

“A LITTLE CHILD WILL LEAD THEM”

REDISCOVERING CHILDREN AT THE HEART OF MISSION

By Keith J. White

Introduction

There is a misconception of serious proportions among Christians that ‘the Bible says very little about children’. This particular quotation is taken from an otherwise well researched and documented Evangelical publication dated December 2000. It is the purpose of this paper to put the matter straight. After a brief survey of biblical material the beginnings of a theological framework for our role in God’s mission among children at risk is suggested.

Let us not underestimate the significance of our task today. What if we have misheard or neglected God’s revealed teaching about children and childhood? What of the likely effects of such a process on the history and current life and shape of the church? What if by default we have not been salt and light in God’s world? What if our vision of the Kingdom of Heaven is a pale reflection of what Jesus revealed? The stakes are very high and today marks the start of a process of what could in time have a significant impact on the development of theology and mission and the shape of the church.

What is offered here is the tentative sketch of an outline. It has been produced while the responsibilities of caring for children at risk have taken priority over the writing and checking of the manuscript. It comes from the heart as well as the head, and from one who has spent much of the last twelve years working on a new Bible, designed for children of every culture who are encountering the Scriptures for the first time.

An Old Testament Cast of Children (from Genesis to Malachi)

Ishmael (Gen 16) means ‘God hears’. His pregnant mother, Hagar, had all but given up hope, but God was infinitely concerned about this single mother and her future son.

Isaac (Gen 22) prefigured Jesus in the story of the testing of Abraham.

Joseph (Gen 37) the 17 year-old dreamer was the one through whom his father and the Children of Israel were saved.

Benjamin (Gen 44 & 45) was the boy through whom reconciliation came between Joseph and his brothers.

Moses (Exodus 1) was saved by the vigilance of his sister **Miriam**.

The story of Exodus begins with the murder of Jewish baby boys, foreshadowing the birth of Christ. The last plague involved the death of firstborn sons.

The climax to the book of Ruth is the birth of a baby, **Obed**, one of the ancestors of Jesus.

Samuel (I Samuel 3) was the child through whom alone God was able to reveal His will when adults failed. He is a model for human spirituality and obedience.

David (I Samuel 17) was the person through whom it was revealed that God was not dependent on adult power or training. Through a boy the Philistines were routed.

Elijah & Elisha each brought a **widow's son** to life. (I Kings 17; II Kings 4)

A **young servant girl** was the means of the healing of Naaman, the army commander (II Kings 5).

Josiah, through whom reformation and politics and religion occurred, was a boy - king (II Kings 22). He was a boy when the dramatic reforms began (II Chronicles 34).

Esther, the future queen who would save the Jewish people, was an orphan girl. (Esther 2)

Jeremiah was chosen by God, though he was 'only a child' (Jeremiah 1).

It is not just that these people happened to be children but that some of the most significant acts and revelations of God were through these children. Their faith and actions are critically important in the unfolding and outworking of God's purposes.

Childhood in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is much more than a record of the significance of individual children. Children and childhood are of great significance as part of the whole social life and structure.

Worship was visual and dramatic - equally accessible to children and adults. The Passover assumes children will ask what it means (Exodus 12), and so do the 12 stones set up after being taken from the bed of the river Jordan (Joshua 4). The rituals and practices described in Exodus and Leviticus are a primary way in which God's people will serve and worship Him. There is little if any separation of children from adults. In Ezra 10 when the Law is read out, children are mentioned as part of the crowd, echoing the occasion of the renewal of the Covenant in Joshua 8:35.

Children are seen as a sign of God's blessing all through the Old Testament, and yet they are the first to suffer when sin, deceit, war, and famine affect a tribe or city. Achan's children die as a result of his sin (Joshua 7). There are desperately sad and vivid depictions of the suffering of children through out the O.T. (Psalm 106; Jeremiah 31; Lamentations 1, 2 & 4; Joel 3; Amos 2; Zephaniah 1 etc.)

It follows that one of the primary concerns of any responsible adult is the wellbeing and care of children. In most situations families will provide for them, but when this is not possible because of disease, death, famine or war, then the care of the fatherless is dear to God's heart. (Psalms 10; 146; Isaiah 1, Zephaniah 7 etc.)

God's relationship with His people is portrayed in different ways in the O.T., but an emerging one (subsequently developed in the N.T.) is as a Father. In Deuteronomy 8 God disciplines those whom He has chosen as a father. In Psalm 27 a child may be abandoned by father and mother, but not by God, the Heavenly Father. God's compassion is like that of a father to a child (Psalm 103). The Wisdom literature is written largely as from a father to a son (e.g. Psalm 34; Proverbs 1-7). The Jewish people are often called 'Children of Israel' or Daughters of Zion'.

The mother/child relationship is significantly used as an embodiment of the bond between God and us. There is a beautiful description of the weaned child in Psalm 131 representing the stilled and quietened soul. A mother may forget her child at breast, but God will never do so (Isaiah 49: 15, 16). Isaiah closes with a tender description of childbirth that concludes, 'As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.' (Isaiah 66:13) Hosea movingly relates the early days of the Israelites thus: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.' (Hosea 11:1)

You will find much food for thought in Ecclesiastes 11 & 12: 'Remember your Creator in the days of your youth'; Song of Songs 8 and the younger sister; Ezekiel and the 'son of man' (1ff), and the Old Testament closes with a renewed relationship across the generations between children and fathers (Malachi 4:6). And that's only a skim through!

Old Testament Themes

But there are three deeply significant themes we have not yet touched, and before we leave the O.T. we must deal with them.

First in Psalm 8 there is a truth that is easily overlooked alongside the immensity of the night sky. Jesus specifically draws attention to it, so that should be good enough for us to stop and take note: 'From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies to silence the foe and the avenger' (8:2). Children are ordained and designed to praise God and His glory. They are not consumers or future adults, but worshippers of the Creator God. Their ears, eyes, feet, hands and voices have been

created to praise God. This is their true nature and purpose. But more than this they have a special role in silencing the enemies of God. When all else fails, it is children (like Samuel and David, for example) who will be the means of moral and spiritual virtue and power. Isn't this remarkable? The child is being portrayed morally and spiritually as the "father of the man".

This leads on to the second great insight in Isaiah 11. The Messianic kingdom is portrayed here vividly: 'The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the bear and the yearling together, and a little child will lead them.' You see the place of the child? Leading! And it will be a safe environment in which children can play - unlike the urban, war-torn, consumer market - dominated jungle of today. (See also Isaiah 65). The Kingdom of Heaven has children at its heart. We must never lose sight of this if we want to understand the teaching of Jesus, our relationship to God, and our joint mission on earth.

But there is one last crowning role for the child in the Old Testament. Isaiah talks of God's righteous anger against the sin and hypocrisy of humankind. This situation seems unimaginably bleak and hopeless, and yet God gives a sign: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel' (Isaiah 7:14). The culmination of God's saving action is a light to those living in the shadowlands. :

'Unto us a child is born

Unto us a son is given

And the government will be on His shoulders...' (Isaiah 9:6)

The focus is not a warrior king, a wise rabbi, or a High Priest, but a child. The natural and normal place to look for salvation is everywhere else and to everyone else...but the government will rest on this child's shoulders.

And so the scene is set, the stage is ready, for us to venture into the New Testament. 'Little to say about children' indeed? What does this tell us about the way the Scriptures have been read? What else might have been missed? Can we really have been that blind?

The New Testament and Children

It is in the Gospels that we encounter the working out and development of each of these themes from the Old Testament.

There are lots of incidents involving children in the life of Jesus: the daughter of the Canaanite woman (Matt 15 & Mark 7); the boy with a demon (Matt; Mark and Luke); the official's son at Capernaum (John 4); Jairus' daughter (Matt, Mark & Luke); the son of the widow at Nain (Luke 7) and the boy who offered Jesus the five loaves and two fish (John 6). Jesus has a heart for children and they are drawn to Him. His preferred method of teaching by story and sign is, like the O.T. worship and ritual, equally accessible to children and adults.

But there are four aspects of the Gospel narratives that call for our particular respect and attention. The first is the birth of Jesus, *the incarnation*. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke devote their opening chapters to this. Matthew quotes the passage from Isaiah about the virgin and child (Isaiah 7:14). The wise men come in search of the child. When they find him, they worship him by kneeling and presenting gifts. The Exodus narrative is recreated and revisited as Herod realises he has been tricked. Once again, young boys are killed. In Luke there is an extensive account of the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus. Luke tells of a sign for the shepherds that replicates the prophecy of Isaiah; 'You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger' (Luke 2:12). Simeon tells of the significance of the child. 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign...' (2:33) and when those who looked forward to the redemption of Jerusalem came to the prophetess Anna, she spoke about 'the child' (2:38).

The word 'child' is repeated in both Gospels at this point in the story again and again. And what is the significance of all this? God has chosen to enter the world, to reveal Himself as a baby and as a child. Perhaps we are so accustomed to Christmas that we do not realise how radical this is. The theologian Nestorius was so upset about the implication of this that he wrote: 'I deny that God is two or three months old!' Karl Barth, describing the helpless baby wrote: 'This is your God!' The fullness of the creator God is a tiny child? Is it possible? If so what does it mean?

The hymn writers have pondered the paradox and come up with 'Lo within a manger lies, He who built the starry skies....'; and other ways of expressing total amazement. If it is difficult to see how the fullness of the godhead could dwell in a human being, how much greater is the challenge to see Almighty God contracted to the span of a baby! From God's point of view there is no problem, but it shakes our preconceptions. A baby is small, weak, dependent and vulnerable, lacks education and training and language... Yes, says God, and you must learn to look and find me in these things, in little ones, in little things. You must learn, to move from the palaces and encounters with the learned and the powerful, to the manger and the child.

The second strand in the Gospels concerns *children and childhood* and requires some work on your part. You will need to turn to Matthew 17 and be ready to look through to chapter 21. The story here spans the period from the Transfiguration to the entry of Jesus into the Temple at Jerusalem. (It is told also in Mark 9-11, and Luke 9-19 with many of the same elements.) It contains some of the clearest teaching of Jesus about the nature of the kingdom. What we are going to do now is to seek to understand the mind of Jesus and this means we will have to leave the standard commentaries and assumptions behind! The first action of Jesus after the Transfiguration is to heal the boy with a demon. Then there is a section on taxation where payment and sonship are explored. Then, in chapter 18, teaching about children, including the famous statement 'unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven', a curse on those who cause harm to children, and the story of the lost sheep applied to children (little ones).

Next comes teaching on forgiveness and divorce prompted by adult questions and concern, and once again Jesus places children in the centre of the kingdom (19:13-15). A rich young ruler is then told to sell everything in order to enter the kingdom (i.e. to become like a child). There is a parable about workers in a vineyard that demonstrates the upside-down nature of the Kingdom, and more teaching about the death of Jesus. Then the mother of James and John wants to claim top places in the Kingdom for her boys! She has completely misunderstood the nature of the Kingdom and what childhood teaches us about it. The two blind men (20: 29-34) do a lot better! Then Jesus enters Jerusalem and crowds welcome Him. In the Temple things carry on as if the Christ had not arrived and the Kingdom of Heaven did not exist. Only children continue to praise Jesus. They are rebuked. But Jesus confirms that these children are doing exactly what they are designed for: to praise and worship God (Psalm 8:2).

What have we discovered? A thread from Transfiguration to the Temple, from one mountain-top to Mount Zion, linking the teaching about the death of Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven. And children, and child-likeness form the linking strand. All the major commentaries miss this and some translators don't help by deciding to take 'nepioi' (little children) and record it as 'the simple'! (Matt 11:25, Luke 10:21) Once adults have got a bee in their bonnet it takes a lot to shake it out!

The third strand is about the *Kingdom of Heaven*. And what is Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven?

Greatness in His kingdom has nothing to do with status, power, strength, influence, wealth, or the normal assumptions in society.

You need to change (to repent) to enter the kingdom.

You need to become like little children if you are to enter the kingdom of Heaven.

Welcoming a little child we welcome the Lord of the Kingdom!

The Kingdom belongs to the childlike...

The Kingdom is in fact not like an earthly kingdom at all! It's the opposite in every way. Upside down! Inside-out! The best way of describing it is not as a place or territory at all, but as "God's way of doing things". That's when all the stories of the kingdom fall into place.

The other great paradox of the kingdom concerns when it will be fully realised, or when it started. It is both inaugurated (i.e. it has begun) but also not yet (i.e. it has not been fully realised). In this children help us: for children are both fully human (now) and also not fully developed (not yet). Childhood and the kingdom illuminate each other. No wonder Jesus is seething with

anger at the thought of anyone harming a child, made in God's image and sign of His kingdom!

The fourth strand is a powerful and common description of entering the kingdom that we have allowed to become detached from children and childhood. That is the teaching of Jesus to Nicodemus (John 3): '*You must be born again*'. What is Jesus teaching? Exactly the same truth: you've got to repent, to let go of all your adult, culturally-laden preconceptions and become a little baby: to start all over again...in Christ. (This is where the epistles will help so much.) It's not a separate metaphor or teaching: like Matthew, Mark and Luke, John is recording the need for an adult to become like a child: otherwise he or she cannot see the Kingdom of God.

And this truth is embedded in John's Gospel in the relationship between Jesus and His Father. This is the dominant description: Father and Son. And this is to be our norm. So when we pray we are to say not 'Almighty God', 'Creator', 'Lord God' but...*Our Father*. It is the realisation of the hope of the Old Testament. The Gospel of John begins by talking of "children of God" and Jesus' life shows most tenderly and plainly what this means.

In the Gospels and in the Kingdom, if we are to allow God's spirit free rein, children are at the centre – like the boy offering his five loaves and two fish to adult disciples who felt it right to point out to Jesus they weren't enough! The twelve baskets afterwards may have helped them understand in this particular case!

And what of the rest of the New Testament? In Romans and Galatians the whole nature of our relationship with God in Christ is worked out: we are adopted into God's family and enabled to know God as 'Abba'. We are to enter into every aspect of the life of Christ and to live as children of the light. And one of the favourite descriptions of the followers of Jesus is 'dear children'. The epistles describe a new and emerging way of living where in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, bond nor free!

'Little to say about children' ? Let no one ever make this mistake again. But now let us begin the real work. What are the implications of all this?

Preparing the Ground for a Christ Centred Framework for Mission

Let's look first at some of the errors to be avoided from past experience before we begin to outline a theological framework for the future.

(1) We have made fundamental mistakes about the *kingdom* of God and about mission. We, particularly in Europe, separate it from our own culture. Kingdom, empires, colonialism were all about power and territory, conquest. We thought mission was what we did; that God's kingdom depended on our activity.

(2) We have gone about *theology* in the wrong way. It has been an adult orientated pursuit. There is tremendous emphasis given to philosophy, doctrine, systematic theology, hermeneutics, and very little to stories, paradoxes and signs of the kingdom.

(3) We have made mistakes in the *church*. We have got our priorities mixed up. Sometimes we did not distinguish between kingdom and church. Often we underestimated the place and contribution of children and little ones. We honestly did not think we had anything to learn from them!

(4) We have contributed to *societies* where adults, power, wealth, possessions seem to count for almost everything. Where Jesus' teaching to sell everything becomes for many impossible to contemplate. And where childlikeness is marred, or squeezed into adulthood by our commercialism and adult programmes of education. Children are second-rate concerns of the political system. They suffer hugely and the wrath of God and Jesus does not seem to have stirred us into appropriate action.

With this in mind by way of preparation, what of a theological framework for our future mission alongside and among children?

I draw from that wonderful work *Transforming Mission* by David J Bosch, the South African theologian killed in a car crash in 1992, and from the Lausanne Covenant and subsequent Manila statements. They make the life of Jesus a central organising principle. It is in shape and emphasis a Christological framework.

We are, along with every follower of Jesus Christ, called to present our bodies as living sacrifices in His service; to allow the world-view and mind of Christ to permeate our every thought and attitude; to serve Jesus as Lord; to live in new relationships and a new community in such unity and love that people know we are His disciples; to continue His priorities and mission. This is our common calling. But what for those of us committed to work with children and young people at risk?

A Christ-centred framework for our mission

Let's take six of the major events of His life as our framework and see how far our mandate and tasks become clearer.

The Incarnation (*the model of our mission*)

We acknowledge that Evangelical Protestant theology has tended to be comparatively weak at this point in its stress on the cross and redemption, and we pledge ourselves to seek out the implications and demands of this astounding event. We rejoice that God entered the world in time and space, that Jesus in His life and teaching brought forgiveness and healing irrespective of role, gender or class.

We rejoice that parenting, families, communities, work, play, all matter to Jesus, so much so that he brought restoration to people and relationships. We rejoice that the New Testament sees such relationships and life as central to our calling as followers of Jesus. We acknowledge the call to follow Jesus, and rejoice that as we ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" we find His ministry such a vivid and simple guide.

We are seeking to continue His life's work in every family, city and street, along each track, mountain, river and well, in every wound and disease. We acknowledge with humility and wonder that the transcendence and divinity of Jesus are revealed distinctively in John's Gospel through His humanity. That though His daily life, with dust on His feet, and thirst in His mouth, he revealed God's grace and glory.

We acknowledge the social and political dimension of the Gospel implicit in the agony, sweat and blood of Jesus, not only on the cross, but also in His life and ministry. We acknowledge that the wrestling and struggle at the heart of the Lausanne Covenant represents a struggle at the heart of the Gospel. Evil is not only in the human heart, but also in the social structures and there is no Gospel without solidarity (incarnation).

In all this and more we recognise the implications of the incarnation for our life and calling in Christ. But our life alongside children at risk leads us to shed light on hidden aspects of the incarnation. Traditionally, Western theological creeds have stressed that Jesus became man ('*homo factus est*'). The Gospel narratives in contrast stress the *child* Jesus. Drawing on Isaiah, the sign in Luke's Gospel that this was indeed God's chosen One, the Messiah, was the fact that 'a baby was lying in a manger'.

The implications the Incarnation involving a baby and a child have not been fully worked into Western theology. Do the creeds need reformulation? '*Puer factus est*': he became a boy-child?

This tendency to overlook the significance of the child Jesus, finds its way into the commentaries on His ministry and teaching. The centrality of childhood in understanding and entering His kingdom has been overlooked or marginalized. We have not seen children as signs of the kingdom.

We call upon our Christian brothers and sisters to see that the parent-child relationship is perhaps the most pervasive in describing God's love for each person; Christ Jesus taught us to pray, 'Our Father'.

A Christian is one who has been born again, has become like a child... and this process is deeply interwoven with the Incarnation: the child Christ in us, and we in Him.

The Cross (*the cost of our mission*)

The life and death of Jesus cannot be separated. They are indissolubly linked and meaningful. In Philippians 2 His life and death are summed up: 'being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross!' 'When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die' Bonhoeffer wrote not long before his execution. It is the symbol of our salvation, through Christ's sacrificial death. It is also the reminder that 'suffering is the divine mode of activity in history...' (Schutz) There is no following of Jesus without scars.

As followers of Jesus we live under the shadow of the Cross. It is a constant reminder and emblem of the reality and savage cruelty of human sin, rebellion and suffering. We delude ourselves if we ever minimise the extent of human suffering and degradation. It reminds us of the constant necessity for repentance and re-formation as individuals and as a community of believers. There is no mission without tears. And no righteous action that does not need to be forgiven...for the power that works for justice may be unjust tomorrow.

The Cross is God's reminder that we cannot save ourselves by human means: our plight is too serious. We are not just lost, but dead in our sins.

It also points to the sacrifice of Jesus, the sinless one, that we might be right with God. There is no healing or forgiveness without the shedding of innocent blood. It is a constant challenge to our own motives and commitments: a call to love irrespective of reward or return.

It is also a symbol of reconciliation uniting people irrespective of creed, gender or class. It is the place and the point alone where we meet as equals.

Through all this and more we recognise the implications of the Cross for our life in Christ. But as those called to live among and alongside children, we are constrained to cry out on behalf of the silent suffering of children worldwide in every culture and economy. Children are suffering like silent lambs on the altars of our gods.

As adults we have become so obsessed with our own ambitions, fears and agendas, we have allowed generations of children to suffer. Our institutions and structures reflect this. We do not know what we are doing. The prayer of Jesus relates to all, but not least to children: Father, forgive them...they know not what they do. The Cross calls us to identify most of all with those who are oppressed and suffer unknowingly, and chronically.

The innocence of so many children who suffer in our world finds in Jesus on the Cross, one who understands more than others will ever know.

The Resurrection (*the mandate for our mission*)

We are an Easter people and 'Hallelujah' is our song! Through the resurrection of Jesus the forces of the future, joy, hope and victory, stream into the present.

We are not bitter, angry and consumed by a desire to destroy and exact revenge. Why? Because the Cross has taken that desire away and replaced it with love, and because the Empty Tomb opens up whole new horizons and worlds.

We believe there is no situation that cannot be transformed by the power of the risen Lord. And having glimpsed the transforming reality of God's reign we identify and stand against the forces of death, exploitation and destruction. We are not afraid to unmask idols and false gods.

We are prepared to become seeds that die in order that God's life might be revealed in all its glory. We value each person on earth and each relationship in the light of God's love...and yet we see beyond human life, beyond the graves and killing fields.

In all this we identify with our brothers and sisters in Christ worldwide, but as those alongside and living among children at risk we find ourselves moved to consider the ways in which children speak to us of resurrection.

We see the decline of institutional religion in Europe as a sign of hope when we see the spiritual longing of children and young people.

We see in the ability and resilience of children in the face of appalling loss, suffering and humiliation, the desire to work for a better world, as resurrection in action. Children in our world are Easter signs like green shoots after the grip of winter....

The Ascension (*the incentive for our mission*)

We acknowledge that we have too often overlooked the significance of the Ascension of Jesus for our life and God's mission.

We affirm that it is the sign that Jesus Christ is King! That the kingly reign has begun. We acknowledge Jesus as Lord. We acknowledge that we are called to live as the Messiah People, in a world that does not as yet acknowledge Jesus as Lord. We are to resist being squeezed into worldly moulds and ecclesiastical and institutional patterns that distort the values and priorities of Christ.

We recognise there is a rich biblical vision of this new kingdom all through the Scriptures and that we are called to realise it in our lives, our families, our countries, our culture and in the wider world.

We also confess that in the history of mission other visions have unconsciously shaped the living out and proclamation of God's reign. In

particular territory, power and status have been valued more than gift-love and servanthood.

We acknowledge that this kingdom demands an inverting of the status quo: bringing the changes portrayed in the Magnificat of Mary!

In particular we acknowledge that children are central in this vision, and that this is a revolutionary contrast to contemporary political kingdoms that have lost touch with the childlike spirit in their preoccupation with adult concerns and solutions.

Children and childhood present us with insights into the nature and dynamics of God's kingdom, especially the 'now' and 'not yet'. This is a creative tension. We see a child and a sacrificed lamb at the heart of that vision. It is an everlasting kingdom where every aspect of creation lives in harmony and without fear or pain.

We acknowledge that political short-termism and selfishness conspire to cloud the purity and inspiration of that kingdom.

We commit our lives afresh to the service of Christ the King, the baby, child, Lord and Servant, Saviour and Brother.

Pentecost *(the power for our mission)*

We acknowledge the power of God's Spirit in the life and witness of God's people. The love and fellowship of God's people is part of the message the church proclaims.

This community is distinctive in that it exists for others, to be servants of the wider community by revealing righteousness and justice in action. It is God's avant-garde, a sign of the new kingdom, but not the kingdom.

It is a fellowship of followers of Jesus, on the move, responsive to God's agenda, call and timing.

No Christian individual or organisation exists independent of the Spirit's enabling and koinonia. We are accountable to Christ through His people.

As those alongside children and living with them we acknowledge that the church has all too often replicated the assumptions and institutions of the culture in which it has been set, at the expense of Christ's example.

Children have not been at the heart of our life together and our worship. Too often, like the infant Jesus, they have been relegated to the stable-like margins. We have agonised over matters like infant baptism, participation in the Lord's Supper, and whether they are saved and at what age, while unaware of the ways in which, like the disciples of Jesus, we have come between children and the love of Jesus.

We have tended to see work with children as outside the mainstream of church life and worship, and recognise the biblical call to refocus our corporate agenda.

The Second Coming (*the urgency of our mission*)

All our work, our initiatives and structures, like our celebration of the Lord's Supper, are interim. We occupy the period between His first and second comings. We occupy 'until He comes'. We see in part; the kingdom is realised in part. But then we shall see Him face to face, and the kingdom will be fully revealed.

We are alert; we listen; we work in the knowledge that He may come at any time. We operate in every part of the world, for that is His command. He has no preferred people or cultures: all are objects of His mercy and love, and all peoples will be equally joyful as they participate in the new kingdom.

We live in expectation and hope. This event and vision of God's ultimate reign acts as a powerful magnet aligning our activity with His magnetic field, nature, holiness and justice.

We acknowledge that should Jesus come again today the suffering of millions of children will provoke His burning anger and judgement of those peoples and institutions that oppress them and cause them harm.

And as those living alongside and among children we acknowledge the special place and role that they have in His kingdom. They will lead the worship because this is what they are ordained to do. They will be at the centre, as centuries of marginalisation, victimisation and abuse will be replaced by an experience of perfect freedom and harmony.

Some of the Implications of the Rediscovery of Children in Mission

This approach and outline has radical, potentially world-shattering implications. Let us list some of the most obvious and begin the task of working out others.

Theology. There have been major challenges to the western tradition of theology in recent decades from women and from non-European peoples and cultures. The old colonial-type edifice is crumbling. We cannot read the Old Testament, see Jesus, or understand the New Testament and Gospel in the same way. How could we have missed the great transcendent truths and been squeezed by the constraints of our narrow, parochial approach and assumptions?

But especially how could we ever have seen Jesus as a western male, a sort of Evangelical clergyman? We have begun to understand our Lord and Saviour in fresh and living ways: the Jesus we never knew!

Children have been all but invisible in theology, in its formal sense. The assumption has been that theology is an adult pursuit, and children are given Heinz baby food versions!

What if we made the teaching of Jesus the starting point of theology:

Doing, not hearing alone....

Being born again....

Becoming like children...?

There would be much that we would 'need to unlearn – all the adult structure and the cumbering years'.

Church. Alongside the shifts in theological understanding and process have come fresh insights into the nature of "church". For centuries the European consensus across denominations has been of institutions usually worshipping in a building with a male leadership. And in Europe this model has reached a crisis point: there is widespread and chronic decline especially among children and young people.

Are there new ways of being church? In their study Anne Wilkinson-Hayes and Stuart Murray look at examples from different parts of the world. And one of their discoveries was that in several cases 'children are very central to the way of being church'. I recall the excitement and sense of discovery at the last Cutting edge Conference when Stuart Christine told of his discovery of the dramatic change in his understanding of church when he saw children at the heart of ministry, life and worship.

We need to redefine the core and margins of the church...always reforming. And the core is clearly identified in the scriptures: widows, orphans, strangers and the 'little ones'.

We have radical work to do if we are to be God's avant-garde...

Society. Ours is a calling to change the world in line with the contours of God's kingdom. We cannot accept the status quo.

We will be salt and light at every level: living in a new way, challenging evil, power, and traditions.

This is non-negotiable. If children are being harmed we cannot hold back.

Graham Kendrick's prophetic hymn, 'Who Can Sound the Depths of Sorrow in the Father Heart of God?' may become like an anthem for those of us involved with children at risk.

We will challenge adult assumptions and preferences: the market forces that corrupt children and childhood. And where do 'Rights' and 'Democracy' figure in this transformed society?

Patterns and understandings of families, and parenting need to be rethought.

We will be involved personally, and corporately, in action and policy, with individuals and institutions, with ideologies and structures.

A Call to Obedience

We did not choose Him; He chose us. He loved us and gave Himself for us. He fills us with His spirit and leads us into His mission.

In leading us to be alongside children He entrusts us with the heart of His mission and kingdom. He warns us of the costs and dangers.

But He promises that as we open our hearts to one child, we welcome Christ himself.

At the dawn of a new millennium we have an awesome calling to be alongside children at risk, and in the process to reshape the processes, nature and structures of church, mission and society.

If we fail, it is not just children who continue to suffer but civilisation as God sees it.

Not only will children fail to have their rightful place, but Jesus himself will be misunderstood and unrecognised. He will have knocked at the door of our souls and fellowships in vain. But when we welcome a child in His name, we have opened our hearts afresh to Him.