospitality and living it out in practical ways in, and through, the local church is actually obedient participation in God's missionary praxis (cf. Hendriks 2004:24–25). Or, as Bosch (1991) formulated it:

[M]ission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world. (p. 519)

Therefore, holistic children's ministry has to reflect who God is. The way in which a local church practises holistic ministry with children should be an expression of God's identity (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:407–410).

But what is God's identity? God is a triune God: Parent, Son and Holy Spirit. The implication is that God is a God 'of community, of relationships, of belonging to each other, of love' (Smit 2003:24). That is exactly what God expects from the church to be: to live in relationship, in communion with other people, including CAR. Because God is a missionary God, God sent Jesus into the world to restore the community between God and people that was broken by sin. In the same way, God sent the church into the world to reach out to all people, including all children, especially CAR, to include them in the *koinonia* [fellowship] which God established in the church. That is exactly what Jesus asked from the church in Matthew 18:5 – to receive all children, to receive all children at risk, in the name of Jesus that they can experience love,

acceptance, healing, liberation and much more through their inclusion in the fellowship of God's church (cf. Grobbelaar 2008:307–341; 2016).

This holistic missional calling of the church is aptly expressed in Micah:

⁸He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? (Mi 6:8)

According to De Beer (2008:63), Micah 6:8 is a call to a 'threefold conversion'. This call is applicable not only to each individual believer, but also to the whole church, and each local church. De Beer (2008:63) formulated this threefold conversion as follows:

[F]irst, a personal conversion to God, but then the humble God who became a child in Jesus;
second, an interpersonal conversion to other people; as we look into the eyes of Jesus, Jesus shows us the stranger and calls us into relationships of community and interdependence; and
thirdly, a political/public conversion challenging us to work for justice in the public arena. (p. 63)

All three of these conversions are necessary for engaging with children in general, but especially with CAR.

- A conversion to humility as expressed in Jesus becoming flesh amongst us. Philippians 2:4–8 is perhaps the biblical text that describes this conversion to humility the best.

⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phlp 2:4–8).

- An interpersonal conversion of children, including CAR. As followers of Jesus, we have to take up our *kenosis* identity and live it out in relationships of community and interdependence with all children. We will have to serve CAR with the mind of Jesus.
- A political and/or public conversion that will take up the case of children and become advocates of justice for them in the public sphere.

Based on this threefold conversion, participation in the mission of Jesus implies, according to Micha 6:8, at least the following three aspects of action (Burger 1999:83–84), as applied to children by Coetsee and Grobbelaar (cf. 2013:814):

- That local churches, being a learning community of both children and adults around Jesus, will spread to all children the good news of the gospel through preaching and witnessing.
- That all church members will always be attentive in every context to see and hear the needs, the traumas, the struggles of all children, with a sensitivity for CAR who suffer under the phenomenon of social exclusion through experiencing poverty, homelessness, sexual exploitation, violent conflicts, the HIV pandemic, lack of health and educational services and oppressive labour practices.
- That local churches and individual believers will break the silence surrounding many of the risk factors CAR experience and become the voice for so many voiceless children by addressing all oppressive and exploitive practices and enhancing justice and righteousness for all children, both outside and inside the church.

Missional children's ministry takes place in different contexts: the context of a home, the church, the school and community (cf. Lehmann 1999:vi; Malherbe n.d.:23–35). To enhance hospitality as missional activity, the members of the church have to move outside the church into the contexts

of home, school and community. Especially in contexts where many children are socially excluded, local churches have to form partnerships with other local churches, child-focussed agencies and other community institutions, such as schools and businesses. Together they can make more of a difference in these children's lives than when they work on their own. Through the network of partners, they should reach out to CAR and welcome them into the faith communities. Missional involvement with children will become easier when they all work together, and together they will have a bigger missional impact on the lives of individual children as well as in their communities.

Holistic

Being missional and being holistic is closely related. In fact, it is very difficult to be missional without being holistic. Therefore, we have to develop a holistic mindset that will always be present in our theological reflections about being a hospitable church where all children are welcome.

A holistic approach to children's ministry addresses all four developmental categories of children: spiritual, socio-emotional, cognitive and physical. Those adults caring for children have to strengthen the whole child by ensuring that these four developmental categories are integrated with one another, but they also have to understand that holistic ministry is much more than this. It also has to strengthen the broad ecology around children (cf. Powell 2007). It 'connects children, youth, family, congregation, community and culture' (Strommen & Hardel 2000:16) with one another. Both aspects of holistic ministry are imperative when the brokenness of CAR is addressed. In such a situation, strong collaboration is needed between children's workers, child caregivers, the church, the Christian agencies, the child advocates, any supporters of the children and

the children's ministry, and also the children themselves. In the process, each role player can focus on different parts of a holistic process, but they should think holistically and understand where their focus fits into the overall ministry process.

In focusing on the whole child and all the aspects and needs of their lives, five possible processes in holistic children's ministry can be identified (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:72–75). The concepts that are used to describe these processes are well known in the social sciences. It is impossible to discuss these concepts critically in detail. The goal here is only to indicate how these processes fit into a more holistic understanding of children's ministry. These five processes are growing, nurturing, socialising, formation and healing.

Growing

To live is to grow: physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually and spiritually. Holistic children's ministry has to stimulate this growth with the intention that each child should have the opportunity to actualise its potential. If a child is not able to grow in one or more of these aspects the child should get the best care and support to live with human dignity. The following four processes support the growth of children: nurturing, socialising, formation and healing.

Nurturing

Nurturing is a very basic process of human life. Without it no child can grow. Nurturing supplies the day to day nourishment, stimulation and security that a child needs to grow. It is through nurturing that children should discover that they are loved by their family or primary caregivers. In the process they should also discover that God is love and that they are

included in God's love. Therefore, holistic children's ministry should support families and primary caregivers in creating a nurturing environment for children. Sometimes it is not possible to provide such an environment. Then the church's calling is to provide for these children the best alternative family environment in which they can be nurtured so that they can keep on growing.

□ **Socialising**

The socialising process starts at home. Through socialising children build relationships and experience community with different people. In the process they should gain the courage to venture outside their homes and into the world. It is through the process of socialising that children learn the values, norms, traditions and customs of their families and community. This process contributes much in forming children's own identities. Building and experiencing good relations with the older generations should always be encouraged. Young and old have to learn how they can enter the world of the other generation and to come to an understanding of the other.

□ **Formation**

In all the stages of life it is important to keep on learning. Without learning it is not possible to grow or integrate faith and values into a Christian lifestyle. Formation is so much more than only schooling.

It includes discovering, imitating, learning through play, and teaching as part of everyday life. Much of this is unstructured, and happens informally and even unconsciously. That is why role models play such an important role in formation, especially faith formation (Grobbelaar 2012:74).

This is one of the big challenges for holistic children's ministry: to facilitate and establish relationships between children and as many adults as possible. Through these intergenerational relationships children can see, experience and learn the practices and principles of the Christian

lifestyle. However, the influence of role models should be supplemented by the creation of intentional and more formal structured educational moments in which the Bible plays a central role. These educational moments should be relational driven. As part of formation, evangelisation, as introducing children to Jesus and as incorporation into the body of Christ, has a place. But children should never be manipulated or coerced to accept Jesus as saviour.

□ Healing

The restoration of wholeness in the lives of CAR and other traumatised children is a huge challenge for holistic children's ministry. Grobbelaar (2012) is of the opinion that:

[C]hildren's ministry should strive to provide healing for children in unjust situations. The implication ... is that children's ministry should guide the healers to move into the world of traumatised children with a listening attitude, also in terms of play as the universal language of children, to hear their pain and understand their wounds and needs.

Also, the healers should be prepared to walk together with the children into an encounter with the healing God who is the only one who can really restore wounded and broken people. (p. 75)

Furthermore, holistic children's ministry should guide local churches to create spaces where connecting with CAR is a core activity and the purpose of their existence. Local churches should establish healing communities for CAR (cf. Coetsee & Grobbelaar 2014).

■ Inclusive

As an act of hospitality it is also essential that holistic children's ministry will integrate children into the whole life of a local church. The implication is that children should be included as active participants in all the ministries

or services of the church. These services can be described in different ways. Nel (1994:26–27; 1998:84), coming from the Reformed theological tradition, identified eight essential ministries:

- *Koinonia* [Fellowship]
- *Kerugma* [Preaching/Proclamation]
- *Leitourgia* [Worship]
- *Didache* [Teaching]
- *Paraklesis* [Pastoral Care]
- *Marturia* [Witness]
- *Diakonia* [Service/compassion]
- *Kybernetes* [Leadership and administration].

In many local churches following the ‘educational’ paradigm, children are almost only included in the *didache* ministry. Sometimes they take part in some of the other services, for example the *leitourgia*, but in a segregated way in their own children’s services. In the ‘hospitality’ paradigm this situation changes drastically. Children are now welcomed and included in all the ministries. To function as a hospitable church the challenge is to creatively reshape each of the eight ministries so that all children, also CAR, will feel welcome to participate. In general, it will expand the services of the local church.

□ ***Koinonia***

Fellowship in all the church meetings, including the main worship service, can be expressed and experienced in sincere and respectful acknowledgement of one another. Purposeful rituals including touch, eye contact, compassion and caring can become integral parts of every worship service. Intergenerational *koinonia* can become the keystone to the life of the church.

□ *Kerugma*

Preaching or proclamation needs to be revalued concerning inclusiveness. It is possible to ‘preach’ in such a way that even a child can understand the message without compromising on the theological depth or radical appeal of the Word. Child-friendly preaching, however, is far more than a ‘children’s sermon’ once in a while. A narrative approach to proclamation is one example of proper inclusive *kerugma*.

□ *Leitourgia*

In 2 Chronicles 31:16 we find the following remarkable words:

[T]hose enrolled by genealogy, males from three years old and upward—all who entered the house of the Lord as the duty of each day required – for their service according to their offices, by their divisions. (2 Chr 31:16)

This text suggests that boys of three years old were already deemed fit for temple service. In the rich liturgy of the temple it was not difficult to find a meaningful role for a ‘preschooler’, and with creative wisdom the same can be done in the modern church. In this respect, the ‘young’ churches, with their focus on preaching through the spoken word, have much to learn from the ‘old’ churches, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and early Protestant, with their greater understanding of the role of senses and experiences in the worship services. According to the Bible, children have a place in public prayer (Ac 21:5), confession (Es 10:1), worship (Ps 8:2), music (Ps 148:12) – in all aspects of liturgy.

□ *Didache*

Instructing, teaching can go far beyond transferring knowledge just on a cognitive level. According to Ephesians 4:12, *didache* becomes ‘equipping of the saints’, preparation for ministry. Children are agents of faith and

have proven in many situations that they are ready to be equipped for active service, not only for Sunday school examinations.

□ ***Paraklesis***

It is a sad fact that children are hurt, and trauma leads to suffering that is often prolonged deep into adult life. What is also true is that dealing with the wounds at a young age often has greater effect than counselling or therapy at a later age. Unfortunately, few churches are geared to address childhood trauma, and few pastors are equipped for child or family counselling. However, pastoral care has to be broadened. Healing, as discussed above, can be enhanced by establishing healing communities where adults and children together take responsibility to care for each other.

□ ***Marturia***

In the early church, where witness and martyrdom were two sides of the same coin, children fully participated in 'marturia'. John Foxe, in his classic (although controversial) 1563 work *Acts and monuments*, popularly abridged as *Foxe's book of martyrs* (ed. Forbush: 1967), describes many incidents of children dying for their faith. This is also true for the persecuted church of today in many countries. However, even where children are not subjected to physical persecution, they often show a readiness to participate in witnessing, whatever the cost. It seems as if more and more local churches take whole families on their outreaches and that children participate actively in these programmes.

□ ***Diakonia***

Despite the highly visible advocacy efforts of UNICEF and other global agents for children, churches still seem to be slow or reluctant to react to

the plight of the little ones in distress. Where they do become involved, it is often 'from a distance' through financial sponsorships or donations. Too often children are seen as objects (recipients), but not as participants in Christian and/or humanitarian aid, but it is possible to include children in such activities. An inclusive diaconal church can have a lasting impact on the society, as well as on its own members.

□ *Kybernetes*

Leadership, planning and budgeting are highly exclusive in many churches. One person, or a few at the top, makes almost all the decisions, including those decisions that are directly connected to children. Exclusivity is often reflected in the budget of a church where holistic children's ministry is not a high priority, in spite of the fact that children are a big proportion of the church's membership. Inclusive churches are discovering the richness of including children in decision-making processes, planning and budgeting.

■ **Conclusion**

The chapter started with a discussion on the history of children's ministry in Africa. From this discussion it was concluded that we need a new paradigm for doing children's ministry in Africa. It was suggested, after attending to what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples that they should receive or welcome the children, that the biblical concept of hospitality may help us in this regard. The concept hospitality was unpacked into six aspects: relational, intergenerational, narrative, missional, holistic and inclusive. In the discussion of the concept holistic, five processes were identified as essential processes in practising holistic children's ministry: growing, nurturing, socialising, formation and healing. Under the aspect inclusive, attention was given to the eight services or

ministries of the church, and the statement was made that, as an act of hospitality, children should be included in each of these eight services. To achieve the goal of being a hospitable church for children by practising holistic children's ministry, it may be worthwhile to use the holistic children's ministry processes and the services of the church as complementary tools to evaluate churches' ministry to, with, by and on behalf of children.

It is a huge challenge to change local churches to hospitable spaces where all children, including CAR, are welcomed and fully included in the life and ministry of the church. To practise hospitality implies, according to Anderson and Johnson (1994:111–131; 1995:37–39) and Jensen (2005:111–115) that the local church has to become 'a sanctuary for children/childhood.'

With this view they embrace a custom from the Middle Ages. During that time, church buildings became a refuge place 'for the dispossessed and despised, anyone on the run from powers that enslave and kill' (Jensen 2005:112). Lindner (in Jensen 2005) explains this custom as follows:

The intention of sanctuary, legally speaking, grew in the twelfth century. In those days, one who was fleeing from someone who would do them harm could run into a church or monastery, ring the bell, and speak to the abbot. The abbot would protect them for forty days, until the complaint could be adjudicated in some fair way. (p. 112)

In discussing the characteristics of a church as sanctuary for children, Jensen (2005:113) expressed the opinion, that '[a]t a bare minimum, the church would provide a place of physical and emotional safety.' A place where children can grow spiritually and emotionally in the presence of God and the support of the faith community (cf. Anderson & Johnson 1994:112–113; Jensen 2005:113). As a sanctuary for children the adult believers should honour the human dignity of every child. They should

handle the children with respect and a commitment to enhance their self-worth, creating a space where they will feel secured and loved. Anderson and Johnson (1995) declare:

The church that is a sanctuary for childhood will (1) welcome children as full participants in the life of God's people; (2) support parents in their ever-changing parenthood; (3) attend to the formation of faithful children with new urgency; (4) intervene when children or families experience extraordinary problems and needs; (5) advocate for systemic change where families are endangered by social conditions; and (6) challenge individuals, families, society and the church itself to a deepening regard for childhood as the measure of God's justice and mercy in the world. (p. 38)

Hospitable sanctuaries with round tables where all children are welcomed, served and their human dignity acknowledged, providing for all their needs as people in whom Jesus is present in our midst, and respecting them as agents of faith in the coming of God's kingdom – these are the challenges we have to face and address if we really want to do holistic children's ministry.

Integrating children in the life and ministry of faith communities

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■ Introduction

When we in theology and the church do not reflect on how we think and deal with children, we miss out on the very essence of life. Children are an expression of the ability of us humans to ‘create’. We are being created and ‘appointed’ to be creators. ‘Then came the eighth day and man, almost divine, was called to be “almost a creator”’ (Fiebert 1986:226; cf. Gn 1 & 2). Different from God, we are but creators on the eighth day. Children being

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‘born’ from us are testimony to this. We are dealing with the very essence of being and becoming.

The intention in Chapter 5 is to reflect on:

- The theology behind inclusive thinking in youth ministry, with specific reference to children.
- The challenging ministry of changing congregational culture to be inclusive.
- The operational procedures when we do change to integrate children in the life and ministry of faith communities.

■ Inclusive thinking

I cannot help remembering the response when I first read a paper on this subject in 1984 at a meeting of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod in Chicago. The topic was almost the same as the one given to me for Chapter 5. I had to speak on *Integrating youth into the full life and work of the church – in worship* (Reformed Ecumenical Synod: Youth Conference 1984). Within a reformed environment, the reaction was not hostile, but very ‘cultural and surprised’. My second opportunity to try and share my convictions was at the second international conference of what is now known as the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry in 1997. I tried to argue a case for youth ministry as practical theology, working with an inclusive understanding of youth ministry (Nel 1999:23–42). Here, in a very diverse ecumenical setting, the reaction was mixed, even hostile.

It all started with my research for my doctoral degree at the University of Pretoria. My research problem concerned youth evangelism. I already realised then that we are trying to win back what we have lost – our very own. We have lost them so often (too often) because we thought about

them wrongly. In an article based on his PhD thesis, Seibel (Seibel & Nel 2010) confirmed (even proved) it all over again: When we neglect inclusive intergenerational youth ministry it has a serious impact on any missional congregation. He even speaks of a need for the reconciliation of generations when this happens. It was, however, that second paper in Oxford in 1997 that led to my participation in *Four views of Youth Ministry* (Senter III *et al.* 2001). It was probably my contribution to this publication that has put the issue of inclusive thinking on an international agenda.

Here, on my own continent, inclusive thinking is challenging for one more reason: culture. It is common knowledge that we live on a continent where children are indeed important – but important in a different way. I grew up in this culture. We were loved in many ways, truly loved. We did, however, grow up in a culture of ‘being seen but not heard’. This culture exists whilst it is true that it is only when we are heard that we realise the value of our humanity. Only then do we feel ‘human’, someone of worth. Children are then, as Firet (1986:138, 156–171) proposed, equally human. He coined the phrase of accepting children as equi-humans. Being seen does not necessarily communicate, let alone being part of, importance. I will come back to this important issue when I discuss the challenging ministry of changing congregational culture.

■ Trying to understand scripture

It is crucial in developing an argument for inclusive thinking to understand what the witness of the Bible is in this regard. In using the Bible in this argument, it is important to understand that the Bible is not a book about children or any other age group as such. The Bible is basically a book about God, God’s kingdom, God’s dealing(s) with this world and God’s people. In this sense it is a book about all of us, whoever we are and whatever age we are. It is like sitting alongside a beautiful mountain stream of the

revelation of God through history (Nel 2000:10). When you watch closely (and in a sense only when you watch closely) you often notice the clear ‘revelationary’ references to children, and you learn from them. There are three ‘insights’ that stand out when you observe attentively and thoughtfully.

□ **God is the God of households**

The first insight is that the human story starts with a ‘we’. As the Bible tells the story it is indeed a sad ‘we story’. But it remains a man and a woman story. The real story starts almost all over with a ‘we’ again (cf. Gn 11: 29–32; 12; 17). God called a family from Ur of the Chaldeans. God called a ‘we’. It was God’s intension all along. We have been created to create. In the Bible ‘they’, the children, are just part and parcel of what God has in mind. There is not an ‘us’ without a ‘them’. We carry them ‘in us’, even before conception and birth. It is almost as if God wants us never to forget: When they are eight days old, please let them ‘know’ they are mine too! (Gn 17). God is indeed a God of households without ever becoming a household god – one on which you sit, as Rebecca did when Laban came looking for his house gods (Gn 31:19 ff.).

This does not mean that God is not deeply involved in the lives of individuals. I do not even want to argue such a common truth in scripture and life. What I do want to emphasise is his deep involvement with parents and their children. The covenantal formula brings both together: [T]o be your God and the God of your descendants after you’ (Gn 17:7 [NIV]). The Bible is one long and exciting story of this involvement. When we separate the ‘I’ and the ‘we or us’ we, as congregations, pay the price. I say this without for one moment ‘absolutising’ the ‘form’ of the ‘we and us’. That has changed. It will probably continue to change. The point is that children

constitute a 'we'. Often through birth, often through adoption – when they are part of the 'we', we know God is involved. God is the God of households!

□ **God is deeply involved in the 'giftedness' of children and their knowing God**

I almost naively believe that there are no 'unwanted children' in the eyes of the Lord. There are, unfortunately, far too many unplanned children. In the words of the poet we learn that 'sons [*and daughters*] are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him' (Ps 127:3 [NIV]). This is the second insight from scripture: Children come from the Lord. Creating life is an act of God. The only difference (as so often) is that we are involved in a very natural way in the 'making' of children. God involves and employs us in the 'giving' of children. This is, by the way, one of the strongest arguments not to 'make' them in an irresponsible way. This is a serious principle in family planning. It is almost a plea: Talk to the Creator before you become involved in the 'making' of the gift. With the strong urge of the 'making drive' (sex, if you prefer) within us, this is one of the most critical issues in the faith development of children. We need to develop a new sense of responsibility when we think and rethink sexual involvement. It is risky 'enjoyment'. Children may come through the sexual involvement.

It is not possible to reflect on the Bible and children without reference to what some people call the most important verse in our book – Deuteronomy 6:4–10 (cf. Nel 2000:9–13). The gift of children by God involves that the children get to know God. When we confess that God is indeed the only one, even though we cannot see God, everything changes. We love God and the first to benefit are children – our household. The principle is important. In the time the book of Deuteronomy was written

it refers to relationships within a specific form of family. Today that form has many faces:

- single parents, whether they be fathers or mothers
- father and mother still married
- newly comprised families – after death or divorce
- same gender marriages
- grandparents caring for grandchildren and even more.

The issue remains the same: Within relationships we love God and we ‘teach’ our children, both informally and formally. We do so in everyday life, using daily life events like travelling, eating, lying down and getting up. Families are constituted by relationships and not by numbers. The form of the family may and will differ in different societies and cultures.

God involves children in what he is up to

The third insight from scripture is that God created us to represent God on earth (cf. Gn 1:28). It is almost logical that we can do so more effectively when we are ‘older’. But: representing God is in effect a human responsibility, irrespective of our age. God involves babies in the changing of parents. There ‘being’ just changes everything – so often including a return to God and his service. God included them in many ways throughout history. It amazes me how often God did so in history: Samuel, the Israelite girl in the life of Naaman (cf. 2 Ki 5), Daniel, the children’s choir in the New Testament, the children attending a farewell prayer meeting for Paul in Acts 21:5. Just think of the many more whose stories did not make it into the Bible! I know of no one in congregational ministry that cannot testify to the changes in the life of parents and families worked by God in

and through children. As it pleases God to ‘reach and teach’ children through parent(s), it also pleases God to do so the other way round.

■ One conclusion with three consequences

□ Children are an integral part of the faith community

The scriptural insights above raise the question: What is the place of children in the faith community? It is more my conviction now than when I first wrote it: Children and other youth are an integral part of the faith community (Nel 1982:29–32, 108–130). By then the denomination of which I am a part had already applied this when, in 1966, a general assembly approved this confession as part of their policy on youth and children’s ministry: youth are an integral part of the congregation. The Dutch Reformed Church did so after eight years of study (Jeugstudiekommissie 1976). When we, as faith communities, agree to this, we change. Because we think differently, we are different and we do differently. The consequences (cf. Nel 2000:77–97) of this view can be summarised as follows:

- Children and other youth should never be ignored.
- Children and other youth are different but never separate (apart) from the whole.
- Children and other youth are the responsibility of the whole faith community.

It is this kind of thinking we need to rediscover if we want to recover children and fully apply other modes of youth ministry. However difficult and challenging, this is our calling. In doing so we probably, as Osmer (1990) suggested, have to rediscover what we have lost:

Rediscovery is the activity of discerning once again the meaning and power of tradition that has been repressed or forgotten. Recovery goes further. It involves the

positive evaluation and appropriation of that tradition, using what has been rediscovered to structure present patterns of thought and action. (p. 141)

This is indeed my understanding of reformation and transformation. This takes time and lots of ministerial energy (cf. Dean 1998:35 for her ‘continuum for youth ministry’).

□ Differentiated ministry

What is the place of differentiated ministry in an inclusive ministry, as explained above? Inclusive thinking takes differentiated ministry serious (cf. Nel 2000:85–97). We do so for many reasons, like the developmental argument. But we do so first and foremost because children and other youth are so inclusively part of the whole. To take differentiation in children and youth ministry serious is for *our* sake – the ‘our’ that includes us all. We differentiate in ministering to parents, seniors and, of course, the young. It does matter whether I am 5, 55, 75 or 95. However, one is never more important than the other; because we are an inclusive whole we take everyone seriously.

My conviction is, however, that the departure point in this way of thinking is to start with ‘inclusivity’. When you think inclusively, you can never escape differentiation. When you start with differentiation (a form of ‘separateness’) you hardly ever, if ever, come to inclusivity, one reason being that the faith community or congregation is just not the total of an add-on sum. *Koinonia*, as a constitutional principle in being church, is more than adding numbers. We are a relational reality. We are so connected in Christ that we even respect our being different, on different levels of development, in different age ‘brackets’. We realise that this is a form of respect (love if you prefer) and not of importance. To make this inclusivity with differentiation possible, the culture of many congregations has to change.

■ Changing congregational culture

■ Changing on a deep level

Osmer (2008:178 ff.) helps us to understand that deep change (a concept used by Quinn 1996) takes place on four levels: identity, mission/purpose, culture and operational procedures. Change on all four levels is critical and difficult. I need to reflect briefly on each one of them. Let me state here: After more than 30 years of involvement in consulting and facilitating in the process of holistic change in developing missional congregations, I am convinced that this is indeed a long-term and challenging ministry. It is a process that takes time even when approached with the best of intentions. Change on these four levels does not happen overnight (cf. Nel 2015a: 23–86).

□ Changing in our understanding of identity

Congregations are often hard hit and almost out of energy because they are confronted by what they should do. So much so that many of them just give up: it is too much, we cannot cope. In congregational ministry (especially in preaching), congregations are constantly reminded of what they have not yet become. It is almost a legalistic and moralistic approach to life, as if we have to make it ourselves. This is too common a phenomenon. My own experience in my 20 years as Director of the Centre for Contextual Ministry (training well-trained and, sometimes, even leaders without a high school education) was that this is sometimes even more prevalent with pastors with little or no training. It is so (too) easy to revert to a legalistic approach to ministry: 'If you do right God will bless, if you do wrong, God will punish.' But this is also true for well-trained pastors in well-educated congregations. The legalistic approach hides just under the skin of a sometimes shallow understanding of the gospel.

When we want to change this we run up against a wall of resistance. The people think that we are no longer serious about sin. They seem to think we take sin seriously because, and when, we take the ‘law’ seriously. This is tough. I will never forget when a relatively young pastor told me: ‘I preached about our God-given identity and within the first month of doing so the leading elder approached me and said: “When are you going to preach to us again?”’ To many, ‘talk about sin’ is ‘preaching’. So much so that listeners become used to being ‘blamed, scolded, and belittled’ and take this to be preaching. No wonder so many congregations are not at all excited about who they are in Christ. They only feel bad about what they have not become yet – so much so that some even give up on becoming. A legalistic approach to changing congregations will get us nowhere. If the law (in this sense) could do the job Jesus came in vain.

The Bible helps us understand what God did on our behalf. What Christ did was so complete and sufficient, that no contribution (offer) on our side is necessary to make our salvation complete (cf. the central message of the book of Hebrews). Because of what he did he calls us by ‘new’ names. We do not call ourselves ‘the body of Christ’. God does. There are about 82 such names or metaphors for us in scripture (cf. Minear 1977). When we begin to understand this grace of God we begin like children (to use one more such name) to say after our God: We are your children, we are your body, we are your priesthood of Kings, we are yours ..., we are ... and we rejoice in it.

If we are right in stating, above, the importance of inclusive thinking, then we rejoice that we are ‘such’ children or any other name we are called. What God did, God did for our children too. Our coming of age does not make God’s deeds of salvation valid. What God did in Christ validates our salvation.

It is ours because God did it and not because we earned it – or we are old enough to understand it. The identity of the faith community is a God-given reality. Nothing on our side adds value to that: it is finished, now and forever.

Helping congregations to begin to understand and appreciate this kind of thinking is a long and tiring ministry, so much so that many leaders give up on it. They either break away with some people who enjoy their (the leader's) legalistic approach or with a section of the congregation who understand their God-given identity and can no longer accept it that so many do not understand. Some others merely begin to settle down in a legalistic kind of ministry for the sake of peace in a valley of death. I explored the road to a new understanding of identity in my book: *Identity driven churches. Who are we and where are we going?* (Nel 2015a:25–50).

□ **Changing our understanding of mission or purpose**

A second level of change of congregations that we have to attend to, is mission or purpose. Facilitating deep change in traditional churches is no easy task. I have already said above, it is often easier to opt out and start all over again. We are sometimes just not honest enough to admit that we are tired of seeking to change traditional churches and then rationalise a break away as being God's guidance. Some try finding so-called theological reasons to justify their break away. And let us admit it: It is a tough ministry to move away from a traditional church where maintenance and upholding tradition is the mission or purpose of all we do. Some may even rationalise starting 'youth churches' and give up on changing parents and grandparents (cf. Senter III in Senter *et al.* 2001:113–147 in what he calls a 'strategic approach').

It is impossible to cover the expanded discussion on developing missional churches in Chapter 5 (cf. Nel 2015a). The so-called missional

discussion is all about this. It is a process where we begin to understand that we do not perform missions but we are in mission. We are indeed God's plan to touch and heal God's world. In deed and word, we are God's 'good-news' people, serving, almost, the so-called world back to God (cf. Nel 2002:65–87).

Missional congregations develop an understanding of their purpose or mission in their contexts. Such a mission statement (understanding of contextual purpose) flows from a deep understanding of who and whose we are. If this is not the case, I personally doubt whether one may even call it a mission statement.

In the case of our topic under discussion, two observations have to be made:

- As a faith community we want, and have to be, inclusive. This pertains first and foremost to 'our' children and other youth. There is no theological justification not to include them. As a church in mission, this is our mission: Let them be and let them experience inclusion, acceptance and love. Missional churches within the reformed tradition are inclusive in nature.
- Inclusive congregations are in essence missional. 'We' are involved in God's healing plan and activities in God's world, our world. Age does not exclude anyone from being involved. The old and the young, the baby and the senior are evenly important in what God is doing in and by us. Yes, it is true that the older amongst us may be able to do more. It is, however, not true that the older ones do better in the sense of doing something more important. The inclusive 'we' is in mission. Dick (2007:92) found in his research amongst 719 congregations that the word most often used in the 10% stable and growing congregations is

'we'! Can we even imagine what it will mean if we make disciples in youth and children's ministry that will make disciples! When at primary and high school campuses; when on the soccer, cricket, netball, rugby and whatever other sports fields; when family and social life become spaces where we show forth how we (at whatever age) learn to live our lives the Jesus way! In this sense we are being missional, making disciples as we live life (cf. Nel 2015b).

Changing our culture

I am convinced that of the four levels of change, cultural change is the most difficult one. It does not change easily, if at all. Culture can be described as the way we grow up, the language we use to express feelings and needs, the way we live and do. We inherit that from our parents, through our parents. In a sense, we do not even know it. This is who we are and how we become. You do not learn your mother tongue; you just begin to speak it. Culture is, in a sense, the way you are and become because of what you hear and what you see. It is understandable that it is deeply entrenched in our very fibre. We inherit culture.

When it comes to children, cultures deal with them in certain traditional ways. One may call it the 'way we see children'. And even while children, and more so adolescents, may reject that way of seeing them, they so often do exactly the same when they become parents. How often do grandparents say: 'Now that my son or daughter has children I can see where and how they grew up, in my home.' Probably close to 80% of all children take over the life philosophy of their parents.

One of the challenges in changing tradition of (all) churches is that this kind of change may involve acknowledging that your parents, grandparents,

great-grandparents may have been wrong. And this is no easy acknowledgement. A cultural turnaround (conversion) is so often more challenging and tiresome than turning back from a sinful life. In the last mentioned, I only have to admit: I was wrong. The cultural conversion asks for an acknowledgement of a different kind: we were or may have been wrong. The people I love most in life, my ancestors, were wrong. This is tough.

To challenge people to make this kind of turnaround makes ministry so demanding. It calls for the prophet within us. Prophets and reformers are, at least for a time being, heretics. You may lose your job and even your life. Jesus paid that price. His crucifixion was in more ways than one a cultural one. And none of us wants to be made out as a person who does not love our own (born into) culture. No wonder Jesus called this change a born again intervention! (Jn 3).

Even when leaders sometimes have changed in their understanding of identity and mission, and would agree that culture has to change too, our ‘unconverted’ vocabulary gives us away. We may know better but we do and speak the same as before. Even pastors in the pulpit would still use culturally determined language. Examples are:

- Brothers and sisters *and children*, you are welcome in the worship service.
- The upcoming congregational event is for all. The children are welcome too.
- All of you are invited for tea, also the children.
- ‘Father, bless the members of our congregation and our children.’

When culture has really changed for the biblical good we find new ways of expressing ourselves. Cultural conversions lead to conversions in word and deed, the fourth level of change.

□ Changing the way we do things

We do things differently when we as a congregation:

- think differently about ourselves ('we' and 'us' always include children)
- understand ourselves differently (identity)
- develop a sense of our God-given purpose (mission)
- are challenging our culture to change into the likeness of the Christ.

It can no longer be business as usual. In a sense, everything changes. Our thinking, our understanding of who we are motivates the change. In this sense, it is not change for the sake of change – as it sometimes tends to be in Youth and Children's Ministry. It is well-motivated change. It is identity informed and motivated change (or may one call it reformation?). Moreover, the motivation does not come from being charged up by challenges, however valid these challenges may be. Our motivation comes from inside – it is called intrinsic motivation. To the best of my understanding this has everything to do with the level of our understanding of our God-given identity. We rejoice in it, we celebrate it in worship and we live it in everyday life in the ways we think and act. Callahan (2010:4–14) has proved beyond doubt that there are six motivational resources in the congregation: compassion, community, hope, challenge, reasonability and commitment. He also found that we leaders think that the last three will do the job of motivation for change. Members think differently. Compassion, community and hope motivate them.

Osmer (2008:178 ff.) helps us to understand how deep this change goes when he discusses servanthood as almost the 'ultimate' expression of how we respond. This is deep change indeed. Relating this change to the topic of Chapter 5, it is probably obvious how significant this change in doing things might be for us adults. Such 'conversions' are nothing short of what

may be called ‘downward mobility’ in life. We have to become like children (again). If not, we may even miss the bus to the kingdom (cf. Mk 10: 13–16). Osmer (2008:178 ff.) discusses this change in operational procedures as part of the fourth movement in his practical-theology approach. He calls it the pragmatic dimension of our practical-theology way of thinking. Heitink (1993:18 ff.) called it the strategic dimension. This is part and parcel of our change of heart or mind. We do something and we do it differently. Our faith seeks understanding (*Anselmus*), and through our understanding, we change. It is this change then that informs our way of being and doing.

After 35 years in helping local churches attempt this long and sometimes tiresome process of change (within the above understanding of identity finding as motivation for change), I am convinced that ‘telling’ people to be and to do differently does not help much (cf. Nel 2015a:223–254). ‘Difference’ (in biblical words ‘being holy’) is the work of God, and because of who God is and what God did (cf. 1 Pt 1:11–25). Change is almost the response God, by his Spirit, works within and through us. We change because we have been changed.

Having said all of this, it remains true: we change. We are different, therefore we act differently. We all change, adults and children alike. In my mind, the congregation is this ‘sphere of change’, this is where it is modelled and where it happens. I call it an agological sphere (Nel 2000:21–24).

Changing and growing is a never-ending, ongoing process in every person’s life. None will ever reach perfection. It is also true of children. But we also have to remember that they were created by God as full human beings. Therefore, their human dignity should always be accepted and respected by everyone.

In our day God is still developing each person into someone who can represent God according to God's original intention. This recreating work of God is described by Nel (2000) as follows:

As new people in Christ, the new creation is an irrefutable fact. In Christ we are new people. We merely become what we already are in him. This constant change (conversion) to the reality already granted by God is the central agogic principle in Scripture. God has finished creating, but he is not yet finished with his creation. He is bringing creation to its fulfilment. He created the *end* in the *beginning* and he has already begun to realise this *end* for which he created everything. In a certain sense he starts with the *end*. In another sense he *ends* at the *beginning*. (p. 21)

It seems as if God never becomes tired of starting anew with people. In a sense, the birth of each child is a new beginning, as with Israel's expectation of the Messiah. The birth of each new boy-child announces the possibility that this boy could be the Messiah, 'a person that can represent God better and more fully than all before him' (Nel 2000:22).

This agogic principle should always be understood pneumatologically: It is the work of the Holy Spirit. This agogic moment is seldom a more striking reality than in the life of children and adolescents who both are living in a phase of dramatic changes. This is what makes children and youth ministry worthwhile: it creates hope.

What is important to remember, is that it is always God who creates and supplies the agogic sphere. In this regard Nel (2000) states the following:

Out of the one who has been called the whole of the *kahal Jahwe*, grows the *ekklesia* of the Lord. Constant change is normal within this gathering of people who have been changed by their calling. One's calling changes one. *Ur* is left behind. The journey to the unknown fatherland (that has been promised, and where you belong, but which you have not yet reached) has begun. Turning around and going back is no longer possible. Neither is sitting down. *Calling* changes, the *called*. One's vocation calls the

agogic into being. The gathering of the called ones is the gathering of people in transition. (p. 22)

The local church is God's agogical sphere. Growth and change in this sphere is a given. Those people who do not experience any change in their lives in this sphere do not really belong here. Continuous conversion and spiritual growth is the most normal thing and happens on a daily basis. In the lives of the believers it may not be a very fundamental change. But many a time it is a very intense process of accepting new insights and making new choices, changing your everyday life (Dingemans 1986:113; cf. Firet 1977:256–295, 1986:192–230). Faith is rather a verb than a noun, 'more of a total lifestyle than a commodity to be possessed, more of a process than a product' (Myers 1987:xviii; cf. xix & 61 ff.). Nel (2000) states it as follows:

The agogical sphere is more than merely normal in the sense of a given, existing sphere. This sphere (the congregation) motivates and facilitates growth and change. Here the fifteen year-old sees the changes in the sixty year-old and vice versa. Even more: some changes are difficult and painful. The new person does not become what he is in Christ without a struggle. Sometimes the struggle against sin is a bloody one. (p. 22)

In this regard, Myers (1987) made an important observation about the role of the older members in the congregation. They are the:

[G]uarantors ... who [are] appropriately anchored in adulthood but who will walk with youth on their journey. Guarantors share the burden of the journey, help read the road maps and offer encouragement. (p. 35)

As Hebbard (1995) says:

For this the congregation and also the pastors should be willing often to confess: 'I don't know all the answers, but I am here to cry with you' and '... a new definition of valid, God-blessed ministry awaits.' (p. 15)

The reference of Hargrove (1983:72–81) to a congregation as a 'mediating structure' comes here into play.

Change, deep lifestyle change is not a one person 'game'. It only happens with the involvement of other people, those people who have already been changed by God. Actually, we can say that God 'changed them in order to help you change through them' (Nel 2000:23). And God always changes people to use them as changing agents in this world, to address the ever-present realities of injustice, oppression, exclusion and sin. But even more. God's changing work in the congregation always has a missional intention: 'The congregation grows so that others, yes, the whole of creation, can become through them what God meant them to be' (Nel 2000:23). In the process the congregation becomes more and more like Christ. They become people compelled by the love of Christ to be God's instruments of change in this world (cf. 2 Cor 5:11–21). In the Bible, as is also shown in the life of Jesus Christ, love is partial: It becomes the voice and defender of the destitute and deprived, the excluded and oppressed, the sick and the poor, slaves and exiles, orphans and strangers (cf. Bosch 1991:8–10, 349 ff.; Dingemans 1986:51).

The rapidly changing lives of children and adolescents confront each and every congregation with the all-important question: Are we as congregation still an operative agogical sphere? Do we allow and encourage the changing processes of children and adolescents? Are we facilitators of change? Nel (2000) directs the following challenge to local churches:

The congregation as agogical sphere, and hopefully as a model, naturally invites the youth who are changing and seeking change: come and change here, in the sphere of the Spirit, and together with us in whom he lives, to attain the image of the Son (2 Cor 3:18); come, *become* with us, ever more effective representatives of God here on earth. (p. 24)

Children and youth ministry, as part of the whole ministry of the congregation, is called 'to create a context in which faith can be awakened, supported, and challenged' (Osmer 1992:15). Working with this agogic model, the crucial task of the congregation becomes the creation and

enhancing of agogic moments and situations within the congregation (cf. Firet 1977:296 ff., 1986:231).

Agogics, pneumatologically understood, places a lot of demands on the local church, including the children and youth who are a part of the whole. To address these demands effectively, and in a way that integrates the children and youth into the life and ministry of the congregation, leadership and discipleship are important factors to address (cf. Borthwick 1988:199 ff.). Good leadership paves the way to integrating children and adolescents in all spheres of the congregational life. The end can only be achieved as the leadership guides the congregation in such a way that they grow and mature more and more as disciples of Jesus.

■ Changing is a process

We grow, we develop and that is always a process. Richards (1983:89–176) has put this in a simple Christian framework in his book on Children's ministry. His brief discussion of the important developmental psychologists like Comenius, Freud, Erikson, Piaget and Kohlberg is enough to give insight in how complex, but also natural, this process is. When we ignore this process-like nature of change we pay the price in many ways.

This is also true for facilitating change in traditional churches. I referred to the important concept of 'unfreezing' in this process (cf. Nel 2015a:223 ff.). When culture (or whatever else) has conditioned us to think in a certain way about children, we think that the way we think is right. We become so 'fixed' in our thinking and way of doing that we are very close to being frozen, deeply frozen in our ways. When someone does not take this into account they may put such a good leg of lamb, but a 'frozen' one, in the 180 °C oven. The result: a spoiled piece of meat. Leaders often do not take this reality enough into account.

In my research, since 1982, in the field of developing missional churches, I have determined five phases in such a process. Phases do not make the process or make change happen. Understanding the ‘phasial’ nature of change also does not mean that we are now able to manipulate congregations into change. Understanding the phases only helps us give better leadership. We at least understand a little better how change happens (cf. Nel 2015a:218–222).

Leaders who want to facilitate the changing of congregations to include children may be wise to keep this in mind. It may be a little easier than facilitating the change from a maintenance mode to a missional understanding of being. Older members are probably more positive and sensitive to the children in their midst than to the presence of ‘the other’ in their context. My suggestion is, however, to study change as a process and how to lead in and through such processes. Easier may be very relative when it comes to change in culture.

■ What will we do differently?

According to Osmer (2008) change involves a different understanding of:

- identity
- mission
- culture
- operational procedures. (p. 178)

I am not suggesting that we do things differently only when some idyllic state is reached. My suggestions below are more meant to be happening as part of the change as well as a result of a change in certain dynamics in local churches. Without any claim of being complete, I offer the following, built on research and experience over 40 years in youth ministry.

■ Think children

Inclusive congregations become like parents: They (children) are just always on your mind, even subconsciously so. And because of that we do not miss them in our rational processes and planning. Some say our subconscious determines up to 70% + of our so-called rational behaviour. Children and other youth are then ‘in our minds’. On our mind and in our minds, one could say. What would the implications be?

- Pastors ‘remember’ them when they search and pray for a preaching text.
- Pastors ‘have them in mind’ when they prepare and deliver the sermon.
- Pastors keep them in mind when preparing liturgy.
- Pastors recognise them as part and parcel of the whole worshipping community.
- Pastors do ‘not forget’ them when they pray.
- Include them as an integral part of the body.

Not only the pastors, but the whole system changes in the way they think of, and remember, children. It is the difference between the children and other youth being an ‘afterthought’ and being part and parcel of every thought. Too often we plan and then ask: And what about the children? Every ministry and every strategic effort should take them into account.

■ Consult them

This is not easy and needs some good reflection by the leaders. Some churches include them in the committee system and, when it does not work well, they deduce that children and youth are not interested and involved enough. This may be true but is often not the case. Youth are not so much into formal structural involvement yet, and children, of course,

even less so. What I suggest is more on an informal level, but a very intentional involvement.

□ **'Dialogue teams'**

In the case of children's ministry, parents are the logical choice for such dialogue teams. Whoever wants this to work will do well to study the book by Freudenburg and Lawrence (1998). In the following case study it even applied to the ministry with adolescents. To paraphrase: parents asked him at a point what he is up to with their children? 'Whose children do you think they are? Yours or ours?' When this dawned upon him everything changed for him, even his own family life was saved. It led to the book with a slogan: from 'church centred, family supported' to 'family centred, church supported'. This is a huge paradigm shift. Only then do dialogue teams of parents make sense. We help, they minister, over and against 'we minister, they help'.

In more than one way is this a totally new ministry theology and philosophy. I take it for granted that readers of this publication understand that it builds on a family approach in youth ministry, including children's ministry. Part of the deep change discussed above will then include a change within parents to understand their God-given privilege in 'raising' the part of us that is still young. As parents grow in this understanding of their ministry, involving them in dialogue teams will, and should, assist them and confirm how important they are.

This may (and should) also enrich the teaching ministry of the congregation. We need to help one another with giving words to what we believe and why we believe (cf. Armstrong 1979:21–37). In the words of 1 Peter 3:15, help is always to be willing to give an account of the hope that is within us. Parents, as they gain understanding in their calling within an

inclusive congregation, will help us to shift our focus to training parents. Parents who take ownership for this basic (in the sense of core) ministry will also help us in discerning what to focus on in our training of adults who are helping in the Christian education ministry of the congregation.

Developing such dialogue teams with parents may take time but will bear fruit in future. We have to get the primary partners in youth ministry, including children's ministry, back into the active loop of ministry thinking and planning. I am convinced this will boil over into dialogue teams for teenagers and emerging adults, especially when they are part of a congregational culture: this is how we do it in this congregation. Leaders may want to consult the good book by Ott (2004) on transforming churches with ministry teams.

In doing it this way we consult with them in the process of thinking and planning, not afterwards. When we consult them afterwards we create the impression that the adult members think and plan and they only have to 'fall in' – as we say in Afrikaans. Whether we mean it this way is not really the issue.

We will also be wise to consult with both the parents and the children in a seasonal way. Children and other youth are more interested in project thinking than programme thinking. Callahan (2010:30–36) refers to marathoners and sprinters. Children and other youth are probably far more sprinters than marathoners. They are per definition seasonal people.

Research children

Within practical theology we believe that the empirical world is not only there for information, such as in gaining facts. There is knowledge out there too. We can, and must, learn from this source. We do confess that there is in

a sense no difference between researching the biblical **text** and the **context**. It is evenly necessary. The only difference is that we confess that the biblical text is authoritative. The context is often confronted and challenged by the biblical text. However, having said this, we need to research the second text or context evenly and thoroughly. This happens on two levels:

- Learning from what is being done in national and international research projects concerning children. Congregations will do well to set up a learning centre where parents and all other leaders can tap into knowledge obtained by such research projects. Building a local library of good books, videos and other material is worth the investment.
- Undertaking local research projects amongst children. It goes without saying that here we need all the ethical safeguards that protect children in such research projects. On a very simple level we need to find out all we can get to know about:
 - the total number of children in our context
 - the age groups within this data source
 - the socio-economic realities concerning these children – their access to education, play and other necessities in growing up as well cared-for human beings
 - their parents and their socio-economic realities – abilities to care, to teach their children, and everything else they need to be the best parents. Also, the best core ministers to interact with children
 - whatever is needed to serve them as an inclusive part of the faith community.

Minister to and with them

My understanding of youth ministry (Nel 2000:97) more or less boils down to a comprehensive congregational ministry where we as a

congregation take parents serious and minister **to**, with and through youth themselves.

In children's ministry, the *to and with* will be more prevalent. The *through* is, however, never absent in any way. We (not the parents) are participating in what happens in the home – in the basic relationships. Together with parents as the basic mediators of faith (Nel 2000:108) we cultivate, educate, love and respect. We attend to all the basic 'ingredients' of a faith community, constituted by a deep relationship with God and with one another. One should never underestimate the influence of this 'atmosphere' on small and older children. Before children cognitively 'learn' they experience the same acceptance (hopefully) in the home – whether 'home' is a one-bedroom apartment, a 'shack', a double storey mansion, farm house or a humble 'servant quarter'. Home is so much more than the form of the dwelling place. 'Home' is also constituted by relationships.

Education, then, becomes so much more than conveying information. It becomes a covenantal journey, where children discover the very essence of the covenant – the coming together of God and 'us' (cf. Nouwen 2006):

- God is *God-for-us*.
- God, in Christ, is *God-with-us*.
- God, the Holy Spirit is *God-within-us*.

This boils down to a new understanding of discipleship and disciple-making. We need, urgently, to help parents understand what this means (cf. Nel 2015b). They need to understand that, in more way than one, only 'wounded healers' (Nouwen 1972) can make disciples. Van Aarde (2006:103–122) has exegetically explored the relationship between Matthew 5 and Matthew 28:19. One needs to know, in the sense of relationally and cognitively knowing, how dependent one is on God to

even begin to enjoy life, to live life and to begin to help others enjoy, live and deal or cope with life in a Christian way. This is exactly what disciple-making is all about. Moreover, how in the world can we keep this from the very people we love (our children)? How can we afford to keep them from discovering?

- There is abundant life in Christ.
- We are on a lifelong journey, learning what this means.
- We learn how to deal with the ups and the downs of life through the people with us on this journey – first and foremost by growing up in relationships (homes) where the ones who brought us into life ‘model’ this lifelong learning and how they have learned, and are learning, how to live life in a Christian way.
- That the joy is in the journey and not (only) in the destination.

This we do *to* and *with* them. And whilst doing so we learn and experience that God is ministering to ‘us’ *through* them in so many ways. We learn so much (the heart of discipleship) from and through children. Who would like to miss this? They are indeed making us disciples too.

Child thinking

I remember how relatively easy it was for me to minister and, especially, preach for children and adolescents when my two sons themselves were children and later adolescents. When they outgrew these phases my ministry, and especially preaching, suffered by losing the two who helped me in my ‘youth thinking’. We need them in our world. Books help, but real-life representatives of the age group help more. Pastors and other leaders will be wise to often be with them to pick up how they think: What makes them tick, the Americans would say. When we do not have children

in those age groups, we should find ways to access their world. This may not be easy, but whoever said that being and becoming inclusive is easy? When pastors and other leaders ministering to, with and through children and youth employ something like a liturgical and preaching workgroup (cf. McClure 1995) this will help. When our children are very young, this may well be the ‘dialogue team’ of parents. But given the developmental level of children in our societies, there may be older children who will help a lot within such a group – helping us learn how they think and where they are. Pastors and leaders who think like children all along (see above) go to great lengths learning some child thinking.

■ Conclusion

To be serious about children is to be serious about life itself. It is about:

- life given
- life lived
- life developed
- life respected.

My conviction and plea is that this be done within a congregation where children are accepted as an integral part of the whole. The smallest baby, even the unborn baby, is both a gift to a parent or parents and to the faith community. To confess this is so radical that we even respect them enough to differentiate in our ministry. It matters to an inclusive congregation to care at their level. This should never mean that they are less important because they are whatever age they are. Age does not determine importance. We are evenly important and evenly an integral part of the whole – irrespective of age.

Our challenge is to reform congregations into inclusive communities, starting with our own children. Sensitively, but intentionally, we facilitate deep change with regard to identity, mission, culture and operational procedures or ministry (cf. Osmer 2008:178).

And when Jesus comes again he will find 'us' together and not separated according to our age groups!

Public theology and the plight of children in Africa

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■ Introduction

Chapter 6⁹ discusses three features of a public theology for children in Africa. Looking at public theology through the eyes of children, three aspects will be emphasised. In a first round public theology is portrayed as a theology of vulnerability. Thereafter, public theology for children in Africa is discussed as a theology of solidarity with the most vulnerable, and lastly public theology for children in Africa is discussed as a theology that advances the implementation of human rights, especially for children and

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9. This contribution draws upon, extends upon and freshly applies earlier research of the author on related themes which was thoroughly revised.

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the most vulnerable. The implementation of human rights for children is advanced through processes of moral formation.

■ A theology of vulnerability

The notion of vulnerability is used in a variety of ways. Vulnerability firstly means that we are at risk and under the threat to suffer. We are predisposed to various forms of suffering. We are frail and fragile and can easily be wronged and hurt. Theologian Thomas Reynolds (2008:108) refers to the root meaning of vulnerability to illustrate this point. Vulnerability derives from the Latin word *vulnerare*, to injure and harm, and to be open to be wounded; in my words, to be under threat and to be predisposed to be hurt and wounded. Secondly, vulnerability refers to our actual and concrete suffering in a variety of forms.

Vulnerable beings, like children, are always at risk and under the threat that their basic needs for dignified living might not be met. Three types of needs need to be addressed in order to avoid severe suffering for children and to let them experience a life of dignity.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow (1943) and, in line with his thinking, Dutch social scientist Rob Buitengeweg (2001:94–95), identify three sets of basic human needs to be addressed in order for humans, including children, to flourish. The first set of needs pertains to our physical needs, namely the need for goods like housing, food, water, clothing, medical care and education. Our vulnerability with regard to the fulfilment of these needs might be called physical vulnerability. Many children in Africa are, for various reasons, exposed to physical vulnerability.

The second set of needs refers to our need for safety and security, and also the need to participate in different spheres of life, including the

political and economic domains. Living in communion with others and not being alienated and excluded is a central aspect of the fulfilment of this second set of needs. The predisposition to the non-fulfilment of these needs might be phrased as social vulnerability. The globalised network society in which we are living tends to exclude children in many ways, endangering their need for safety and security and creating social vulnerability for them (Castells 2000a, 2000b, 2004).

The third set of needs refers to our quest for the freedom to actualise our potentialities and to render meaningful service to others. The fragility that we experience with regard to the fulfilment of these needs can be termed teleological vulnerability, because it has to do with the meaning-giving *telos*, purpose and aim of our lives. Many children in South Africa experience teleological vulnerability because of many reasons, for instance, a lack of good education which hinders the actualising of their potentials.

Where these sets of needs are not met we experience suffering in a variety of forms. Famous Dutch theologian, Bram van de Beek (1984:24–26), discusses the various faces of human suffering, that is, physical, psychological, social, political and economic. Suffering takes on the form of homelessness, hunger and famine, dehydration, nakedness, illness, death, assault, violence, alienation, exclusion, political oppression, poverty, which many children in Africa experience. Suffering is intensified by the powerlessness to overcome forms of suffering like severe poverty, illness and death. Van de Beek states that all forms of suffering, also the suffering of animals and perhaps also plants, constitute the violation of wholeness and *shalom*.

Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) argues that all human beings experience vulnerability, dependency and disability in both the form of being predisposed to suffering and in the form of actual suffering right through

our lives, and not only during some periods of life. He is of the opinion that this emphasis on vulnerability and dependence is a highly neglected theme in Western moral philosophy:

From Plato to Moore and since there are usually, with some rare exceptions, only passing references to human vulnerability and affliction and to the connections between them and our dependence on others ... Dependence on others is of course often recognized in a general way, usually as something that we need in order to achieve our positive goals. But an acknowledgement of anything like the full extent of that dependence and of the ways it stems from our vulnerability and our afflictions are generally absent. (p. 1)

MacIntyre (1999:2) states that when there is reference to disabled people in the pages of moral philosophy books, they are sketched as subjects of benevolence whilst so-called normal people are portrayed as continuously rational, healthy and untroubled. He argues that there is no human being who does not experience dependence and vulnerability in his or her life. He articulates this inclusive understanding of dependence as follows:

This dependence on particular others for protection and sustenance is most obvious in early childhood and in old age. But between these first and last stages our lives are characteristically marked by longer or shorter periods of injury, illness or other disablement and some among us are disabled for their entire lives. (p. 2)

This inclusive understanding of disability and dependence leads to the following conclusion about public responsibility:

[C]onsequently our interest in how the need of the disabled are adequately voiced and met is not a special interest, the interest of one particular group rather than of others, but rather the interest of the whole political society, an interest that is integral to their conception of their common good. (p. 130)

In a remarkable exposition of Mark 10:13–17 about the blessing of children by Jesus, Dirkie Smit (1983:93–101) explains that children inherit heaven not because they are more innocent than older human beings, and not because they have moral merit that older humans do not have, but because of their

childlike dependence and trust upon others. The dependent ones inherit the kingdom, specifically those who know how dependent they are upon others and the Other. Children are the most extreme form of the vulnerable, the poor and the marginalised. They are indeed the epitome of vulnerability.

Children are the vulnerable ones in the sense of being predisposed to suffering and in the sense of real suffering that they experience. In a very special way, their physical, social and even teleological needs are not met. Their plight, especially in South Africa, is outlined in various publications (cf. Macmaster 2009; Ramphela 2002). What MacIntyre (1999) said, quoted above, about the disabled is just as applicable to children. They are *'the interest of the whole political society'*.

■ A theology of solidarity with the most vulnerable

A theology that addresses the plights of children as the epitome and personification of vulnerability in society is a theology that cherishes the classic confession in the Christian tradition of God's special identification with the destitute, the poor and the wronged.

The idea that God is, in a special way, the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged is a controversial formulation. It would, however, not be an exaggeration to say that the theme of God's special identification with suffering people runs like a golden thread through scripture. This theme is not referred to coincidentally. It cannot be ignored. Neither can it be countered with other evidence from scripture. Vast biblical evidence shows that this theme has to do with the heart of the Christian faith.

This confession of God's special identification with the marginalised received attention in specifically the Reformed tradition. The South African Reformed theologian, John de Gruchy (1993:74–76), explains how

this notion was prominent at the birth of the Reformed tradition. De Gruchy shows that this was the case because many of the earliest Reformed theologians and pastors, as well as congregations, were persecuted and that much Reformed theology was conceived in exile, in poverty, amidst adversity and in the struggle against social and ecclesiastical tyranny.

According to De Gruchy, this theologising from the perspective of the destitute faded as Reformed Christians became part of the so-called middle and upper classes where the dominant political power also resided. It regained prominence in Reformed theology as a result of the challenge posed by liberation and Black theology since the 1960's about God's preferential option for the poor. De Gruchy is of the opinion that liberation and Black theology's real challenge to Reformed theology, however, was to rediscover and to revalue the notion, which was so central at the birth of Reformed theology, namely to express its commitment to the public square from the perspective, and in the interest, of the victims of oppressive power.

De Gruchy (1991:133–134) explains, with an appeal to Gustavo Gutiérrez, that the notion of the preferential option for the poor and marginalised should not be interpreted in an exclusive manner, as if God chooses against some. This option for the poor indicates how God works in the world, namely from the particular to the universal. The option for the poor, therefore, also does not imply that even the poor are ends in themselves. In the redemption and liberation of the poor and wronged God is working towards the liberation of all, also of oppressors. The poor, however, do enjoy God's primary attention, albeit not God's exclusive attention.

The emphasis of liberation and Black theology on this notion not only entailed that the interest of the marginalised should be viewed as a

matter of social ethics, but that it be viewed as a theological question. How we respond to the destitute in society has to do with how we respond to God.

The Confession of Belhar 1986, echoes this confessional truth in article 3. It confesses that in a situation of injustice God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged. It continues that God calls his church to stand where he stands, namely against injustice and with the most vulnerable.

A theology that serves the children of our continent would, therefore, loudly advance this classical Christian conviction of God's special identification with the most vulnerable (cf. Grobbelaar 2012:63–66). In the next part of this essay it is argued that the most vulnerable are protected through the advancement of human rights. The nurturing of ethical leadership and citizenship through processes of moral formation is portrayed as one important manner in which the implementation of human rights for children is advanced.

■ A theology of advancing the implementation of human rights for the most vulnerable

The notion of human rights developed in contexts where the vulnerable needed to be protected. The confession of God's and the church's special identification with the most vulnerable can be translated into the protection and advancing of their rights to a life of dignity, and a life where the three building blocks of dignity are fulfilled, namely healing reconciliation, embracing justice and freedom from all forms of oppression and discrimination, as well as freedom for a life of sharing and participation in the goods of society.

The implementation of human rights is advanced through the nurturing of ethical leadership and citizenship. This nurturing occurs by means of processes of moral formation. Ethical citizenship is emphasised increasingly in talk about building a democracy with a human rights culture, a culture and way of life where dignity, healing, justice and freedom is advanced.

In the context of the South African democracy, one could describe moral formation as the transformation of people or citizens so that our attitudes, thinking, desires, intuitions, inclinations, tendencies and predispositions, that is, our virtues, increasingly reflect the values of the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution of 1996. The basic value of the Bill of Rights is human dignity with its three constituent features of healing reconciliation, embracing justice and responsible freedom.

Such transformed and transforming persons participate in the transformation of societal visions and ideals, as well as structures, policies and public as well as personal practices so that they cohere with the vision and values of the Bill of Rights. In the context of the democratic public sphere, the process of moral formation sets as aim the development of citizens with civic or public virtue.

Moral formation can be described as the formation of ethical leaders and citizens of civic and public virtue. The appeal for moral formation in this understanding is made from various circles in societies all over the world.

In the American context, James Fowler (1996:222–228) lists various manifestations of moral malformation which cause America to become an uncivil society, for example, the neglect of children; the preference in the electronic media of hard-heartedness and violence to tenderness, fidelity and empathetic understanding; stigmatisation of other races; economic inequalities; ecological damage; the failure to maintain standards of basic

decency; religion as force that contributes to conflict over issues like abortion, school prayer, and homosexuality; and that does not contribute to achieving economic justice, tolerance, civility and ecological responsibility. Dutch scholar, John Sap (1997:3), refers to the growing appeal for moral formation since the mid-1990s by various political groupings in The Netherlands. They make this appeal against the background of the loss of moral orientation and a 'norms and values vacuum.' This appeal is echoed in various circles of South African society (cf. Koopman 2003:72–81).

Various theologians and scholars of other disciplines appeal for moral formation as the process of developing citizenship. American theologian, James Fowler (1996) describes the importance of moral nurturing for citizenship. He specifically emphasises the indispensable role of churches and other religious organisations in this process. American Catholic theologian, Christopher Mooney (1986:20), appeals to churches to be public in the sense of providing a moral vision that transforms private virtue, with its emphasis of self-interest, to public virtue that serves the common good. This same idea is echoed in a collection of essays edited by Boxx and Quinlivan (2000) that deal theologically with the appeal that democracies need citizens who embody civic virtue, human excellence, common decency, public responsibility and civic engagement.

The importance of moral citizenship for democracies receives much attention in current political thought. Political philosopher Will Kymlicka (2002:284–285), amongst others, explains how prominent the idea of moral citizenship has become in contemporary political thought. According to him, political thought in the 1970s was characterised by liberal individualism. The concepts of justice and rights were then proposed as alternatives to a utilitarian approach. In the 1980s,

communitarian thinking became prominent. In the attempt to show that liberal individualism could not account for, or sustain, the communal sentiments, identities and boundaries required for feasible political community, terms like community and membership were emphasised. In the 1990s the idea of citizenship developed as an attempt to transcend the opposition between liberal individualism and communitarianism. Citizenship theory makes space for liberal ideas of rights and entitlements as well as communitarian ideas of membership in, and attached to, a particular community. Besides these theoretical developments, Kymlicka (2002:284) refers to various political factors all over the world that had prompted the idea of citizenship: that is, increasing voter apathy and long-term welfare dependency in the USA; the resurgence of nationalist movements in Eastern Europe; stresses created by an increasingly multicultural and multiracial population in Western Europe; the backlash against the welfare state in Thatcher's England; the failure of environmental policies that rely on voluntary citizenship cooperation; disaffection with globalisation and the perceived loss of national sovereignty. Kymlicka argues that both theoretical and political considerations indicate that the health and stability of a modern democracy depend not only on the justice of its institutions, but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens. He (Kymlicka 2002) mentions some of these qualities and attitudes:

[T]heir sense of identity, and how they view potentially competing forms of national, regional, ethnic, or religious identities; their ability to tolerate and work together with others who are different from themselves; their desire to participate in the political process in order to promote the public good and hold political authorities accountable; their willingness to show self-restraint and exercise personal responsibility in their economic demands, and in personal choices which affect their health and the environment. Without citizens who possess these qualities, democracies become difficult to govern, even unstable. (p. 285)

William Galston (1991:221–224) has compiled a very influential list of four categories of civic virtues that enable democracies to flourish, namely general virtues (courage, law-abidingness and loyalty), social virtues (independence and open-mindedness), economic virtues (work ethic, capacity to delay self-gratification, adaptability to economic and technological change) and political virtues (capacity to discern and respect the rights of others, willingness to demand only what can be paid for, ability to evaluate the performance of those in office, willingness to engage in public discourse).

In his influential study on the role of civil society in Italy, Robert Putnam (1993) argues that the success of regional governments was related to the civic virtue, or social capital, of citizens, amongst others their ability to trust, to participate in public life and their sense of justice. Although they had the same institutions, the various post-war regional governments achieved different levels of success. Putnam attributes these differences not to the different income and education levels of citizens, but to differences in civic virtue and social capital.

North American theologian, J. Philip Wogaman (1989:11–26), provides a helpful theological motivation for the process of moral formation. This motivation is important as Protestant Christians, especially, are traditionally sceptical about attempts to emphasise the human participation in processes like moral formation; they rightfully oppose work's righteousness. The anthropological dimensions of moral formation, however, do not stand in conflict with the pneumatological side thereof.

Through an analysis of major Christian doctrines, Wogaman concludes that an appreciation and encouragement of moral formation as both a theological and anthropological activity, that is, an endeavour in which human beings participate with the triune God, is supported by

Christian theology. As persons created in the image of God, human beings do have capabilities of authority, freedom, creativity, rationality and relationality that enable them to participate in moral formation. Our sinful nature, inclinations and practices, however, contaminate even our best efforts. Participation in moral formation, therefore, asks for humility and recognition of our sin, finitude and also of the broken, tragic and *aporetic* nature of existence. We are, however, declared righteous by the gracious God in view of the work of atonement of Jesus Christ and through faith in him. The Holy Spirit renews us in the process of sanctification. This Trinitarian work of creation, salvation and renewal rightly forms, for Wogaman, the basis of our participation in a process like moral formation.

In South African society, a plea is made to churches to participate, in partnership with other institutions in society, in the process of moral formation. Besides their Trinitarian theological potential for moral formation, they are also sociologically speaking, the institution of civil society which is the best equipped to participate in this process, that is, they have good access to people, even the most marginalised ones; they have well-trained staff; they enjoy much trust; they have good buildings all over the country.

A public theology that focuses on the building of ethical citizenship and leadership through processes of moral formation, and the consequent advancement of human rights for the most vulnerable, is a theology that advances the cause of the most vulnerable, especially of children.

Ethical leadership and citizenship is expressed in three ways, namely in the adherence to a moral vision, in lives of character and virtue, and in ethical decisions and actions.

Ethics first refers to the vision that people have for their own life, and the life of others. It refers to the ideals that we have for life and for broader society. It reflects our understanding of a life that is worth living, a life that

is good, that is right, that is beautiful, that is joyous, that is happy. The Greek word 'ethos' literally refers to the habitat of animals. The habitat is that space of safety and security where life flourishes and blossoms.

To talk about ethics is to talk about the creation of habitats in which the good life blossoms. The *South African Bill of Rights*, Chapter 2 of the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, describes the good life as one where there is dignity, justice, equality, equity (bringing what is unequal into equilibrium) and freedom. South Africans from a variety of religious and secular traditions agree about this vision for South African society.

The first aim of moral formation is to advance the ethical development of public leaders and responsible citizens in all walks of life, who envisage a *habitat*, a society of safety, security and well-being where all of life is flourishing, a society where dignity, freedom and justice are actualised.

These values have their foundations in various religious, philosophical and political traditions in South Africa. The African philosophy of *ubuntu*, which literally means personhood, is constituted by dignifying and humanising communion and relationships of care, compassion and solidarity with other persons, supports our human rights vision. All religious traditions in our country cherish human dignity values. The political struggle for liberation in South Africa echoes these values. Within various religious traditions, the aim of moral formation will entail a thicker or broader moral content, and it will be expressed in different ways. According to Bonhoeffer (2005:60–66), the aim of moral formation in Christian communities, for instance, would be *Christiformity*. Moral formation, therefore, would be described as moral transformation so that conformation of our vision, virtues and policies and practices to Christ are achieved. We are challenged to enrich democratic aims of dignity, freedom and justice with these thicker Christocentric descriptions.

The second meaning of ethics is derived from the Latin word *habitus*. It refers to the habits with which we live. It refers to our virtues and character. It tells what type of people we are. Virtues refer to the tendency, inclination, predisposition and intuition to be, and to act in accordance with what is good, right and beautiful. Character literally refers to the mark of an engraving tool. To have character, or to be a person of character, means that specific values and ideals are engraved into one's life. These incarnated values and ideals can be called virtues. The person of character embodies virtues.

The second aim of moral formation is to contribute to the nurturing of public leaders and responsible citizens in all walks of life, who live with a *habitus*, that is, with a public character and civic virtue, with incarnated and embodied public values that enhance the embodiment of a life of dignity for all.

Societies hunger for people of public and civic virtue: public wisdom in contexts of complexity, ambiguity, tragedy and *aporia* [dead end streets]; public justice in context of inequalities and injustices on local and global levels; public temperance in context of greed and consumerism amidst poverty and alienation; public fortitude amidst situations of powerlessness and inertia; public faith amidst feelings of disorientation and rootlessness in contemporary societies; public hope amidst situations of despair and melancholy; public love in societies where public solidarity and compassion are absent (cf. Koopman 2007:107–118).

The third meaning of ethics is derived from the Latin word for ethics, namely *mos*. *Mos* is the root of our word morality. It literally means to measure. Ethics, therefore, has to do with measuring, judging, evaluating, deciding, choosing between good and bad, beautiful and ugly, right and wrong, wise and unwise. The third aim of the moral formation is

consequently to contribute to the strengthening of public leaders and responsible citizens in all walks of life who engage in individual and personal decisions and behaviour, as well as collective public decisions, policies and practices that enhance the operationalisation of a life of dignity for all. And we know that, although we might agree on the vision, values and virtues that public life requires, we might disagree on the concrete decisions and policies that can be made on the basis of this vision, and these values and virtues. The challenge for moral consensus in pluralistic contexts is big, as is the challenge to live constructively and peacefully with one another amidst incommensurable positions, that is, positions that are based in different world views and meaning-giving frameworks, rationales and motivations, and that seem to be irreconcilable.

This concrete action for the sake of dignified living for all entails a wide range of practices such as, policy-making, policy implementation and policy monitoring, advocacy and lobbying, participation in public discourses and public opinion formation, strengthening of political will to bring about change for the better, development of theories that enhance the fulfilment of especially social and economic rights and actions of common decency and civility.

One area in which we see the vulnerability and the violation of the rights of children most clearly is in the provision of education to children at preprimary, primary and secondary school levels. This domain also constitutes the area where we are challenged very clearly to work for the materialisation of the rights of children to education. This mandate also entails that the moral formation of children be advanced so that children can be nurtured to enjoy rights, on the one hand, and to fulfil appropriate responsibilities, on the other hand. This is crucial because, as sinful beings, children also abuse their rights to manipulate teachers and parents, to

neglect responsibilities, and to function with a poor work ethic and indiscipline.

South African journalist, Max du Preez (2013:133), describes the plight of especially poor children in a very clear manner: 'Primary and high school education has without doubt been democratic South Africa's greatest and most depressing failure and the brightest flashing red light.' He (Du Preez 2013:135–136) argues that the rights to education that black children enjoy in democratic South Africa are the same as they have experienced under apartheid South Africa.

More than white intransigence or 'white monopoly capital' could ever have done, our education system has been perpetuating apartheid. The children of the white middle and upper classes still receive a good education and go on to have good careers. The education we have given black children since 1994 is close to the worst in the entire world.

The National Development Plan (National Planning Commission 2011:274, 275, 283, 284) makes concrete suggestions and set targets to improve education on all levels in the country. These include early childhood development; eradication of child undernutrition; eradication of vitamin A deficiency amongst children; universal access to two years of early childhood development; about 80% of schools and learners should achieve 50% and above in literacy, mathematics and science in Grades 3, 6 and 9; renewed pay structures to attract and retain good teachers; leadership training.

A public theology that emphasises vulnerability, that advances solidarity with children as vulnerable ones, and that promotes the rights of children should consider prioritising the fulfilment of the rights of children to education. In seeking concrete ways of doing that so much of the plight of children in our societies will be addressed. Public theology for children can

help to mobilise the best equipped and most trusted non-governmental organisations in South Africa, namely churches, to address these challenges, and to do it in partnership with institutions and individuals in political life, economic life, ecological life, civil society and also in partnership with the media.

■ Conclusion

A public theology that serves the plight of children in Africa, as the epitome of vulnerability, will prioritise being a theology of vulnerability, will prioritise being a theology that acknowledges the theological, ecclesial as well as epistemological priority of the destitute, the poor and the wronged – as they are epitomised by children, will prioritise being a theology that advances the implementation of human rights, especially the rights of children, through processes of moral formation that nurture ethical leadership and ethical citizenship, from childhood to old age.

Child-inclusive cities: Towards a liberating praxis with children

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■ Introduction

In Chapter 7 child-inclusive cities are explored from the perspective of a 'rights to the city' approach, initially framed by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1996), and more recently further developed by social geographer David Harvey (2012) and countless others. It considers child-inclusive cities with regard to institutional presence, practices and protection, access to services and resources, participation in city-making processes and spatial transformation.

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Theologically, Chapter 7 will reflect on the ‘rights to the city’ approach in conjunction with Gustavo Gutierrez’ integral liberation (1988:97–105) and the notion of human flourishing as developed by Miroslav Volf (2013), offering suggestions for a liberating praxis with urban children, particularly children living in vulnerable urban neighbourhoods. Its basic premise is that children’s integral liberation and holistic flourishing cannot be mediated unless conditions are created that will institutionalise, respect and advance the rights of children in very concrete ways.

■ Children, cities and exclusion

In her Pulitzer prize-winning book on life, death and hope in a Mumbai slum, Katherine Boo (2012) writes about young girl children:

One by one her students, mostly girls under twelve, emerged from their huts. Several of their sun-bleached dresses had broken zippers, exposing bony backs. Manju didn’t worry about little Sharda. The girl was born spiny like her mother who had broken rocks on the road before her lungs went. Lakshmi was the painful case. Her stepmother reserved the food of the house for her own children. The brothel keeper’s eleven-year-old daughter, kitted in tight black bicycle shorts and dangling earrings, had her brother in tow. Both children liked to be out of their hut when visitors came to have sex, especially when the sex was with their mother ... The troupe then marched to the hut of Manju’s secret pupil, her friend Meena. Meena’s parents kept the old ways about girls and education: too much learning reduced a girl’s compliancy. Manju had been teaching Meena English on the sly. (p. 66)

This quick single glimpse into a Mumbai slum exposes the reality of urban slums, informal settlements and inner city neighbourhoods across the world. According to UNICEF’s report entitled ‘Children in an urban world’, the following is true of cities: 1 billion children – half of the world’s children – today live in cities (UNICEF 2012b:iv); urban populations grow fastest in Asia and Africa; children of the urban poor are more likely to be undernourished (UNICEF 2012b:v; 19), like Sharda

and Lakshmi in the story above (which is not fictional but a journalist's real-life journey with real-life people); access to water and sanitation does not keep up with urban population growth (UNICEF 2012b:58); and school attendance is lower in slums, particularly affecting girl children (UNICEF 2012b:7).

Fifty-three percent of South Africa's children, totalling 9.7 million children, live in cities (Republic of South Africa 2012:22; UNICEF 2012a). The economic disparities in our cities deal some children the greatest advantages regarding access to housing, education, health care and play, whilst others are excluded from liveable spaces and accessible resources. Child-headed households on urban fringes and violence against children are in the order of the day in South African cities.

The National Development Plan (National Planning Commission 2011:338–340) includes children in a section entitled 'The status and wellbeing of children in South Africa', in which it gives attention to social protection and social vulnerability. In the section on education, a high priority is placed on early childhood development, and two specific recommended actions are the implementation of a nutrition intervention programme for pregnant women and young children, as well as securing universal access to early childhood development for at least two years before Grade 1 for all South African children (National Planning Commission 2011:35). These are commendable action steps if implementation can be secured in ways that honour and empower current grass-root attempts to offer access to early childhood development.

The section on the economy and employment demonstrates how unemployment in South Africa was highest in the age group 15–24 years old in 2008, at 46.6% (National Planning Commission 2011:85). It then refers to global examples where 'employment and labour productivity

were boosted by rapid increases in public and private investment in children' at an earlier age (National Planning Commission 2011:86). Similarly, access to proper health care has long-term consequences on physical and mental development of children, which will then contribute to enhance future well-being (National Planning Commission 2011:86).

Although children are therefore included in the National Development Plan in ways that could lay a solid foundation for the holistic development and well-being of children, the mention of children in the Plan does not guarantee fundamental changes in the lives of children. Firstly, the voices and cries of children themselves do not clearly speak through the pages of the National Development Plan. Secondly, the specific realities and challenges of urban children, and particularly children living in urban informal settlements, are hardly acknowledged. Thirdly, there is no guarantee that the Plan will successfully translate into concrete actions and changes at the level of local cities and towns, without which it will be meaningless. And lastly, although the specific interventions proposed in the Plan that specifically relate to children are critical, there are many other issues facing children that are not directly mentioned, although some of the other actions proposed by the Plan might have indirect consequences in the interest of children.

If children are given attention only in technocratic ways, through top-down interventions not generated from within communities or in collaboration with children themselves, the chances of real liberation for, and with, children are indeed slim. Children should be a clear socio-economic-political priority in South African society at large and in government interventions, including the National Development Plan, in particular. To the contrary, children themselves are still most often being silent (and silenced).

■ Inclusion and liberation

The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez (1988:97–105), doing most of his theological work from within the slums of Lima, speaks of salvation as integral liberation. He suggests that the work of God in Christ was to mediate a three-fold liberation: individual freedom from sin (personal), humanisation (interpersonal) and socio-economic-political freedom from oppression (public). Boff (1997), in *Cry of the earth, cry of the poor*, and eco-feminist theologians such as Van Schalkwyk (2014), added the cry of the earth to a liberationist agenda. I would add spatial justice as part of the third set of freedoms named by Gutierrez.

Gutierrez' understanding of integral liberation flows from his understanding of the personal and structural nature of sin. Sin is death-dealing that occurs at personal, interpersonal and political levels. It is therefore not adequate to think about human or social development that is detached from a deeper socio-economic-political analysis that will indeed surface with the pervasive death-dealing nature of capital, patriarchy and empire over and against the flourishing of all creation. What is required is more fundamental liberation from such death-dealing structures, and the ushering in of radically new ways of being: individually, interpersonally and collectively in the sphere of the *polis*.

Gutierrez's integral liberation speaks to the question of what constitutes good news. Is it indeed good news for a 10-year-old black child in the informal settlements of Diepsloot or Orange Farm that a white man with long hair died for her on a cross? Or is it rather good news when Jesus is one of us; when Jesus affirms our humanity and dignity; when children are free to have equal access to resources that will sustain their livelihoods and enable them to dream the unimaginable; is this the good news for them – to be taken seriously enough to help design a public open space in a way

that is expressive of their humanity; to have access to clean water and sanitation that will prevent drowning in pit toilets; to live in environments that are not polluted and not having to sustain their families by scavenging from the local dumping sites?

Gutierrez (1988) reminds us that liberation theology positions itself intentionally to have as dialogical partners the poor:

[T]hose who are ‘nonpersons’ – that is, those who are not considered to be human beings with full rights, beginning with the right to life and to freedom in various spheres. (p. xxix)

Children, particularly in vulnerable urban areas, are often regarded or treated as non-persons, not fully human with full rights in various spheres, and therefore systematically excluded. This is not dissimilar in the church where children are often made acutely aware of being ‘non-persons’ until a certain age or ritual, or until they finally are allowed access to a certain sacrament.

In Gutierrez’s understanding of the gospel, the mediation of liberation should, therefore, start in dialogue with children, affirming their personhood, hearing them articulate their cries and hopes in their own words, and mediating, in languages and with images that make sense to children contextually, friendship with God. It will continue with the important pastoral work of healing wounds and restoring relationships that violated children and reduced them to non-persons. At the same time, it will seek to remove all obstacles – social, economic, environmental, spatial and political – that hinder access to resources of sustenance, growth, freedom, and indeed, flourishing. It will ensure the complete inclusion and participation of every child, regardless of his or her background or history.

Gutierrez and others help us to understand mission as liberation (Bosch 1991:432–446), but mission as liberation is complemented by notions such

as mission as contextualisation (Bevans 1992; Bosch 1991:420–431) and mission as conscientisation (Gutierrez 1988:xxix, 57, 70).

Contextualisation is the process whereby people within a local context read their own situations and bring them into conversation with biblical texts in their own socio-historical contexts, discerning appropriate faith responses in relation to particular local contextual challenges.

Conscientisation is the process whereby non-persons reject the oppressive forces that initially turned them into non-persons, claiming their own agency with a clear consciousness, and carving out their own destinies through their own initiatives.

Children's participation and children's rights movements often resemble something of such contextualisation and conscientisation. It allows for children to articulate their own struggles and hopes, rather consciously, within their own unique contexts.

How can we, therefore, better create the kinds of spaces in which children can develop consciousness and practice agency, participating radically in shaping their own futures, but also the futures of their neighbourhoods and cities? How can we discover and practice mission as contextualisation, conscientisation and liberation with children, in urban areas where children are excluded and violated?

Such missional engagement will remove obstacles that mediate children's exclusion and daily violation, ensuring their full presence and participation at the table. However, the concept of inclusion is not entirely problem-free either. On whose terms are people included? Whose power dictates whom to include and who to exclude? Can children ever be truly included? How can spaces be created for children to be authentically included? The obstacles to authentic, radical and equal inclusion need to

be acknowledged, understood and accounted for if they are to be engaged meaningfully.

■ The 'right to the city' approach and the inclusion of children

Chapter 7 proposes that we consider a theological understanding of integral liberation as proposed by Gutierrez, in conversation with a 'right to the city' approach, as we consider cities that are radically inclusive of children.

Lefebvre (1996:150) lamented 'the commodification and privatisation of urban space' (cf. Görgens & Van Donk 2012:3), benefiting the few at the expense of the many. He called for 'a new praxis' which became known as a 'right to the city', that will allow all inhabitants 'to participate in the use and production of urban space' (Görgens & Van Donk 2012:3), including, therefore, children.

Harvey (2012) builds on the work of Lefebvre, asking whose city it is, and who has a right to the city. Harvey's assertion is that the right to the city does not emerge primarily from intellectual or philosophical discourse. 'It primarily rises up from the streets, out from the neighborhoods, as a cry for help and sustenance by oppressed people in desperate times' (Harvey 2012:13).

It is not just a cry, however, but much more an assertion of own agency to reclaim the city and to remake the city for all who inhabit it. The realities of vulnerable urban children question whether they are indeed embraced as fully human inhabitants of the city, with a full right to the city, in every sense of the word. How can we invite the agency of children in order for them to help reclaim what has been lost through commodifying what is supposed to be

common or collective? When children are considered, the ability of children to participate fully is debated, which I will return to later in Chapter 7.

In South Africa, the Isandla Institute, based in Cape Town, hosted a series of conversations with civil society partners to explore what a right to the city approach could look like in South African urban contexts. They concluded by unpacking a right to the city, in a South African context, to have three distinct but interrelated meanings: a right to be in the city, a right to access city resources and a right to city-making (Görgens & Van Donk 2012:12–13). This, to me, relates to issues of urban being and belonging, of urban participation and becoming. In the context of urban children, it is about children being, belonging, participating and becoming, but always in relationships of reciprocity and mutuality, with neighbours and in neighbourhoods, also seeking to determine what being, belonging, participating and becoming, could be, and how it could be expressed in ways that are life giving and life affirming.

Can a ‘right to the city’ approach assist us – asserting the right of children to be in the city, children’s right to access city resources, and children’s right to participate in city-making – in exploring and advancing child-inclusive cities? There is a need to not only see children as victims of circumstances, but also as potential agents sometimes migrating by themselves rather purposefully, in order to seek and construct possible better futures for themselves (cf. UNICEF 2012b:38).

If we consider children to be fully human from the moment of birth, invested with the image of God, then their obvious and complete inclusion in the city, their access to all possible resources that could secure, enhance and make livelihoods to flourish, and their full participation in processes of city-making, should not only be encouraged, but insisted upon and institutionalised at all levels.

■ Inclusion and flourishing

In this section, I am exploring inclusion in relation to the concept of flourishing. Volf (2013:14) shows how the concept of human flourishing underwent changes over time. For the 5th century church father Augustine, the ultimate form of flourishing could only be found in love of God (Volf 2013:14). In his work on *The Trinity*, Augustine (1991:XIII:10) writes: ‘God is the only source to be found of any good things, but especially of those which make a man good and those which will make him happy.’

Around the 19th century Volf (2013:15), speaks of an anthropocentric shift that took place, from the transcendent God to a new humanism. It still retained the moral obligation of love of neighbour, ‘in which the flourishing of each was tied to the flourishing of all and the flourishing of all tied to the flourishing of each’ (Volf 2013:15). This is expressed in Marx’s vision of a communist society as well as *ubuntu* philosophies.

Volf (2013:15) suggests that a third shift took place in the late 20th century, from what he calls universal solidarity to individual, personal and experiential satisfaction. It is not that individuals have nothing to do with broader society or that they do not care for others at all, but the ultimate yardstick for flourishing is personal gratification.

Volf (2013:16) describes these three concepts of human flourishing as ‘a history diminution of the object of love.’ He describes how the great religions and even universities of higher learning traditionally had human flourishing at its core – asking questions not so much about personal prosperity or individual success in a particular vocation but on how to be successful at being human together (Volf 2013:25).

Viewing the shift in understanding of human flourishing as diminishing love, Volf (2013:30) then asserts ‘that the love of God and love of neighbour

is the key to human flourishing’, to our ‘flourishing as persons, cultures, and interdependent inhabitants of a single globe.’ Human flourishing, in Volf’s terms, would therefore indeed be about self, others and God, in an interdependent relationship with one another, with love at its core. The flip side of flourishing – a depletion of well-being – would be the result of diminishing love, of self-interest over communal solidarity, of unbridled greed at the expense of the little ones.

Brueggemann (2011:16–30) speaks of it as social flourishing, which depends on a ‘commitment to the common good.’ In retrieving Isaiah 65, Brueggemann shows how human flourishing is imagined by the prophets as an attainable urban possibility. In Isaiah 65, it seems clear that inclusion and flourishing go together. It says that people will build houses and live in them, and plant vineyards and share in the fruit. People will not be excluded from the work of their hands or from safe dwellings in central locations, with access to resources. Children will not die young it says, because they will have access to basic health care, water, sanitation, and mother-to-child transmission of HIV will be virtually eliminated. Because children and the poor are included, their access to resources will enable their full liberation, and they will flourish personally and socially. It imagines flourishing people, flourishing neighbourhoods, flourishing creation, held in bonds of solidarity and mutuality and rooted in love of God, neighbour and creation. Inclusion becomes a prerequisite for human and social flourishing.

British theologian Elaine Graham helps us to connect a ‘right to the city’ to human flourishing. Her understanding of flourishing is ‘to find oneself’ (Graham 2011:265–280). She suggests that space is central ‘to the quest “to find ourselves” as fully human subjects’ (Graham 2011:267). She asks whether urban communities, in the face of the dominance of global capital,

can “find themselves” spatially, politically and ontologically?’ (Graham 2011:267) In other words, can urban communities mediate flourishing in every sense of the word? Right to the city, in that sense, is ‘a form of rhetoric about human agency as the basis of human flourishing’ (Graham 2011:271); or, to repeat Harvey (2008:23), ‘it is the right to change ourselves (“find ourselves”) by changing the city.’

If human agency should be seen as the basis of human flourishing, what, then, would this mean for urban children? It becomes a question of how to invite and allow the agency of children in (co-)determining their own spaces, or, in the language of Graham and Harvey, how to support their quest to find themselves, to change themselves and therefore to flourish, individually and together.

■ Let our children flourish: Beyond child-friendly cities

For the purposes of a theological vision, I propose a ministry praxis that would assert, further and operationalise the rights of children in order for them to experience the good news as integral liberation and to flourish holistically as human beings. This ministry would operate in four distinct areas: institutional presence, practices and protection; access to and provision of services and resources; participation in city-making processes; and spatial transformation.

I suggest that such an understanding of child-inclusive cities provides an expanded vision of what is known as child-friendly cities (UNICEF 2012b:55–56), seeking for more radical changes in all spheres, rethinking the city – socially, economically, institutionally, environmentally, spatially and politically – with and from the perspective of children. It goes beyond

the artificial integration of children and makes them central in reimagining cities.

Child-friendly cities represent systems of governance ‘committed to the full implementation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child’ (UNICEF 2012b:55). Riggio (2002:45) suggests that such systems would enable children ‘to express their opinions and have their views given due consideration.’ In some cities or towns this is done through instituting children’s councils and participating in neighbourhood or project design and planning activities (cf. UNICEF 2012b:55).

It would require of cities to make fundamental ‘institutional, legal and budgetary reforms and to develop a strategy to transform the living environments of children at the family, neighbourhood and city levels’ (Riggio 2002:45). The reality, of course, is that most city authorities lack the political will, the moral passion and the technical skill to ensure child-friendly cities (Riggio 2002:46). If Riggio’s vision of child-friendly cities and the required reforms can be implemented just partially, it would already go a long way to enhance children’s possibilities to flourish. However, a right to the city approach in the school of Lefebvre and Harvey and a liberating praxis in the school of Gutierrez would argue for more fundamental reforms. They would suggest a more radical dismantling of current systems of capital and power which never trickles down to the poor in general, or vulnerable children in particular, but masquerade inclusion behind veneers of democracy. Child-inclusive cities are a radicalised plea for cities’ complete inclusion of children at all levels, and the removal of obstacles preventing such radical inclusion.

A liberating praxis with urban children needs to advance inclusion, at least in four distinct areas, as would be unpacked in what follows.

■ Institutional presence, practices and protection

In the context of children, a right to the city approach should affirm the right of all children to *be* in the city. Child-inclusive cities will therefore be cities that will create spaces of radical hospitality for children to be generously welcomed and fully affirmed: in local churches and religious organisations, clinics, schools, neighbourhood consultations, public open spaces such as parks, parliamentary deliberations to assess citizen's priorities, the media and so forth. It requires a rather single-minded and robust monitoring of the ways in which children's presence is affirmed in the city, or obstructed.

In such a city, the presence of children will be welcomed, encouraged and affirmed institutionally. Practising welcoming and hospitable spaces, and learning how to do that with children, will deconstruct institutional forms that excluded children traditionally. Exploring the presence of children should not be restricted only to the design of innovative play spaces, for example, which is a crucial intervention, particularly in very vulnerable urban areas. In Chapter 7, consideration for the presence of children is proposed in ways that will go way beyond creative play spaces, which are often spaces made to exclude children, but indeed seeks to advocate the city, in its entirety, as play space.

Theologically, Hillis (2014), in advancing new understandings of the church's urban mission, advocates the city as playground in which God's people help to overcome hostilities and animosities, instead retrieving the creative resources of the Spirit and the latent assets of the city, to give fuller expression to the new household of God in the city. Understood in such a way, embracing the city as playground, how can we not only consider this notion metaphorically but in concrete ways to ensure that the city in its entirety becomes a playground in which children can

experience the fullness of life and the manifold possibilities of being fully human?

Institutional practices to welcome and affirm children will be intentionally developed and shaped: It requires the fostering of new practices resulting in new kinds of spaces, new processes and new ways of being that will welcome children's presence, belonging and participation. The participation of children, for example, in drafting integrated development plans for different regions in the City of Tshwane, allowing children's felt needs to be expressed in ways that will help prioritise implementation plans and budgetary commitments, would be a way in the right direction.

Simultaneously, the vigilant protection of children – their sanctity, dignity, well-being, and rights – need to be prioritised by all institutions, from church to government and private sector institutions. Institutions will place the protection of children, not just from overt abuse but also from the violations emanating from socio-economic, generational, educational and spatial exclusion, at the core of their own value sets. The opposite is mostly true in that institutional practices exclude children, both deliberately and unconsciously. Children not only have a right to be in the city, but also to be safe and protected in the city. This should be embraced as a mandate of all institutions that care for the well-being of the city and its people.

Recently, a draft policy surfaced seeking to guide the presence of employees' children on the campus of the University of Pretoria. Although couched in a language of protection, the policy seems to endeavour to sanitise the University campus. It demonstrates a commitment to excluding children, thereby 'protecting' them from potential (and invisible) dangers on campus, but in the process violating their humanity and personhood as

well as the agency of their parents to make responsible decisions, both as employees and parents.

Whilst that happens, the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria runs a Psychology Clinic in Mamelodi Township. The issue they deal with most is the occurrences of sexual assault or even child rape. In April of 2013 alone, 57 children were referred to them for being sexually assaulted (cf. Blokman 2014). This is in one township in the City of Tshwane, and only the reported cases of rape or sexual assault. Essential therapeutic and supportive services are provided to victims. It begs the question though of the University: Having a campus right in the heart of the largest informal settlements in Tshwane, and being the most resourceful institution in that community, should it not consider more fundamental questions as an institution about the protection of children's well-being and ways in which cycles of violent abuse can be broken, before their humanity is scarred so significantly?

Is there not a way in which the University can broker bolder and more innovative collaborative action between institutions to not only care for the victim, but also to address the very systemic issues that turn children into victims, in preventative ways? But will the University consider this if, on the other hand, it seeks to 'ban' the children of employees from campus, thereby creating conditions that might place children at greater risk?

This is one example where one institution can embrace the inclusion, protection and support of children, not just in reactive or responsive ways, but also in proactive and preventative ways, as part of its own mandate. It can also learn and demonstrate how child-inclusive spaces can both be radically inclusive, protective of children and mutually beneficial to children and the spaces in which they find themselves welcomed and affirmed.

Institutional practices that foster child-inclusive cities will protect children, remove obstacles to children's well-being, and enable children to sit at a common table. Theologically speaking, it will affirm children's inherent dignity, humanity and right to be(long).

■ Access to and provision of services and resources

The right to the city also affirms a right to access urban resources. According to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), a slum household is deprived of one or more of the following: access to improved water, access to improved sanitation, security of tenure, durability of housing, sufficient living areas (cf. UNICEF 2012b:5).

Child-inclusive cities will display high degrees of accessibility for all children to urban services and resources, ranging from quality early childhood development and quality education to access to water, sanitation and basic health care, safe and decent open spaces, and access to affordable, decent and safe housing.

In Calcutta, India, the Movement for Education seeks to enrol 45 000 out-of-school children in a partnership between government, NGOs and citizens (Riggio 2002:55). In South Africa, the National Development Plan has as aim to ensure that all children will be enrolled in early childhood development programmes for two years before entering primary school, which is a laudable goal. What is unclear is whether the appropriate budgets will be available to achieve this goal.

Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), Faith-based organisations (FBOs) and churches work in urban communities across South Africa to facilitate and offer access for children to services and resources. This often happens with very limited resources and inadequate public and private investments.

If we are to achieve child-friendly and child-inclusive cities, major investments need to be made into providing equitable services and resources to all children; policy, structural and budgetary changes need to be made to ensure the fair distribution of resources; the call for a wealth tax to invest in children's education and well-being should not be resisted but welcomed in the interest of our mutual flourishing into the future; and bold collaborations need to be developed across the spectrum of stakeholders, instead of the current climate of competition for limited resources.

The International Secretariat of the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI) identified nine building blocks for cities working to become child-friendly or child-inclusive. These building blocks are: children's participation at all stages of planning and implementation; child-friendly legislation; a children's rights strategy; a coordinating agency for children; assessment of policy and programme impact on children; a dedicated children's budget; a regular report on the state of children in the city; awareness-raising and capacity building on children's rights; advocacy for children (UNICEF 2012b:56).

Considering these building blocks in the City of Tshwane, it is clear that it has not in any way moved towards becoming a child-inclusive city, lacking all nine building blocks proposed. To ensure proper access to services and resources that will break the cycles of poverty and mediate increasing justice for children, dedicated institutional capacity needs to be built, represented by these building blocks. Not only will it ensure proper assessment of the status of children's well-being or deprivation, which currently is not the case in the City of Tshwane, but it will make visible the greatest challenges faced by children, and it will prioritise their improved well-being and the elimination of deprivations.

A good example is the work done by the Child-Friendly Movement in the Philippines (UNICEF 2012b). They have:

[E]stablish an accreditation mechanism for urban communities and municipalities, measuring improvements in 24 priority indicators of child well-being in the fields of protection, health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation, and participation. (p. 56)

Access to, and provision of, services and resources needs to be preceded by proper and on-going research in which children can contribute as participants in articulating their own struggles and needs, but also aspirations and hopes. It also needs to be accompanied by a rigorous assessment mechanism, such as the one established in the Philippines. The fragile lives of children are at stake whilst adults too often hide their failures of response and will behind impressive rhetoric, plans and policies.

Participation in city-making processes

The right to the city, in its finest form, is about the right to participate in city-making. This is exercising own agency to determine the shape and future of the city and local neighbourhoods.

Children's right to have their views taken into account in all matters affecting them is enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Nevertheless, children are seldom invited to take part in decisions informing urban planning and design (UNICEF 2012b:50).

Child participation is a thread running through all successful attempts at creating more child-inclusive cities. This ranges from the participation of youth in public debates, to children's parliaments in more than thirty countries of the world (Wall 2010:4), to participatory budgetary processes, either considering children's concern as budgetary priority, and/or consulting with children in the formulation of priorities

(Riggio 2002:54–55; 57–58; UNICEF 2012b:50–51). In some cases, such as Bolivia, the Children’s Parliament, constituted by children, makes formal recommendations to the National Assembly about laws and policies (Wall 2010:5).

Many cities in Ecuador and Brazil have developed participatory and child-friendly budgetary processes (Riggio 2002:54–55). In Barra Mansa, Brazil, children are not only consulted in city budgeting processes but the Children’s Parliament in this city has extensive powers over children’s issues and controls parts of the city budget (Wall 2010:5). In some urban slum areas, children are directly involved in mapping and documenting their surroundings, generating information to be pursued by local communities and local governments in reimagining such areas (cf. UNICEF 2012b:50). A direct impact on the quality of life of children is reported in many of these cities (Riggio 2002:55). In all 13 properties of Yeast City Housing, a social housing company in the City of Tshwane, child participation and children’s rights programmes are running. Children help determine priorities for their living spaces, in conjunction with architecture students, and spaces are then constructed after joint design processes.

Participation, however, in many instances is only tokenism without giving children real power. Roger Hart (1997) described seven levels of political power for children through his ‘ladder of participation’: from manipulation and tokenism, to consultation, own initiative and joint decision-making with adults.

A more radical approach is arguing that children will only be included as full citizens ‘if citizenship is redefined as the political inclusion of *difference*’ (Wall 2010:13). Moosa-Mitha (2005:375) suggests that citizenship should be grounded in ‘the right to participate differently’ in the institutions of

society, acknowledging childhood's 'own lived reality' without making adulthood the norm. Moosa-Mitha and others propose a political inclusion of difference extended to all marginalised groups, including children.

John Wall (2010:16) presents an even more radical option which he calls 'the politics of the gift'. He argues that children, by virtue of their shorter time on earth, their lack of economic resources, and the unequal power relationships, are indeed different, but that which makes them different is precisely their greater dependence and relatively less power to make a difference themselves. This presents a dilemma regarding the participation in a politics of difference. Will children's presence and participation in city-making processes indeed be considered equal and approached with proper respect and appreciation? Will children's participation simply be politically correct tokenism? Can the presence and participation of children be liberating and transformative, not only for the children but also for practitioners, academics and policy-makers? To be liberating and/or transformative how should such spaces be created to invite, listen to and hear diverse voices authentically? How best should children be prepared to participate fully in such spaces?

In this regard, Wall (2010:16–17) proposes the politics of the gift, or the Christian ethics of the gift. He says: 'Each new human brings their own distinctively new gifts to the world that the world in turn is called upon to give a new response' (Wall 2010:17). It is precisely in the difference of the child that their gift to the world can be found. How can the gift of a child's humanity be invited into the political sphere to help shape city futures? How can the gift of the powerless child disrupt economic practices that hurt small people? How can the gift be identified, discerned and invited, in life-changing ways, where children are present? Denying the gift would be at our own peril.

Wall (2010:16–17) questions the absence of a Christian voice on these matters, even though the Christian religion is one ‘that began in the birth of a poor infant to an oppressed people.’ Considering child-inclusive cities theologically is an agenda that seems to be way down the road for most theologies, theological seminaries and churches. Currently theology and church still lack a clear commitment to find, do and develop both urban theologies and child theologies. Only once the realities of cities and children, particularly vulnerable urban children, are grasped by theology and the church, would it be possible to venture into new conversations that would include children’s participation and child-inclusive cities.

Wall reminds us that the story of liberation started with a poor infant. Why will we look elsewhere for our own liberation and that of our current generation, than in the faces and cries of the children?

Spatial transformation

Whereas the first three areas for advancing children’s inclusion are derived from the Isandla Institute’s threefold rights – to be in the city, to access city resources and to participate in city-making – I have added the fourth area, as the rights of children and their radical inclusion are spatially expressed, or denied.

The Book of Lamentations (2:19) mourns the death of children on the corners of city streets. And Zechariah (8:5) envisions city streets and squares where boys and girls will play in unrestrained and joyous ways. The inclusion, agency and gift of children, are most often visible denied or heartily welcomed in the ways in which city spaces are structured. Theologically, children are also to be considered spatially, as was done by the prophetic voices of the Old Testament. Spatial transformation should

be a distinct and, indeed, central area of focus for a liberating praxis with urban children.

In a video clip made by UNICEF (2012c) on children in Johannesburg, the lives of children occupying different kinds of urban environments are compared. John and Solomon live in the Alexandra Township marked by poverty and limited infrastructure. Robin and Raven live in Orange Grove, a more upmarket suburb of Johannesburg. When Robin and Raven want to play they go to their own backyard and jump in the swimming pool. When John and Solomon want to play, they have to walk to their nearest park which is a thirty-minute walk away, crossing busy roads in the process, and the park itself is infested with dead rats, broken glass and piles of garbage. Socio-economic inequality is spatially expressed, and children from the moment of birth are initiated into these disparate circumstances.

Urban spaces often compromise children's safety and protection, as well as their ability to play and express themselves creatively. It is about more than play spaces, however, as I tried to argue above. It should not only be about creating safe play spaces for children in the city, which is essential, but what should rather be imagined is the city, in its entirety, as playground.

Riggio (2002:56) records how Sweden, Canada and Lebanon have prioritised the environmental and spatial transformation of cities, 'in response to children's need for free movement and recreation.' Recognising the unfriendly design and organisation of cities, these governments seek to address green spaces, traffic control and organised recreational opportunities from the perspective of children's inclusion. They do not only consider play spaces, but the complete social, economic and

environmental fabric of the city from the perspective of children. The United Nations Children's Fund (2012b:55) suggests that: '[A]n inclusive environment can be created with a focus on two major issues: space and transportation.' Differently said, they propose that an emphasis on space and transportation, or accessible and affordable transportation as a way to bridge and connect spaces, can go a long way in mediating inclusive environments in which children can feel safe, empowered and free to be and create.

Spatial transformation would ensure access to safe play spaces for children within close walking distance. It would ensure the development of decent and affordable housing for the poor, in close proximity to good health services and educational centres, reducing travel times for parents to and from work, and generally increasing the quality of life for children. It would work tirelessly to transform all apartheid city forms – such as the Cape Flats with its notorious public housing and ongoing gang violence, or men's hostels in the Gauteng city region which work against family life and force women and children to live far from their husbands and fathers – into liveable spaces affirming dignity and enabling flourishing. It would work tirelessly to overcome street homelessness and upgrade informal settlements into decent neighbourhoods where children can live healthy lives. It would facilitate innovative connections between resource-rich and resource-poor neighbourhoods in order for access to services and opportunities to be shared more freely and meaningfully, ensuring that the full potential of children is unlocked and not denied through spatial distance or exclusion. As cities engage in spatial restructuring and transformation, it will heal urban fractures and ensure the well-being of children who can walk tall, play freely, and dream big.

■ Towards a liberating praxis with urban children

In exploring ministry that will advance child-inclusive cities, we need to consider the gospel as integral liberation, enabling human and social flourishing. I propose consideration for ‘right to the city’ approaches and various rights-based approaches to children and children’s participation.

At the heart of such a liberating praxis with children – mediating friendship with God, humanising non-persons to embrace their fullness of humanity, and securing social, economic, environmental, spatial and political freedoms – lies the resolve to foster a new consciousness, with both adults and children, about the gift, presence, status, rights, vulnerabilities, and agency of children.

Such a consciousness has the potential to release new practices of interdependence, radical forms of inclusion, and fresh experiences of human flourishing. So that the temple – and city – can once again be subverted by the presence of a child and it would be said of every child in the city as was said of Jesus: ‘the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him’ (Lk 2:52).

Seeking justice for poverty-stricken children in Africa

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■ Introduction

Poverty is still an extremely serious matter in Africa. Children suffer most under poverty and injustice. There are many reasons for this, and seeking justice for children in poverty-stricken Africa is, therefore, of the utmost importance. Children are vulnerable and need help confronting their challenging circumstances.

Addressing this huge challenge, Chapter 8 will, firstly, explain the general background of need and poverty, followed by a discussion of the task to obtain children's rights and an effective ministry for these children.

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Old and New Testament aspects are then put forward. Thereafter, justice for poverty-stricken children is discussed.

Absolute poverty is still rampant in Africa. According to Kende-Robb (ed. 2014):

It is in terms of overall poverty numbers that the failure of growth to improve Africans' lives is most starkly evident. While the proportion of Africa's people living in poverty is falling, the number of extreme poor rose by 23 million between 2002 and 2010 – and the region's share of global poverty increased from 23% to 34%. (p. 36)

The biblical view on justice for children under these circumstances is, therefore, extremely important. How can the biblical view enhance the lives of African children so that they may also flourish and experience the fullness of life? Is justice possible regarding the dire situation challenging poverty-stricken children? How can justice be brought about for them?

■ Challenges in seeking justice

In the informal settlement Phase 7 in Mangaung (Bloemfontein, Free State Province, South Africa), two children in an informal structure were lying in the shade of a black plastic bag. The sun was scorching. The plastic bag provided some shade, but it was extremely hot under the bag. The mother was sitting next to them, looking at them. She had little means to better their circumstances. Infrastructure was lacking. Clinics were far off. One is filled with sorrow and the question of how to help these people, especially small children in informal settlements, come to mind. In some informal settlements children are living under very difficult circumstances. The challenges are immense, and there are serious challenges to alleviate the conditions and to help the children to have a better life.

Informal brick works are close to the informal settlement Phase 7 in Bloemfontein. Clay is burned to make bricks. There is an open field, and the road leads to these open brick works through a little ditch. Two small children with their backpacks were walking back home from school through these ditches. What are the dangers? Why are they left alone? Their parents are working and cannot tend to them. The children have to walk long distances to school on their own. The circumstances in the informal settlements these children have to confront are extremely challenging, and the solutions to these problems are also not readily available. In empirical research in informal settlements in Mangaung/Bloemfontein, it was established that people live in dire need. Housing is usually corrugated iron shacks. There is a terrible lack of infrastructure and education facilities. Jobs are extremely scarce and many households go without the bare necessities (Verster 2012:314ff.). People—especially children—are deeply in need of hope. Although many see no hope at all, there are those who find solace in the church (Verster 2013:1ff.). Therefore, the challenges in the informal settlements in Africa remain serious for any Christian and others dealing with the problems children have to face in Africa.

Burch (2013:33) refers to the fact that he, with a group of young Kenyans, cared for children living on the streets. Together they performed a blanket drop and went out in the chilly evening to clothe or comfort children by wrapping them in warm blankets whilst they were asleep. Many children in Africa live on the streets. It is important to help and care for them. It should be mentioned that much more is needed to be done. Small signs of compassion are necessary, but a totally holistic approach is needed.

In rural areas, the challenges are also immense. Circumstances are similar to those in the urban areas, with even longer distances from school;

sometimes they do not have enough to eat and arrive at school hungry. Sometimes they have to endure extreme weather conditions, and children are also at risk of falling prey to criminals whilst on their way.

Child labour is also a very serious challenge. Children are suffering because they are exploited as cheap labour. The rapid increase in child labour is a very serious problem. Children in parts of Africa are exploited by having to perform labour such as cattle herding and working in the domestic environment. Children should be protected against these abusive practices (Nkurunziza 2004:124).

Swart and Yates (2006:318) explain that many crimes are committed against children. From 1994 to 2004 Childline in South Africa reported an enormous increase in sexual abuse.

Education is another challenge in Africa, as described in the African Progress Report 2014 (ed. Kende-Robb 2014:36). Some 29 million children of primary school age, one fifth of the total, have dropped out of school – an increase from 39% to 50% in 10 years. Only one in three children will emerge from the primary school years with basic literacy and numeracy skills.

African children's needs are immense. For example, civil war, such as in Somalia, and other conflicts also raises the question of the involvement of the church. The abduction of the girls in Nigeria by Boko Haram is an example of the extreme injustices towards children (Onyanga-Omara 2016).

There are, therefore, serious challenges for children in Africa. Many children in Africa suffer from illnesses such as malaria and AIDS, and these challenges beg for an answer. Poverty-stricken Africa calls for justice. There should be justice for the children because only through justice can they experience a full life, and a young child can then be brought to

experience the fullness of life, and the fullness of the situation where they can honour God and live before him. It is important to ask what approach would be best.

■ The rights of children

Swart and Yates (2006:314ff.) explain that, in South Africa, new emphasis should be placed on the rights of children. Christian theology should develop a children's rights agenda and should question the limited involvement of governments in the issues of children.

Swart and Yates (2006:316) further explain that the social contexts of children in South Africa are grave and that children suffer much; some do not have parents to care for them and many are abused. The rights of the 11 million children living in poverty (Swart & Yates 2006:317) need to be addressed.

In the international arena, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child was proclaimed in the United States in 1924. The US declaration was expanded in 1924 and again in 1959 (Swart & Yates 2006:320). In 1959, the Declaration states, amongst others, that a child shall enjoy special protection, shall be given opportunities by facilities of law, or by other means, to enable it to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy, normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity. The enactment of the law, for this purpose, in the best interest of the child, shall always be of paramount importance.

Couture (2003:33) explains that children's rights, formulated in international discussions of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, were adopted into international law in 1989 and ratified by all nations except Somalia.

Couture (2003:40) continues that these capabilities of the declarations would be those in which our political societies need to support children's growth. They demonstrate that affiliated needs of love flourish best when supported by the conditions of justice, and the condition of justice brings a fullness of life because it enables love to flourish. The conditions of justice and the possibilities of love are essential for the most vulnerable of human beings amongst us.

Although it is important to accept these views, a few aspects should be emphasised. Children's rights will not change their dire situation unless a holistic approach is followed. Rights and responsibilities go together. Church and society should work closely together not only to establish children's rights but also children's responsibilities. The needs of children and the challenges to empower them should take all the aspects of the life they live before God into account.

■ A ministry to poverty-stricken children

Ministry to poverty-stricken people is built on the same principles as ministry to other groups of children. Important aspects on how a ministry to children should be conducted are explained by Breed and Kruger (2014). They are of the opinion that parents and the faith community should take responsibility for the ministry to children. Parents are primarily responsible for leading their children to follow Christ. The challenge for children's ministry in poor contexts is that many poverty-stricken children do not have parents to model a Christian life for them. In caring for them and the development of their faith, the faith community should take more responsibility.

Parents, extended family members and other primary caregivers have to be equipped by the faith community to care for and empower children. Parents and children should be empowered to live out their calling to

diaconia [caring for each other]. This *diaconia* should be made possible by the ministering of God's grace through the gifts of the Spirit. *Diaconia* is also the ministering of God's grace in obedience to, and dependence on, God (Breed & Kruger 2014). Faith communities also have the responsibility to help children to reason morally. Christian convictions should be enhanced. In this regard, the church should also be a socialising agent for children. A holistic approach by faith communities and society at large should take responsibility to help children to live their lives in fullness before God.

However, poverty-stricken children need much more. Couture (2003:40ff.) explains that many children live in very dire circumstances because of extreme poverty, and that living out pastoral theology is important in this context. In God's eyes, all people are, at birth, already complete human beings because they were created in God's image. Therefore, children should be accepted with human dignity and not as inferior to anybody else; for this reason, charity and kindness should be shown to these children and should also be developed in their own lives and in the lives of all their caretakers. In the process, love and justice for children living in poverty-stricken contexts should be deeply interdependent and practiced together. A holistic approach will take cognisance of the fact that the needs, challenges and responsibilities of children can only be met if they are seen through the eyes of Christ.

Swart and Yates (2012:1) write that it is important to develop a public-orientated ministry that would do justice to the social plight of the children living in Africa, and that a new hermeneutics of listening is important and must be developed. Listening is all-important in dealing with the struggles in poverty-stricken communities in Africa, and specifically South Africa.

This is very true of children living in these contexts of poverty: they need people from the faith community that will listen to them. Theology and the church in general should listen more attentively to them.

According to Swart and Yates (2012:2), one of the positive outcomes of interdisciplinary engagement of childhood studies is that the conceptualisation of a new hermeneutics of listening with regard to children can theologically be addressed. They refer especially to Osmer (2008:129ff.) and say that it brings about a new interconnection with the hermeneutics of listening. They also express the opinion that to enhance children's participation in citizenship in society not only entails enabling children with resources to voice their opinion, but it also implies that adults need to listen to the voices of children and be committed to do more than just to hear what children are saying. Hearing should grow into doing justice for them.

Swart and Yates (2012:4) add that, when listening to children, it is possible to identify and appraise what children have to offer and contribute to the spaces in which they find themselves. In a perspective from a South African project, it is explained how the promotion of children's rights can be enhanced in a given situation, and how a positive view of children can eventually ensue. The conclusion is that by identifying a definite and visible movement towards hermeneutical listening, children all over the world can be positively influenced towards dealing with their problems. Listening to children is of great importance, but with a holistic approach they should also be helped to better understand their own situation. Listening and empowering should go together.

There can be no doubt that it is extremely important in the ministry to poverty-stricken children to emphasise God's radical and comprehensive grace. God's grace in Jesus Christ is the most essential aspect to communicate

to children. This should be done from the perspective of the encompassing love of Christ.

■ **Biblical perspectives**

The challenges from the biblical perspectives regarding poverty-stricken children are, therefore, also important. Children in need should still have hope. This comes about when justice is ensured for these children.

■ **Old Testament**

The family in the Old Testament (OT) was highly regarded. Kaiser (1983:125) writes: 'The family was as central to the ethical development and management of the community as was the vitality and worth of the individual.' The person with the least possibility was also highly regarded. It is, therefore, not strange that references to the widow and the orphan are found in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. These orphans should receive the full attention of God's people. The prophets calling for justice always called for justice for the widows and the orphans. The prophets called for justice because the orphan was the most vulnerable person in the Old Testament community. Widows and orphans had no one to take up their cases in the congregation of the elders. No one was there to look after them and to tend to their problems, but in the Old Testament the prophets called for the people of God to specifically look after the poor and the poverty-stricken children and widows. Justice, according to the Word of God, was served in a special way when it was served to the widows and the orphans. They had to experience the kindness of the community around them. The community surrounding the suffering widows and orphans was required to tend to them so that they could experience love and kindness in many situations. Waltke and Yu (2007:812)

explain that the 'I-am' prophets highly revered the orphans and widows and that 'no subject is as worthy of consideration as the plight of the orphan, the widow and the sojourner.' Birch, Brueggemann, Fretheim, and Petersen (1999:148) show that the relationship with God was the key to all other relationships, especially to people in need. They (Birch *et al.* 1999) write:

The laws that seek to protect and nurture the poor and the needy are considered among the oldest in the OT. While also attested in ancient Near Eastern law, their frequency in the OT and the intensity with which they are presented evidences their unparalleled significance for both God and Israel. (p. 161)

Therefore, hope for children in need is also the hope for the most vulnerable amongst the children. This is exactly what the prophets called for. If God is a God of justice, he calls for justice for the most vulnerable.

Burch (2013:33) refers to Exodus 1:15–22 where the midwives saved the children by being obedient only to God and disobedient to the Pharaoh. He (Burch 2013:35) is of the opinion that liberation theology opened up new ways for understanding how the children could be cared for. Their lives were spared in this way. Especially important is the role of children in the kingdom of God, and although God is the prime person in his kingdom, children must also be helped to be part of the kingdom of God (Burch 2013:39).

New Testament

In the New Testament (NT), it is also clear that Jesus called the children to come to him and be blessed. As in the time of the Old Testament, children were very vulnerable in the New Testament times. The community looked down upon children, but Jesus called the children to his midst and he

blessed them, because in them he saw the true way of attaining the kingdom of God with outstretched hands and without giving something back to God (see Mk 10:13–16; Mt 19:13–15; Lk 18:15–17). The disciples understood little of Jesus' new way of doing, and they tried to send those away who brought their children to be blessed. They shared the views of the community in which they lived. Jesus changes this (Jl 1990:141). For Jesus the new order of the kingdom meant that the little, powerless, unprofitable ones were welcomed guests (DeSilva 2004:206). Gundry (1993:545) writes: '[F]or children's reception of God's kingdom provides the model that adult non-disciples must follow if they, like the children who are receiving God's kingdom are to enter it.' The children experienced the radical salvation of Christ. Therefore, Christ called the children, those who are blessed in his kingdom, because they are open to receive a gift as all should receive the kingdom (Witherington III 2001:279). Again justice should be served.

Howard (2013:275) explains that it is important to look at the Bible and understand how Jesus cared for those vulnerable people, also those children with disabilities, and how he helped the boy, mute since childhood, to offer insight for present readers who provide care for children with serious disabilities. The Gospel of Mark makes a positive contribution in this regard and makes it clear that modern caregivers may find a note of consolation that, in this tale of pushy and persistent parents, they can also see how to react to the needs of their children (Howard 2013:279).

From the perspective of the Old and the New Testament, it is clear that the family is of great value in the community and that children should also be accepted as important in the household of God. In a holistic approach, children should be acknowledged as extremely valuable.

■ Justice

■ The implications of justice

Whilst dealing with this, however, we must always take into consideration that the justice that the Bible calls for is the justice of God, not the distorted justice of people. God's justice is the justice of his reign, of his kingdom and of the essence of his kingdom. His kingdom and his justice must never be separated. The justice of God is not something next to his reign. God brings justice to the people and by bringing justice to the people, they must experience the fullness of the grace of his justice. They must stand in his justice because of God's salvation in Jesus Christ; therefore, it is always important, when we speak about justice, even in the New Testament, we must speak about the justice in relation to Jesus Christ who gave himself up to save people. The justice that Jesus called for is the justice of the Son of God who suffered on the cross. It is the justice of him who gave himself and brought salvation to us. It is the justice of him who died in our place. Therefore, it is also important to acknowledge that children are in need of the salvation of Jesus Christ. Children are not per se saved or good or beneficial to others. Children have to be saved, just like any adult. Sin is also present in the lives of children, and we have to acknowledge that. Moreover, when we accept that children also have sin, we also have to deal with them in the name of Jesus Christ who takes away sin. So that the justice we seek for children, is a justice for the most vulnerable but also the justice of salvation. Justice and salvation must never be separated. Justice and salvation are linked and should both be accepted as part of the salvation that God is bringing to people.

Whilst totally accepting the challenges and needs of children, it is also necessary to acknowledge that only God is good in himself and that children also have the responsibility to live before God. It is,

however, important to realise that it is not possible to teach children about redemption if they go hungry or are abused. The gospel of Christ is the good news for the total person and includes the well-being of the person in his or her totality. A holistic approach will take all aspects of life into consideration, with the important aim of helping children to be fully human. Justice means that all the needs of the child should be taken into account. When this is done the gospel in fullness can be proclaimed.

Love and care

In bringing about justice, love and care is extremely important. The biblical requirement of justice should include unconditional love and care for children. Children need to know that God cares for them and that the love he has for them also includes the love and care of parents and other caregivers.

Care in difficult circumstances should also be emphasised. Van der Walt, Swart and De Beer (2014) consider the contribution and challenges of informal community-based early childhood development. They (Van der Walt *et al.* 2014:4) emphasise that dedicated resources should be channelled towards ensuring the children are well cared for from an early age. It should be broadened to take into account the development of the needs of children. Two years of quality preschool attendance should be made compulsory. A comprehensive package of services should be defined. Coordination weaknesses between the different sectors and departments responsible for early childhood development (ECD) should be addressed. The guidelines for ECD programmes should be standardised and innovation in the way ECD services are developed should be encouraged.

A holistic approach will emphasise the preference of love and care for children. All possible means will have to be used to empower even the smallest child to live as a full human being.

Justice and the atonement

Justice and the atonement are linked, because God, asking justice, provided his Son to bring about justice for the unjust humans. The gospel is the gospel of God providing his Son for the atonement. Jesus Christ yielded himself as the One without sin for those in sin, and because of this, justice is possible. Christ becomes the justice of God. In him righteousness can be found. He is our justice.

Kärkkäinen (2013) writes:

A proper account of the meaning of the salvific life, death, resurrection, and atonement of Jesus as the representative of the people of Israel and, in continuation, as the collective new Adam helps connect with history. The whole history of Jesus, including the subsequent pouring out of the Spirit on the new community sent out to the world, belongs to atonement with a promise of a holistic offer of salvation that encompasses all aspects of human, social, and cosmic life. (p. 344)

This means that children can also experience justice. Christ calls on them to be his children and be renewed in his name. He also calls for justice towards children because he has changed the way people should look towards others. The fullness of the atonement includes children in all aspects of their lives. New possibilities for childhood are present in the atonement, because life gets new meaning in Christ, especially for children.

The atonement of Christ on the Cross was atonement for all human beings who come to him. Children are not excluded. He died for them also. A holistic approach will also emphasise this truth.

□ **Justice and reconciliation**

Christ is also our reconciliation. Enmity is changed to friendship. God as Father becomes our friend. Now we can live before him as his children. This includes the whole family. It is God who makes it possible to be a community before him. Reconciled in Jesus Christ we can now experience the love of God in fullness. This love is the radical love of the One who reconciled us in his Son Jesus Christ. Migliore (2004) explains that the death of Christ has three characteristics in this world of violence and need:

1. Christ died for us in order to expose our world of violence for what it is – a world that stands under God’s judgement, a world that is in deadly bondage and that leads to universal destruction.
2. Christ died for us in order to extend the healing love of God to all the violated and to mediate the forgiving love of God to all the violators.
3. Christ died for us in order to open, in the midst of our violent world, a new future of reconciliation and peace for a new humanity and a new creation. (pp. 190–191)

All these aspects of reconciliation are also intended for children. They can experience the love and nearness of God in Christ in all its fullness. However, their experiences of reconciliation with God and the people around them, have to include justice towards them. Only then their full, new humanity before God can come to realisation.

□ **Justice and responsibility**

Children are very vulnerable. They are in great need. In situations such as informal settlements they live in extremely challenging environments. They are, however, also human. Therefore, it is not a contradiction to state that they are also responsible beings, although this responsibility is not the same as that of adults.

One must take into consideration that children are responsible for their actions. Whilst children are on their way to adulthood, they need to realise that they also have to act responsibly. Children also need to live in such a way that they show love towards God and to their fellow human beings. Children can be very cruel. They have to be educated and developed and informed to live according to God's Word.

In the church children should also be accepted as brothers and sisters in the community. Wiebe (1993:48) explains that one can hardly talk of the status of children without talking simultaneously about how they come to faith, and therefore about communion, baptism and membership. Without addressing the status of children in the faith community it is impossible to explain their spiritual well-being.

May, Stemp and Burns (2011:278) refer to how children are included in worship and how they become part of new kinds of worship. There are different ways to accept children into the faith community. They visited a few mega churches and found that these churches did not promote integrating participation, nor were children encouraged to be part of the main church service. Often, smaller churches are more intentionally nurturing children into participating in the life and ministry of the faith community.

In nurturing children and integrating them as participants in the church, we have to attend carefully to our communication of the Bible stories to them. In this regard, Reddie (2010) refers to the story of Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son, Isaac (Gn 22) and discusses how that can be detrimental to nurturing, developing and helping children understand how to continue in their lives. It is difficult to explain to them how to understand what God's message to them is, as such stories can sometimes be dangerous to children. Reddie (2010)

explains that it can be dangerous to confront children with a story of such a sacrifice without clearly showing that God did not want the child to die. Reddie (2010) discusses how one has to develop these types of stories in a certain way to communicate the story and God's message in a manner that helps children to understand the story better and to continue with their lives in the light of that understanding.

Life in fullness

Sturm (1992:153) underlines that the role and the situation of children need more attention because children are the most vulnerable and the most victimised of people and therefore need to be helped. There should be a response to the suffering of children. The intention of love is, therefore, very important (Sturm 1992:151) and there must be freedom, and freedom to empower the children. Affirmation of freedom is, therefore, not merely opening up opportunities for the individual; it is also a quality of interaction.

In this interaction, we have to understand children. Children, especially young children, are not always capable to reason like adults in a logical way. Childhood is rather a time for play, allowing orientation, experimentation and even indulging in ways that seem inappropriate for adults. Sturm (1992:157) writes that children, like adults, are creative participants in the world. He explains that they are citizens of the world community to be respected as such and that they manifest a keen ability to interpret the generous possibilities for their lives.

Children's rights are important, and the development of church and human rights should be explained very thoroughly. Sturm (1992:169) writes that there are historical forces against children, and the development of children is, thus, very important.

If we mention justice then we also have to mention the salvation in Jesus Christ, because he brings about salvation and deliverance – also for small children. His salvation is for children so that they can also experience the fullness of the revelation in Jesus Christ. The fullness of the revelation in Christ means that children can be saved, can experience, understand and live in, the fullness of God. This has to do with God's righteousness. Schreiner (2013) explains:

God's righteousness represents God's character, an attribute of God, if you will. And the righteousness of God has been granted to believers as a gift, so that they stand in the right before God by faith. They share the same status as the resurrected Christ, for they are united to Christ in both his death and resurrection. Hence, God's righteousness is also a gift of the new age. (p. 554)

A holistic approach will always reveal the radical love of Christ for the human person, child and adult. This love of Christ in his salvation will empower the child to become responsible as a human being before God. In that sense, he opens his arms and receives little children and calls all to become like them.

■ Justice for the future

Only when we look at the future from the perspective of God's reconciliatory justice can we also change the way in which we live to bring about a new perspective. Children can then also be empowered for the future. On their way to the fullness of life before God, children can experience God's care where the community, especially the church, takes them to the future on the journey of the church with God. The future holds new possibilities when the church is truly the church of the reconciliation. Children look towards the future with the new eyes of God's interventions when they also experience God's love in the community.

In practice this means that children should be empowered by looking after their primary needs. Justice means that no child should go hungry and be in physical need. The church should empower communities to look after their children in such a way that it is beneficial for them to hear the gospel and to turn to the church because they are no longer in need. Only when children experience well-being can they also be empowered spiritually. All effort must be made to help children not to go hungry or be abused. When this is accomplished, children should be helped to fully understand the life with God.

■ Conclusion

Justice for the poor in Africa means that the true justice must be found in the atonement and reconciliation of Christ. A holistic approach will take all needs into account, but will also empower children to become fully-saved human beings. Children should look up to Christ for the full redemption. They should receive the reconciliation of God in Christ. Justice towards children should also be made known by the acceptance of the atonement. In Christ, true justice can be meted out to children because he makes it possible. This should be established by his encompassing love.

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The authors are theology scholars from Africa who focus on the children of Africa. The book addresses theoretical challenges and provides theological perspectives for ministry with children in a context of rapid social change. Written from the perspectives of a variety of theological subdisciplines, the book is aimed at theologians across disciplines, especially those academics who are interested in the intersection between theology, childhood studies and African socio-cultural themes. Chapters include: Welcoming children? On building cultures of trust; Doing child theology: History and methodology; Child theology in Africa – a new hermeneutic; Holistic children's ministry: History and challenges; Integrating children in the life and ministry of faith communities; Public theology and the plight of children in Africa; Child-inclusive cities: Towards a liberating praxis with children; and Seeking justice for poverty-stricken children in Africa.

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A timely book on child theology that addresses an extraordinarily important topic in the area of theology and specifically within the African context. It attests to a sound hermeneutical approach – albeit primarily biblical hermeneutics – and is based on apt research methodology and theoretical foundations.

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This collected work is a timely and sound theological contribution to the discourses on Child Theology from African soil. The varying contributions advance the role and place of the child in the church, academia and African society at large.

Dr Shantelle Weber, Lecturer in Practical Theology (Youth Work), Faculty of Theology at Stellenbosch University, and member of the Circle for Concerned African Women, and the Child Theology Movement

