

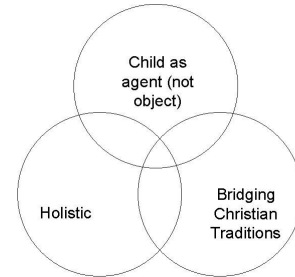
# The Spirituality of the Child<sup>1</sup>

Thomas H McAlpine

## 1 Introduction

At last year's Ministry Net I focused on:

- ❑ Jesus' perspective on the child (summarizing Gundry-Volf 2000)
- ❑ some of our emerging ministry models, a growing number moving towards the intersection of the three circles in the accompanying diagram
- ❑ creative work on childhood spirituality outside WV on which we can draw
- ❑ opportunities/challenges at the strategic level



By way of a reprise and because I refer to it repeatedly in this paper, the table following this introduction is one way of summarizing Jesus' perspective on the child. Enlarged to poster size, it could be a resource for an ADP or national office.

In addition to continuing work on the ground, this past year has seen important synthetic work: the Spiritual Enrichment Task Force, the Transformational Development tracks as they defining our model of transformational development, and the case studies the Commission on the Church has gathered. All of these open opportunities to deepen our reflection and action with regard to the spirituality of the child. This paper explores some of these opportunities.

### 1.1 Assumptions

"Spirituality of the child" points to (1) children's spirituality and (2) the spirituality of adults as they attend to children and their spirituality. Given our work and commitments, both meanings are relevant for us.

God and the child are probably in conversation before we arrive. The child, who characteristically aims "directly and energetically at functional independence" (Montessori 1967, 83); asks of us "Help me to come closer to God by myself" (Cavalletti 1992, 62). This doesn't mean that others have no contribution; it does mean we don't assume the child is a "blank slate."

Our attention to children's spirituality is a key component of Christian witness as our life, deed and words expectant of God's signs encourage the child to deepen his/her encounter with the Holy Trinity, the world's Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

We owe it to the children with whom we work to continue learning about their spiritualities and the experiences and resources of the different Christian churches in their work with children.

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at Ministry Net, January 2002.

"Spirituality" is a useful word for us in World Vision because it can be used both broadly (applicable in interfaith contexts) and specifically (Christian spiritualities). Used broadly, it points to a "combination of praying and living" (Wainwright in Jones et al, eds 1986, 592) or "those attitudes, beliefs, practices which animate people's lives and help them to reach out towards super-sensible realities" (Wakefield 1983, 361), Hay & Nye speak of children's spirituality as "relational consciousness" (1998, 113). Used specifically, an "authentic 'Christian'

"We teach Christian catechism at the school," explained Mr. Sawaya. "We meet the ... parents at the beginning of the year and let them know that we will be teaching this, but that their children will not be required to participate. But all of them want their children to be there. The word of God is good, and they want their children to learn it."

Ghassan Sawaya  
Principal, Damour Community  
School, Nabaa (Beirut)

spirituality is one that binds us to Christ and leads us through the power of the Holy Spirit to God the Father" (Maas & O'Donnell 1990, 17). Christian spirituality is "as much for the body as for the soul, and is directed to the implementation of both the commandments of Christ, to love God and our neighbor. Indeed, our love, like God's should extend to the whole of creation" (Wakefield 1983, 362). It is our hope that the children with whom we work come to participate in and contribute to this Christian spirituality.

Integral to Christian spirituality are rebirth (Jn 3.3-6) and repentance (Mk 1.15; 1Jn 1.8-10). Christian practices of baptism witness to the importance of rebirth even as they reflect differing understandings of the relationship between rebirth and repentance.<sup>2</sup> Repentance, however related to rebirth, is a recurrent challenge —and gift. How do these assumptions affect our approaches to childhood spirituality?

- "World Vision acknowledges its need for the larger Church and knows that, in itself, it does not express all the marks of the Church or fulfill all the functions of the Church. It is not self-sufficient or spiritually autonomous." ("Guiding Beliefs," WV Commission on the Church). Working with churches means paying attention to how they use the language of rebirth and repentance in relation to children. (We do not assume one model of being "born again" as normative.)
- Once children begin to function as moral agents (usually beginning at about 6 years) they begin to engage the gaps between what they believe is right and what they (and others) do. As we involve children as agents in the ADP we will support this engagement.
- We are transparent with children's families and other publics (including donors) regarding our commitments and programs.
- Where applicable, we are guided by the "restricted access" addendum to the Christian Witness policy.

<sup>2</sup> In some traditions, rebirth (in baptism) precedes repentance (the child's sponsors promising to nurture this practice); in others, repentance precedes rebirth, which in turn may be loosely or tightly linked to baptism.

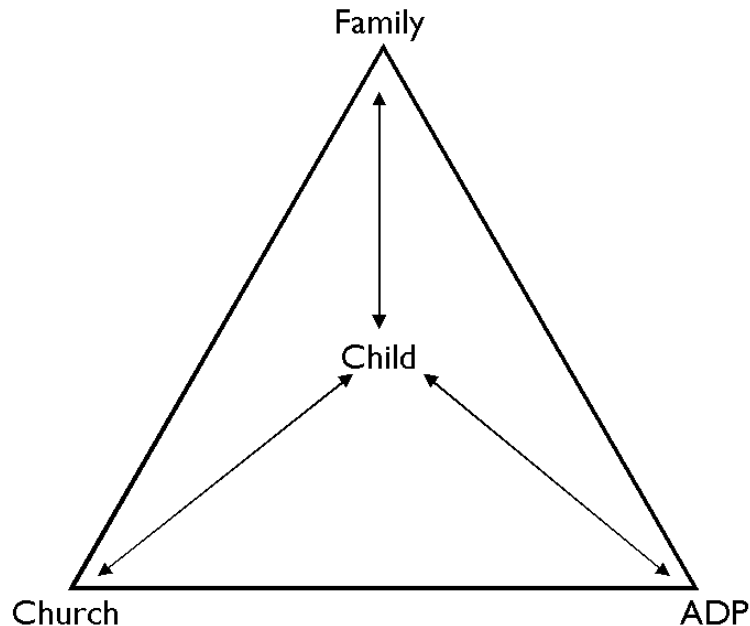
## Jesus and children

Children are recipients of the Reign of God	People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. (Mark 10.13-16)
Children are models of entering the Reign of God	
Greatness means becoming humble like a child	At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. (Matthew 18.1-5)
Greatness means serving children	Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." (Mark 9.33-37)
To welcome a child is to welcome Jesus	
Sometimes children recognize Jesus' presence before the adults	14 The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them. 15 But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the amazing things that he did, and heard the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David," they became angry 16 and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'" (Matthew 21.14-16)

## 2 "Field office" context

### 2.1 Childhood spirituality in context

In listening to our experiences, reflections and concerns, I wonder if we might be helped by something like this model. The central idea is that when we address childhood spirituality in the ADP, both the family and the local churches need to be in the equation. Obviously, this is an ideal type: churches and sometimes families are absent. In the following paragraphs I'll explore some of the diagram's implications in the form of theses for reflection and refinement.



### 2.2 The Child & the ADP

For the sake of brevity I focus only on the local level. Other levels (national, regional, global) may be equally important to resource what is happening locally. For example, WV Romania's "Christ to the Children" worked on the local, national, and global levels.

#### 2.2.1 What does the ADP give to the child?

2.2.1.1 The ADP in its personnel and programs incarnate Jesus' vision of children.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the day, the ADP has made Jesus' vision more imaginable and more credible in the community.

2.2.1.2 Child protection and girl-child initiatives are integral parts of incarnating this vision.

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<sup>3</sup> If we agree on something like this, it needs to be clearly connected both to our emerging ADP design and our Ministry Standard on Christian Presence for the ADP. Regarding the latter, "the ADP in its personnel and programs incarnate Jesus' vision of children" speaks directly to these topics: "Plans to facilitate spiritual formation and training," "Spiritual Needs of the ADP communities," and "Participation of Churches/ Christian agencies in program planning, implementation and monitoring."

- 2.2.1.3 The ADP nurtures (markets) this vision in the community as a whole. Over time, Jesus' vision transitions from "utopian" to an ingrained set of behaviors. The conversations with churches and families described below are part of this marketing.
- 2.2.1.4 The ADP interprets itself and its initiatives to children in age-appropriate and contextually sensitive ways so that they experience the ADP as an expression of God's love for them and their community. An annual event, e.g., Vacation Bible School, can contribute to this; a clear focus on child spirituality helps us see that we're dealing with something that is 24/7, 52 weeks per year.

Because children (like adults) give more weight to what we do than what we say, this last item needs to be embedded in the other three. When we focus only on the last item, we risk sending mixed messages.

## 2.2.2 What does the child (age 6-18) give to the ADP?

Asking what the child contributes to the ADP is one of the welcome cutting edges of our ADP thinking; it is important also from the perspective of the child's spirituality.

This question is also important from the perspective of how the child learns —also about God. Learning how to respond to God happens best through action. "Movement is intrinsic to life itself, while its contribution to mental growth is as crucial as that of oxygen to the brain. Hand and brain have evolved in such a degree of interdependence that the proportional representation of the hand (especially the thumb and forefinger) in the cerebral cortex fairly exceeds that of any other comparable part of the bodily surface. In an important sense then, in the context of individual development, the human mind is 'hand made'. Correspondingly the mind has no outlet but through the body, while the body has no orderly purpose unless its actions are controlled by the mind" (Gettman 1987, xi).

### 2.2.2.1 An example from **Brazil**:

The "*Amigos para Sempre*" ADP (Friends Forever) lies in a slum complex which is considered one of the most violent of Rio de Janeiro because of drug trafficking and the worst human development indices in the north of the city.

When the ADP began in March 1999, the first APR's (Annual Progress Reports) had to be written up. One of the questions asked was what the children would like to be when they grew up. From the children who said they wanted to be doctors, dentists or nurses, a group of 20 children aged 9 to 12 was chosen to begin the Young Health Agents group. The proposal was that these children should receive formation to care for personal, family and community health and environmental issues.

From August 1999 until now, every Saturday morning from 9 to 12 a.m., the group meets with a team of interns of the adult Welfare Service and Health Agents, where they receive formation in Christian growth, community health and citizenship. The children visit and do follow-up with some of the ADP families. They participate as catalysts in the meetings with families. They have represented the ADP in a meeting with the Catholic Health Pastoral of Rio de Janeiro.

This program has the main objective of recovering the self-esteem of the children involved, giving value to their potential and making it possible for them to live in a concrete way the values of the Kingdom of God, such as solidarity, respect, love and companionship. The great message of this group is that all of us are responsible and that we must, from an early age, show solidarity and care for each other. Health has been the tool used by these children to show the love of God for all people. (Sueli Catarina, WV Brazil)

#### 2.2.2.2 An example from **Colombia**:

"World Vision's participation in the Children's Peace Movement has been very important in my life and in that of my community... World Vision is one of the largest NGO more influence. People throughout Colombia are looking for peace, but without God there can be no peace. World Vision has shown us that we must first seek the Kingdom of God and its justice.

"This year I am working with 14 children and we are planning marches and some drama productions about friendship, self-esteem, and obviously peace..." (Mónica Andrea Godoy Cardona, Altos de Cazuca Project, Colombia)

2.2.2.3 In some cases, current programs can be strengthened by giving more attention to the link between action and reflection. Children's participation can be more consistently grounded in age-appropriate biblical reflection; children's reflection on biblical themes can be more consistently linked to age-appropriate participation in the activities of the ADP.

2.2.2.4 In what sense does the ADP have an obligation to develop ways for the sponsored children to contribute as agents? Might this be part of a response to an issue the Sponsorship Transformation group is wrestling with (sponsored children who do not receive any direct material benefits from sponsorship because they are not among those in the ADP whose minimal needs are not already being met)?

2.2.3 Implications of recognizing the context (church & family) for thinking about the child & the ADP:

2.2.3.1 Recognize prior claims. The family and in many cases the local churches have been there before we arrive and will—we hope—be there after we leave. "Part of the solution," they are sometimes also "part of the problem". We owe it to them—insofar as possible—to envision and move toward futures in which they are "part of the solution."

2.2.3.2 Act in ways that at least do not weaken these relations. Not only do the family and the local churches have, when present, prior claims, but they are in different ways under threat. If the churches have to contend with the "gates of hell" (Mt 16.18), no less the families. We owe it to them to not weaken the relation between the child and family or the child and the local church. It is in the context of these commitments that we confront the cases of abuse in the family or the local church.

## 2.3 Implications (contributions) of diagram for the ADP

### 2.3.1 ADP & churches

2.3.1.1 Focuses conversations with churches. One recurrent problem in our church relations is that the point of these relations can be unclear ("What are we relating to churches for?"). Diagrams such as the above can help orient these relations. As WV, our primary concern is with the child in relationship to the ADP. But we understand that that means being concerned about the child in relationship to the family and the church. We're looking for synergy between the ADP's and the churches' efforts—and this should give us something to talk about.

2.3.1.2 Invites both the ADP and the churches to live into Jesus' vision of children. Often the daily routines of both the ADP and the churches marginalize and devalue children—even while we proclaim their importance. Too often children are second-class citizens. We need each others' encouragement and experience as we seek to change this.

2.3.1.3 Expresses WV's desire for cooperation between churches. We start from the glad confession that the Body of Christ is One, while acknowledging with sorrow the ways human sin obscure that reality. Pragmatically, the churches will most effectively contribute to the ADP by speaking with one voice.

2.3.1.4 Sets agenda for Christian education resource identification (or creation). (While the benefit is at the local level, this is probably an ongoing national-level task.)

2.3.1.4.1 What will orient & empower children as members of local churches to celebrate & cooperate with God's action on behalf of the *shalom* of their communities?

2.3.1.4.2 What will help families (re)discover & nurture their identity & vocation vis à vis the church and the community?

2.3.1.4.3 What elements of traditional and modern cultures threaten the identity and vocation of children and families here and now? How do we respond together?

2.3.1.5 How is this engagement with churches paradigmatic for our strategy in interfaith situations? In many contexts there are mosques, temples, etc. in addition to or instead of churches. Clarity with regard to our strategy with churches vis à vis the child, the ADP, and the family can help us be more intentional and

Work in cooperation with Gospel Light Publications, the Lord's Army Press, and the greater Christian community in Romania to develop, test and produce materials that can be used in ministry to children through Sunday schools or Bible clubs. Adapt materials to fit the denominational distinctives of the Romanian Orthodox Church, evangelical churches, and the Eastern Rite Catholic Church.

Christ to the Children,  
WV Romania

consistent regarding the strategies we employ in interfaith situations.

### 2.3.2 ADP & families

2.3.2.1 Families have often not had an obvious place in ADP design.

Nevertheless, many national offices have responded creatively to the needs they encounter among families in the ADPs. Focusing on childhood spirituality with families may assist us in linking families as families more closely to the ADP.

Dad, mom, today I want to speak with you;  
And to tell you what I feel in my soul  
when from you received an abuse;  
For me, each hit, each rude word,  
and the expressions of your anger,  
they are a nail in my heart  
and although of myself I take that little nail,  
in my heart there has always been a hole  
that it maybe never be filled again  
Because if you well know that when cutting  
A flower and to start up of her their petals  
It would be impossible stick them again  
As it is impossible to erase an abuse  
Dad, mom, remember that your smile  
generates love and appreciation  
But your blows and screams  
Only generate bitterness and suffering.

Dayri Carmona Chávez  
Guisquiliapa, Nicaragua

2.3.2.2 The diagram can help us focus our programs with families

2.3.2.2.1 Jesus' vision of children and day-to-day life in families

2.3.2.2.2 Children as an integral part of the families' contribution to the *shalom* of the community

## 3 "Support office" context

3.1 Children in "support office" contexts are sometimes at risk in much the same ways as those in "field office" contexts. For these children, some of the above considerations may be relevant to domestic programs.

3.2 Children in "support office" contexts are sometimes at risk precisely in affluence. Enola Aird writes: "Here is the challenge for the baby-boomer parent in today's mainline church: Christians profess a faith that calls for submission of the self to the will of God, that believes that there is right and there is wrong, and that the measure of right and wrong is God's will, not ours. The dominant cultural ethos in the United States today exalts the self, is morally relativistic, and has moved away from notions of absolute right and absolute wrong. In such a world, mothers and fathers cry out for help. And remembering the words and the spirit of the baptismal covenant, we naturally turn to the church. We look to the church to help us and our children stand apart from the culture. But we find little help. Too many mainline churches, unfortunately, are using the tools of consumer marketing to get people into the pews and the language of self-fulfillment to get them to stay" (2000, 564; cf also Dean 2000). In this

context, WV activities such as the 30-Hour Famine can be important tools in a youth worker's kit in creating and nurturing cultures of resistance.

- 4 Spiritual enrichment of staff & the spirituality of the child
  - 4.1 The first recommendation of the Spiritual Enrichment Task Force is: "Core Spiritual Commitments: We recommend that World Vision equip staff to integrate their spiritual commitments expressed in our Mission Statement and Core Values with their professional competencies, giving particular attention to areas unlikely to be addressed through personal spiritual practices or received from church participation." Our child-focused vocation —and Jesus' vision (p.3)— suggests that one of these areas be precisely... the child.
  - 4.2 What does it mean to "become as child"? This question is fruitful precisely as an open question, with simultaneous & synergistic benefit to us & to children. Here are some examples of the sorts of responses the question can elicit; *do not try to read them quickly!*
    - 4.2.1 "Listening is the leaning toward others, the opening of ourselves in a receptive attitude toward the reality around us; it is only the capacity to listen that prevents us from revolving around ourselves. As for the child, we think that there is no age when the person is more capable of listening than in early childhood. The adult must struggle to attain that 'simple and humble' listening which is necessary...to approach God's Word. The adult finds it hard to receive the Word for itself, to remove all preoccupations from his mind and heart. In the adult, the space of acceptance is never whole; yet it is in the child" (Cavalletti 1992, 49-50).
    - 4.2.2 "He asks the disciples to accept themselves not in their power, but in their weakness; not in their wealth, but in their poverty; not as grown-up children, but as the children of their adulthood. He asks the disciples to reclaim the facets of their own being, which had been repressed by development and education. We can only come into the kingdom of God if we receive it like a child with empty hands" (Moltmann 2000, 600).
    - 4.2.3 "[I]n calling us to become like little children, Jesus was calling us to something far more serious and involved than merely trying to emulate a few of their easily observed characteristics. I believe he was calling us to a life-long journey of growth and transformation— of continually turning and changing and becoming always more like them, but I believe he was first calling us to look at them. In order to become like them, we must first come to know them. We must first find out who they are and, especially, what their relationship with God is like" (Rojcewicz in Cavalletti 1992, 19).
  - 4.3 "Receive the child / receive Jesus" is another way of helping us understand that what the language of faith often does is not put more

pieces on the table, but help us recognize the ones that are already there.

- 5 How do we capture and deepen our learnings? What are the next steps? These questions may help identify the next steps:
- 5.1 How do/can ADP teams support/encourage each other to better listen to and respond to children? [Links with staff formation (Bible, Christian traditions, early childhood development) & appreciative inquiry.]
- 5.2 How do/can ADP teams increase their awareness of contextual factors (culture, society) that encourage or discourage listening to and responding to children? [Links with child protection & girl-child initiatives, Christian witness strategies.]
- 5.3 How do/can ADP teams encourage children to connect the Bible's story, the ADP's story (life), and their own life experiences with God in age-appropriate and contextually-sensitive ways? [Links with Christian witness & church relations strategies. Church relations, because in many Christian traditions connecting happens as much by Sacrament as by Word. The weekly drama of taking, blessing, breaking and distributing declares "the sanctification of our humanity through the life and passion and heavenly intercession of Jesus" (Farrow 1999, 6).]
- 5.4 How do/can ADP teams encourage children (ages 6-18) to contribute to the ADP's story (life) as an expression of this merging of stories? [Links with TD/ER/Advocacy models.]
- 5.5 How do/can ADP teams interpret/negotiate this vision for children with the local churches? (What do the churches —and other Christian groups— bring to the table? How to we equip these teams to appreciate what the churches from various traditions are bringing to the table?) [Links with Church relations strategies.]
- 5.6 How do/can ADP teams interpret/negotiate this vision for children with their families? (What do families bring to the table?)

**Sponsorship Transformation Project: Purpose One**

The perception of sponsorship will be enhanced to:

- translate the unique relational potential of our sponsorship program into a ministry that contributes to transformation of children, their families and communities, sponsors and World Vision staff. This transformation will change perceptions and foster an understanding of values that will draw people closer to the Kingdom.
- express the commitment of World Vision to recognise the inherent value of children in the context of family and community as a ministry focus and not only as a source of funding.

- 5.7 How do/can ADP teams integrate this engagement with children into their own spiritual formation? [Links with Spiritual Enrichment Task Force recommendations.]
- 5.8 How does/can attention to the spirituality of the child in the "field" offices impact our work in the "support" offices? Specifically, in what ways might it open up additional opportunities for linkages (partnerships) and/or transformation in the lives of the donors?
- 5.9 Where we wish to do more than we are currently doing, how do we mobilize the resources to do it?

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