



Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

The Whole Church taking the Whole Gospel to the Whole World

Evangelization of Children

Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 47

Produced by the Issue Group on this topic at the
2004 Forum for World Evangelization hosted by the

Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization

In Pattaya, Thailand, September 29 to October 5, 2004

“A New Vision, a New Heart, a Renewed Call”

In encouraging the publication and study of the Occasional Papers, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization does not necessarily endorse every viewpoint expressed in these papers.

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Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) No. 47
This Issue Group on Evangelization of Children was Issue Group No. 18
(there were 31 Issue Groups at the Forum)

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The context for the production of the Lausanne Occasional Papers

The Lausanne Movement is an international movement committed to energising

“the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world.”

With roots going back to the historical conferences in Edinburgh (1910) and Berlin (1966), the Lausanne Movement was born out of the First International Congress on World Evangelization called by evangelist Billy Graham held in Lausanne, Switzerland, in July 1974. The landmark outcome of this Congress was the **Lausanne Covenant** supported by the 2,430 participants from 150 nations. The covenant proclaims the substance of the Christian faith as historically declared in the creeds and adds a clear missional dimension to our faith. Many activities have emerged from the Lausanne Congress and from the second congress held in Manila in 1989. The Covenant (in a number of languages), and details about the many regional events and specialised conferences which have been undertaken in the name of Lausanne, may be examined online at www.lausanne.org.

The Lausanne International Committee believed it was led by the Holy Spirit to hold another conference which would bring together Christian leaders from around the world. This time the Committee planned to have younger emerging leaders involved and sought funds to enable it to bring a significant contingent from those parts of the world where the church is rapidly growing today. It decided to call the conference a **Forum**. As a Forum its structure would allow people to come and participate if they had something to contribute to one of 31 issues (around which were formed Issue Groups). These issues were chosen through a global research programme seeking to identify the most significant issues in the world today which are of concern in our task to take the *good news* to the world.

This Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) is the report that has emerged from one of these Issue Groups. LOPs have been produced for each of the Issue Groups and information on these and other publications may be obtained online at www.lausanne.org.

The theme of the Forum for World Evangelization held in 2004 was **“A new vision, a new heart, a renewed call.”** This Forum was held in Pattaya, Thailand from September 29 to October 5, 2004. 1,530 participants came from 130 countries to work in one of the 31 Issue Groups.

The Affirmations at the conclusion of the Forum stated:

“There has been a spirit of working together in serious dialogue and prayerful reflection. Representatives from a wide spectrum of cultures and virtually all parts of the world have come together to learn from one another and to seek new direction from the Holy Spirit for world evangelization. They committed themselves to joint action under divine guidance.

The dramatic change in the political and economic landscape in recent years has raised new challenges in evangelization for the church. The polarization between east and west makes it imperative that the church seek God’s direction for the appropriate responses to the present challenges.

In the 31 Issue Groups these new realities were taken into consideration, including the HIV pandemic, terrorism, globalization, the global role of media, poverty, persecution of Christians, fragmented families, political and religious nationalism, post-modern mind set, oppression of children, urbanization, neglect of the disabled and others.

Great progress was made in these groups as they grappled for solutions to the key challenges of world evangelization. As these groups focused on making specific recommendations, larger strategic themes came to the forefront.

There was affirmation that major efforts of the church must be directed toward those who have no access to the gospel. The commitment to help establish self sustaining churches within 6,000 remaining unreached people groups remains a central priority.

Secondly, the words of our Lord call us to love our neighbour as ourselves. In this we have failed greatly. We renew our commitment to reach out in love and compassion to those who are marginalised because of disabilities or who have different lifestyles and spiritual perspectives. We commit to reach out to children and young people who constitute a majority of the world's population, many of whom are being abused, forced into slavery, armies and child labour.

A third stream of a strategic nature acknowledges that the growth of the church is now accelerating outside of the western world. Through the participants from Africa, Asia and Latin America, we recognise the dynamic nature and rapid growth of the church in the *South*. Church leaders from the *South* are increasingly providing exemplary leadership in world evangelization.

Fourthly, we acknowledge the reality that much of the world is made up of oral learners who understand best when information comes to them by means of stories. A large proportion of the world's populations are either unable to or unwilling to absorb information through written communications. Therefore, a need exists to share the "Good News" and to disciple new Christians in story form and parables.

Fifthly, we call on the church to use media to effectively engage the culture in ways that draw non-believers toward spiritual truth and to proclaim Jesus Christ in culturally relevant ways.

Finally, we affirm the priesthood of all believers and call on the church to equip, encourage and empower women, men and youth to fulfil their calling as witnesses and co-labourers in the world wide task of evangelization.

Transformation was a theme which emerged from the working groups. We acknowledge our own need to be continually transformed, to continue to open ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to the challenges of God's word and to grow in Christ together with fellow Christians in ways that result in social and economic transformation. We acknowledge that the scope of the gospel and building the Kingdom of God involves, body, mind, soul and spirit. Therefore we call for increasing integration of service to society and proclamation of the gospel.

We pray for those around the world who are being persecuted for their faith and for those who live in constant fear of their lives. We uphold our brothers and sisters who are suffering. We recognize that the reality of the persecuted church needs to be increasingly on the agenda of the whole Body of Christ. At the same time, we also acknowledge the importance of loving and doing good to our enemies while we fight for the right of freedom of conscience everywhere.

We are deeply moved by the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS pandemic – the greatest human emergency in history. The Lausanne movement calls all churches everywhere to prayer and holistic response to this plague.

"9/11," the war in Iraq, the war on terror and its reprisals compel us to state that we must not allow the gospel or the Christian faith to be captive to any one geo-political entity. We affirm that the Christian faith is above all political entities.

We are concerned and mourn the death and destruction caused by all conflicts, terrorism and war. We call for Christians to pray for peace, to be proactively involved in reconciliation and avoid all attempts to turn any conflict into a religious war. Christian mission in this context lies in becoming peacemakers.

We pray for peace and reconciliation and God's guidance in how to bring about peace through our work of evangelization. We pray for God to work in the affairs of nations to open doors of opportunity for the gospel. We call on the church to mobilize every believer to focus specific consistent prayer for the evangelization of their communities and the world.

In this Forum we have experienced the partnership of men and women working together. We call on the church around the world to work towards full partnership of men and women in the work of world evangelism by maximising the gifts of all.

We also recognize the need for greater intentionality in developing future leaders. We call on the church to find creative ways to release emerging leaders to serve effectively.”

Numerous practical recommendations for local churches to consider were offered. These will be available on the Lausanne website and in the Lausanne Occasional Papers. It is our prayer that these many case studies and action plans will be used of God to mobilise the church to share a clear and relevant message using a variety of methods to reach the most neglected or resistant groups so that everyone will have the opportunity to hear the gospel message and be able to respond to this good news in faith.

We express our gratitude to the Thai Church which has hosted us and to their welcoming presentation to the Forum. We are profoundly gratefully to God for the privilege of being able to gather here from the four corners of the earth. We have developed new partnerships, made new friends and encouraged one another in our various ministries. Notwithstanding the resistance to the gospel in many places and the richness of an inherited religious and cultural tradition we here at the Forum have accepted afresh the renewed call to be obedient to the mandate of Christ. We commit ourselves to making His saving love known so that the whole world may have opportunity to accept God's gift of salvation through Christ.”

These affirmations indicate the response of the participants to the Forum outcomes and their longing that the whole church may be motivated by the outcomes of the Forum to strengthen its determination to be obedient to God's calling.

May the case studies and the practical suggestions in this and the other LOPs be of great help to you and your church as you seek to find new ways and a renewed call to proclaim the saving love of Jesus Christ

David Claydon

Note from the Authors

People from all continents prepared this Occasional Paper. Over several months, we wrestled with the issues and came to a common understanding. Even so, we are aware that there is enormous diversity in the field of children's evangelism and we cannot claim to represent all perspectives. The participants in this group are listed at the end of this paper.

Editors of this paper were Wendy Strachan and Simon Hood.

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Forward

The main focus of this paper is the evangelization of children who have never heard the Good News of Jesus Christ. But there is another significant group that is addressed: those children within our church communities who, while evangelised, remain un-impacted.

Definition: For the purposes of this document, children are defined as those who are 14 years of age and younger.

Going further: This document was drawn from a wide range of material that we explored and is not the only outcome of our discussions. We invite you to visit

www.forum2004children.com for further information and links to resources.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Imagine a child...

- who knows and cares that Jesus is present with him/her and will never forsake him/her – even when the pain of life never fully goes away
- who finds that hope and the kingdom of God are not mere concepts but acts of love by those who gather her into a place of protection away from fear, war, exploitation and abuse
- with special educational needs who encounters Jesus' unconditional love and responds with smiles and noises of joy - and becomes a worship-leader in a church
- who in spite of being mutilated by culture, religion or neglect realises that she, a girl child, has been created in the image of God – and gains hope
- who shunned by school and community because of HIV/AIDS finds Jesus' love through the pastor walking him safely to school each day
- who has something of the Scriptures in a format that will assist her to encounter Jesus
- who although half-naked and very hungry, sleeps peacefully and safely in the shelter provided by the church
- whose regular prayer partners include adults and together they share their concerns
- who finds that Jesus can help him/her understand the difference between sinning and being sinned against, and that both of these are wrapped with healing grace and constant love
- who finds a home with God's people: a place where (s)he wants to be and a people (s)he trusts
- who is sharing this relationship with Jesus with his/her peers and family
- whose parents are the first to introduce Jesus to her and accompany her on a journey of discovering Jesus
- who experiences with the Church what it means to know Jesus and have life in all its fullness.

Imagine a church that ...

- commits the necessary resources to reach children, 30 percent of the world's population
- builds a 'good news' relationship with every child in their community
- believes that, like the biblical child Samuel, children can have a voice in their congregation
- allows children to be in the midst of its teaching, worship, evangelism and discipleship.

Imagine a world where children are ...

- able to be safe, be cared for and live in hope
- given many opportunities to know and respond to the love of Jesus Christ
- encouraged to bring hope, healing, comfort and Jesus to one another
- able to be discipled no matter how diverse their family or faith background.

Imagine families that ...

- move beyond healthy nurture into their God-ordained role as spiritual caregivers
- are empowered to be the models of Christian values in their communities
- are equipped to create spiritual traditions in the home.

Imagine theological institutions that ...

- allow a theology of childhood to inform all disciplines
- esteem children's ministers as highly as all others in ministerial training
- create a synergy between theory and practice that is rooted in the harsh realities of a child's world.

We can make all of this possible when we join God to make the imagined become a reality; when with His help, we establish partnerships that ...

- recognize that as the Body of Christ and together we can do more than we could ever do alone
- combine the strengths and resources of children, family, church, organisations, and institutions across nations.

1. TURNING THE VISION INTO REALITY: *Facing the Challenges*

The dominating issue in children's evangelization is:

Children represent arguably the largest unreached people group and the most receptive people group in the world. Yet the church is largely unprepared to take up the huge opportunities for mission to children.

A. The realities of the child's world today

Consider the statistics

- There are 6.3 billion people in the world.
- 2.1 billion of these are children under the age of 15.

Consider the circumstances

Children live in many and varied circumstances, yet they face remarkably similar realities across the world:

1. Hunger for significant relationships
2. Disappearing childhood through exposure to adult lifestyles and expectations at ever-earlier ages
3. Rapid change especially in technology where children's understanding often outstrips that of their parents
4. Media influence including the promotion of celebrities as role models
5. Peer pressure
6. Unpredictability ranging from global uncertainty to fragile family situations
7. Erosion of beliefs as media and scientific thought challenge traditional or religious values
8. Resilience in some of the worst circumstances.

The child in the developing world is **more** likely to experience huge contrasts in opportunity and life in poverty-induced high-risk situations. The child in the developed world is **more** likely to face the influence of consumerism, increasing exposure to the world but a desensitisation to its pain, new expressions of spirituality (not necessarily godliness), and community attitudes towards children that fluctuate between idolisation and abuse.

Consider what God says about children

Whatever the realities of a child's life, God regards them as precious. To Him, they are:

1. **A sign.** Children are God's blessing (Psalm 127:3) and are missed when not part of the covenant community.
2. **In need of teaching.** They are to be treasured and taught both in the community and home (Deuteronomy 6, 11).
3. **A symbol.** Children are illustrations of the relationship God wants with adults (Hosea 11:1, Matthew 18:2-3).
4. **Worthy of protection.** God is on the side of the vulnerable (Psalm 68:5; James 1:27). When children are neglected, abused, victimised, God grieves. Jesus strongly advocates for their protection (Matthew 18:5-6, 10).
5. **Worshippers.** Children are designed to praise God (Psalm 8:2). Praise is not something they will learn to bring when they are older – it is their role now. Children give praise to Jesus even when adults reject him (Matthew 21:15).

Agents of God's mission

Children are not only the ones who follow, but the ones whom God sends to lead (Isaiah 11:6). God chooses children as key figures in the biblical narrative: Isaac, Moses, Samuel, David, Naaman's wife's maid. God chose to enter this world as a baby: not as king, rabbi or High Priest.

1. **Examples.** Jesus uses children as examples of the humble dependence that the Kingdom of God requires of adults (Matthew 18:4).
2. **Unconditionally loved.** Jesus has a blessing for children brought to Him: no demands, no challenges, not even a story! (Matthew 19:13-15)
3. **A focus in His ministry.** Jesus heals children (Luke 7, 8) and welcomes them (Mark 10); He uses children as examples of humility (Luke 18:17); He warns of judgement for those who harm children (Matthew 18:5-6, 10); He values them: (Matthew 18:12-14).
4. Children are capable of following Jesus *now*. When they do so, they enrich both the community of faith and its mission potential.

Consider that children are found everywhere

Children are no 'specialist' group. They are found within the range of every existing and potential mission endeavour:

- In all countries, in all socio-economic categories and among people of all cultures.
- In all communities: in its families, its schools, its markets, its playgrounds....
- In areas not easily accessible to the gospel.
- In communities of different faith groups including those from ethnic subcultures within Christianised countries.
- In marginalized subcultures: children with special needs, in prisons...
- In 'at risk' situations where circumstances increase the likelihood that they will not have the opportunity to hear the gospel.
- In resistant circumstances: children who have been harmed or neglected by those representing the Christian faith.

Consider the receptivity of children

Children are more open and receptive to the gospel than at any other time in their lives. George Barna concluded from his research in the USA, in Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions¹ that:

- Between the ages 5 and 12, lifelong habits, values, beliefs and attitudes are formed. Whatever beliefs a person embraces when he is young are unlikely to change as the individual ages.
- If a person does not embrace Jesus Christ as Saviour *before they reach their teenage years*, they most likely never will.

While this research was carried out in the USA, conclusions drawn mirror the concern of others. It was the researcher Margaret Mead, who declared '*the society that neglects its children is one generation away from destruction.*'²

The theologian William Strange apportions specific responsibility to those who follow and obey, Christ, '*...there must be for Christians a particular focus of concern*

¹ George Barna, Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions (USA, Regal Books, 2003), 18, 34, 37

² Quoted in Ron Buckland, Perspectives on children and the gospel (Australia: Scripture Union, 2001), 29

*for children; and not merely the children of their own household, nor just the children of the church community, but children simply as children, wherever they are and in whatever need they find themselves.*³

Rev Francis Bridger pleads to the church: *'...that it will enlarge our vision for relevance of the gospel to the millions of children...they need the love of Christ every bit as much as the rest of us and the evangelistic task is urgent.'*⁴

Yet a third of the world's population attracts less than 15% of mission resources.

It would be wrong to imply that little quality work is taking place. Thousands of children continue to come into a life-changing relationship with Jesus as they encounter Him in Sunday Schools, clubs, missions, rallies and camps. However, thousands of other children who *hear* remain untouched by the creator of the Universe and hundreds of thousands *never* hear.

Children remain a neglected mission field. Their numbers are increasing globally, and resources are not meeting the challenge - this despite Barna's conclusion: *'The data show that churches can have a very significant impact on the worldview of people, but they must start with an intentional process introduced to people at a very young age. Waiting until someone is in their teens or young adult years misses the window of opportunity.'*⁵

B. Barriers to effective evangelization of children

What are the barriers that have led to the current imbalance between the potential and the practice of children's evangelization?

Some barriers are not of our own making. They represent issues that need to be taken into account as we seek to evangelise children, and they will impact the strategies and methodologies that we use (see Chapter 4). Such barriers include:

1. Spiritual/religious barriers. A spiritual battle is underway demonstrated by

- Government legislation which prohibits or opposes evangelism of children of other faiths.
- Societies where tolerance and choice are so highly valued that they condemn the exclusiveness of the Christian message, especially for children who are seen as too young to make a choice.
- Perceptions that any form of religious commitment is fanatical.
- Media that promotes negative images of Christians and/or Christianity.
- The weakness - or non-existence - of the evangelical church in many countries with the highest numbers of children.

2. Family barriers

- Families may resist the involvement of their children in Christian programmes (or even contact with Christians) because the family either embraces another religion or has no religion.
- Families do not make time for spiritual nurture of children because other activities are given priority in a highly competitive society.

3. 'Fallen World' barriers

³ W.A. Strange, Children in the Early Church (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 113

⁴ F. Bridger, Children Finding Faith (Milton Keynes: Scripture Union, 2000), 8

⁵ George Barna, 2003, 66 -7

- These are social conditions that create a barrier against the child hearing or accepting the Good News of God's love. These include abuse, war, poverty, trauma and marginalisation.

Sadly, some barriers are of our own making. These sound a warning to the church to change its thinking and practice and include:

4. Barriers created by mistaken attitudes towards children's evangelism

- A belief amongst some that children are too young to respond to Jesus' call to follow, wrongly assuming that spiritual responsiveness is determined by age.
- A fear that evangelism means manipulation (often arising from experience of poor practice).
- An attitude that values children's evangelism as a 'bait' to reach parents rather than as a legitimate enterprise in its own right.
- A stealthy erosion of children's ministry: in some Western countries, as many as 50% of churches are without children's ministry. In England 2 out of 5 churches have no children attending.⁶
- An artificial distinction between evangelism and discipleship. This implies that the evangelist's responsibility is complete when the child's first response is made.
- An acceptance of the platitude 'children are the church of tomorrow.' This ignores their value in the church today and creates churches that are unattractive to children.

5. Barriers created by wrong thinking about the message and the messenger

Myths that exists...	The reality should be...
'Be kind'	'Be true'
'Keep the rules'	'Follow Jesus'
'Be happy'	'Be faithful'
'Do as I say'	'Do as I do'
'Following Jesus is easy'	'Following Jesus is costly'
Tell children Bible stories	Challenge children to respond to the biblical narrative
Direct the child's response	Let the Holy Spirit lead the child as He chooses.
The adult is the giver; the child receives	Both adult and child give and receive; they enrich each other's faith through question and discussion.
Give children information, education, entertainment	Invite children to experience transformation through the Spirit
The Bible is a text book	The Bible is an adventure
Anyone can teach children	Children deserve the best of our commitment and training

⁶ Peter Brierley, The Tide is Running Out (London Christian Research, 2000)

6. Barriers created by inadequate strategising

- Global imbalance of resources that robs some of the most child-conscious churches, especially in the developing world, of effective means to realise their vision for children.
- Competition rather than cooperation between churches and ministries engaged in children's evangelism with the result that some children are 'over-evangelised' and others are never evangelised.
- Lack of imagination resulting in strategies that do not reflect an understanding of the *real* world in which children live.
- Programme *memes* that become an end rather than a means, where the success of children's evangelism is expressed in the number of programmes maintained (quantity) rather than children's lives transformed (quality).

7. What are the results of the barriers we have erected?

Unevangelised children generally become adults who see no relevance of Christian faith to real life, make no contact with a church, who live and die without knowing that Jesus offers eternal life. *Ineffectively-evangelised* children in our churches become 'well-intentioned, inadequately nurtured, minimally equipped secular people who dabble in religious thought and activity.'⁷

This paper proposes ways of breaking down the barriers so that our 'imagined' vision for the future can become a reality as we partner with God. It implores the church to...

- Pray together and think strategically to evangelise for maximum global impact.
- Enrich our theological thinking so that it takes children as seriously as God does.
- Practice evangelism with excellence in the different contexts in which children are found.

⁷ George Barna, 2003, 29

2. TURNING THE VISION INTO REALITY: Expecting the Unexpected in the Upside-down Kingdom

With 2.1 billion children already on the planet, there can be an overwhelming sense that the best evangelistic efforts will always be outstripped by the numbers. Like Moses and Gideon, we can find the challenge too daunting. However, as Moses and Gideon discovered, when it is *God's* work, His solutions are miraculous and often defy logic.

Introduction

We will only succeed when we participate with God in His plans:

- God's great solutions in the Bible were rarely predicted in advance by anyone. Even when God sent specific prophecies, people generally failed to recognise what might happen.
- God used culturally-specific methods to capture the greatest attention: the 10 plagues spoke into Egyptian culture; the mysterious hand writing on the wall challenged King Belshazzar; the Cross was a powerful symbol to the Jews, who considered dying on a cross a curse.
- God's solutions were almost always against the prevailing tide, counter-cultural and 'upside-down.' Adults need to be born again. To gain life, you must lose it. To be the best leader, you must be the greatest servant. If you are poor, you are rich. Of particular relevance here is Jesus' own statement referring to children that 'the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these.'

God's solutions in the Bible were creative, profound, entirely appropriate and completely unexpected. If this is still true today, the solutions to the need to share the gospel with 2.1 billion children will not be found in our own planning and creativity. For '*our ways are not God's ways and our thoughts not his thoughts*' (Isaiah 55:9). God calls us to listen to Him, trust Him and follow Him. The very nature of discipleship is following God's plans, not inviting Him to join ours. God calls us into utter dependence on Him at a time when we have no answers: to listen to God's heart for this generation; to ask Him to take us where we must go, to expect the unexpected.

As this Issue Group prayed, listened and observed, we noted some of the unexpected, culturally appropriate and upside-down interventions that God is already using across the globe for the sake of children. They offer us a glimpse of the wonder and majesty of what God is going to do in the next decades. Five of these global strategies that can be implemented or adapted at local level are offered below. A model for global action is presented in the section following.

A. Thinking with imagination: global ideas with local application

Strategy #1. Prayer for every child in the world

Imagine the impact if every city and village in the world is being prayed for by name, that every child in that city and village would have the opportunity to follow Jesus and every Christian child is part of the Great Commission through prayer.

(a) ACTION PLAN for the local church:

- Adopt a village. Each children's group in each church identifies at least one unreached village by name somewhere in the world and begins to pray for the children in that village.
- Join existing prayer networks that operate on behalf of children (or begin one for your local/national area).

(b) Case study: ARGENTINA

Equipped through Child Evangelism Fellowship, the Evangelical Baptist Church of C. del Uruguay, Entre Ríos began working with children outside the church in weekly Bible Clubs in homes. They write: *At present our best leaders of these Clubs are those boys and girls who were reached through this ministry as children. Some of them came from alcoholic families or from families with other serious problems ... We continue this practice of developing children into leaders.*

Strategy #2. Children empowered for evangelism

To invite children to be active participants in the task of evangelization is to take seriously the Scriptures, the evidence of research and anecdote as well as the unique nature of children.

- *'...Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you'* (Matthew 28:17–19).

The focus of mission and the call to mission do not have any age limitations.

- *'His intention was the perfecting and the full equipping of the saints – his consecrated people - that they should do the work of ministering towards building up Christ's body – the church'* (Ephesians 4:12, Amplified Version).

The work of mission can be shared by a generation of children equipped to be faithful witnesses for Jesus - and so the whole church will be built up.

(a) The evidence

Barna claims that *'...peer evangelism among young children – one kid leading another kid to the foot of the Cross for a life-changing encounter with Jesus – is one of the most prolific and effective means of evangelism in the nation.'*⁸ This is echoed by anecdotal evidence across the world.

(b) The unique position of children

Children bring unique gifts to the task of evangelization. For example, they have access to thousands of children outside the church – and are often the only means of reaching these children. They have a simple faith that is attractive. They put their whole heart into reaching out. Children will do the job of evangelism in simple obedience. Even adults will listen to children because they are perceived to have no hidden agenda.

(c) ACTION PLAN for the local church:

There are three keys to equipping children to be effective evangelists.

(i) Prayer

Give children the opportunity to pray. As they do, they develop a love for the world around them and are stirred to reach out to those around them. Throughout the world God is raising up child intercessors who are taking their place alongside the adults to be world-changers. Prayer is also the key to the miraculous: children need to know the importance of the name of Jesus and to realise He is with them when they share the Good News with other children. Do not underestimate the spiritual battle children engage in when they pray. Read the Bible with children and teach them to pray through the promises that God has given. Observe and record God's answers to prayer.

- Make prayer an important part of discipling and nurturing children as they build their relationship with the living God.
- Model prayer to them.
- Join children in prayer but do not dictate to them what should happen in those prayer times.

⁸ George Barna, (2003) 49

(ii) Recognition

Recognise that children have God-given gifts. 1 Corinthians 12 paints a powerful picture of the Church as the Body of Christ. Children are part of that body - and need to be recognised as such. The same Holy Spirit lives in each believer, giving spiritual gifts to all - children included. While the nature and manifestation of these gifts may vary, we *must* acknowledge and value the gifts God gives children and help them use them.

"A body is made up of many parts, and each of them has its own use. That's how it is with us. There are many of us, but we each are part of the body of Christ, as well as part of one another. God has also given each of us different gifts to use" (Romans 12:4-6, CEV)

(iii) Opportunity and resourcing

Challenge children to be witnesses and challenge them at an early age, but they need the opportunities to serve as well. Churches so often have training, mission trips and speakers that give young people and adults opportunities to share the Good news with others, but many of these same initiatives could also be used with children to enable them to share the message of reconciliation.⁹

(iv) Case study: Prayer networks for Children

(a) In Canada in 1984, *Moms in Touch* was begun by a group of mothers of school children. The vision to have an intercessory prayer group for every school spread to the United States and then to Australia in 1989. See www.motherswhocare.org (Canada) www.momsintouch.org (USA) mired@impaq.com.au or www.suqueensland.org.au (Australia)

(b) Worldwide Day of Prayer for Children at Risk. The first Saturday of June each year is set aside for people around the world to bring the needs of needy children to God. Its website offers information and prayer resources for both adults and children. See www.viva.org

(v) Case study: Prayer turned upside down

At the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization, our prayer was for the children of the world. Yet it was the children of the world praying for us! A team of five children representing the global *Kids Prayer Network* spent the entire conference praying for the work of the conference. They prayed with the various Issue Groups and shared with us what God was telling them, and what God wanted to do.

(vi) Case Study: Elim International Christian Church, Wellington, New Zealand

"In 2000 we began a children's prayer meeting: *Turbulence*. This prayer meeting was *for* children – with the specific aim to help children grow in their personal prayer life. We started with about five children meeting together on a weekly basis for one hour. Soon our Sunday children's programmes as well as our mid-week outreach programmes began to grow. The number of children attending the prayer meeting rose to about 30: learning how to pray, to intercede, to declare the word of God, to claim God's promises, to release healing and salvation and to prophesy. In 2001 we established another arm to our prayer meeting: *Outreach Team*. The object of this was to equip a team of children in outreach, specifically through testimony, drama, song, dance and music. This team travelled to several locations with children doing everything: leading worship, praying, preaching and performing. Since 2001 this team has done outreaches at local schools, churches, clubs, holiday programmes, Christmas and Easter community events, City Council events and overseas mission. This has had a powerful effect on the lives of all those involved as hundreds of other children have come to know Jesus. We have also developed a discipleship training programme for children."

⁹ Resources for equipping children for evangelism can be found on the Evangelization of Children Issue Group web-page www.forum2004children.com.

(d) Global ACTION PLAN:

There is need for a coordinated response from global children's networks and organisations to

1. **Develop a global resource package** to offer basic information on how to equip children for evangelism and the steps churches/organisations would need to take to set this in place. At present, most resources are concerned with the training of adults to evangelise children.
2. **Encourage existing evangelism agencies to work more strategically** to train and equip children as evangelists. For example, existing worldwide initiatives that focus on child evangelism could encourage children who are already church-ed to take ownership of the event – be trained to share their testimonies, invite their friends and do discipleship.
3. **Recognise the global potential of children's enthusiasm.** Marketing companies have recognised that children have the power to enthuse others. Imagine if the church worldwide could harness the enthusiasm of children and encourage them to tell their friends and get them involved as well.

Strategy #3. 'Universal languages' that are understood at local level

Universal languages are those that children share around the world. Sport is the most obvious one; but media, music and Internet are increasingly global phenomena. With technological advances, the church is in a unique position in its history to take advantage of those languages *globally* to share the Good News with children *locally*. In so doing, we are forced to consider seriously to what extent we can exploit the opportunities of popular culture (with its ambivalent and sometimes anti-Christian values) and to what extent we should protect children from them. What, for example, do we do with the culture surrounding sports celebrities or with Harry Potter? Do we help children to think from a biblical perspective about the values expressed or do we try to prohibit children being exposed to them? Although these are global languages, it is unlikely that there are global answers to such questions. Christians seeking to help children follow Jesus need to consider how, within their culture, they best equip children to be disciples who will grow up to make wise independent choices about difficult issues.

A unique movement emerging largely out of the 10/40 window has had unexpected results across the world. This can help our thinking as it expresses New Testament principles of 'body' in the 21st Century global village and serves as a model for similar strategies.

(a) What principles from Sports&Kids can help us to think and act globally?

It uses a universal language to link the child's world with Jesus and this has implications for evangelism:

- The universal language is not just 'bait for sharing the gospel' but a life-experience that can help a child explore questions for which Jesus offers answers. *The entry point to the Bible narrative is experiencing a sports activity that raises life-issues.*
- It is the power of the celebrities involved that attracts children to sport and other universal languages. This urges us to invest in Christian children in sports so that they can become Christian role models as celebrities in the future.

It focuses on values:

With societies all over the world anxious to address a perceived moral vacuum in their young people, *Sports&Kids* is a values-based program that has proved acceptable even in non-Christian countries.

- Values are taught *and* modelled. In some countries where *Sports&Kids* operates, the only 'Christian' element is that it is Christians who deliver the programme and therefore build the relationships. The biblical values it is founded on and the Jesus whom children see in their leaders are a powerful witness to children, families and communities.

It builds partnerships:

Partnerships that create and disseminate global strategies and resources for the local church to use. The task is urgent. It calls for cooperation not competition - cooperation based on shared vision, a commitment to experimenting and an expectation that long-term relationships will be established. This leads to:

- Partnerships at all levels including: churches partnering with parachurch organisations; churches partnering together across denominational boundaries; Christians partnering with non-Christian agencies such as governments, businesses and non-governmental organisations.
- Flexible partnerships - from networking to formal agreements - so that strategies and resources can be multiplied.
- Willingness to relinquish a degree of control and ownership. In *Sports&Kids*, partnering organisations in gave up the right to use their logos and to copyright resources they had created.

It gives careful attention to strategy before resources:

The constant question must be: what are those models and tools that have universal appeal or can be easily adapted? Resources, especially curriculum, should be the servant of, not the 'driver.' We must never focus all our energies on developing more relevant resources for children when this is only part of the strategy.

It includes children as partners in the task not just 'receivers':

In *Sports&Kids*, children are empowered not only to share their faith in the local community but to link with others across the world. Children are being trained in leadership and given opportunities to serve on organising committees or advisory boards.

It values ideas from all cultures:

In *Sports&Kids*, the manuals for all aspects of the programme are all written across national boundaries: for example, the entire Compassion concept (children serving children) was developed in India and shared throughout the world for contextualisation. This runs counter to much current practice in which strategies and resources are generated in the West and then distributed to other countries for use, sometimes with the insistence that no contextual changes be made. *Such an approach ignores the creativity that God has placed around the world.*

It uses media and technology for dissemination:

Technology has greatly reduced the cost of the development and distribution of resources. *Sports&Kids* uses its own website for making available resources, training and information; it has an automatic website generator for local cities; news items for prayer are listed. Email and freely available Internet messenger programmes are used for communication to minimise costs.

(b) ACTION PLAN for the local church:

1. Ask what are the 'languages' local children are speaking? With the help of children, become familiar with their magazines, television and movies, music, celebrity heroes.
2. Consider which of these languages can best be used to connect the child's world to the world of the Bible.
3. Decide how that language could be used to attract children and to raise life issues that can be addressed from the Bible. If you are interested in *Sports&Kids*, contact sportskids@forum2004children.com

4. Think about how a values-based programme might give unexpected access to local non-Christian communities (e.g. schools) and become a vehicle for evangelization.
5. Build partnerships that will maximise the effectiveness of this outreach to children.
6. Develop biblical leadership qualities in children whose talents could place them in leadership positions.

(c) Case study: *Sports&Kids – an unanticipated explosion*

In 2000, a children's sports/games outreach which we will call *Sports&Kids* was launched in the Middle East. In four years, it has swept across the world, into every continent, involving 3 million children with over 150 countries participating.

Six principles have made for such a 'portable' programme:

- No one owns *Sports&Kids*. It is always a partnership, never owned by one organisation.
- *Sports&Kids* has as little structure as possible – it exists to build the local church and not *Sports&Kids* itself.
- Resources in *Sports&Kids* are given without cost and consequently information and ideas are shared freely in return. Media and technology have been the key to disseminating these resources cheaply.
- It is the local partnership that decides what is a sustainable *Sports&Kids* model in their context.
- The local partnership that organises *Sports&Kids* in a community is free to contextualise its resources and ideas.
- *Sports&Kids* is a relational programme that provides ongoing opportunities for local Christians to disciple children through leadership and skills-based camps.

Strategy #4. *Culturally-appropriate media tools as an entry point for*

In the secular world the impact of media on children is a global phenomenon. In UK, the average child spends more than 20 hours watching TV each week, but less than an hour in any form of effective spiritual guidance.¹⁰ In cities around the world, children are entertained and educated by programmes that expose them to different worlds (real and unreal). The Internet is an increasingly comfortable zone for children because of its instant communication, entertainment and exposure to new ideas. Computer games captivate children for hours, both alone and together. Music is a global medium.

The church is quick to criticise the influence of media and slow to seize its opportunities. Entertainment and fun are *not* the enemy of evangelism. It is time that the Church became as 'wise as serpents' and seriously considered the 'shaper' and 'educative' roles of the media in the evangelism of children. It gives access into lives and homes of children who would never normally come into contact with the gospel. Developing countries, including those hardest to reach, often have opportunity to access their media for cheaper prices than in the West. In 2002, a Christian TV programme for children in India was estimated to reach 100 million children for \$US25,000.

Consider the impact if the potential of the media for evangelism could be harnessed to offer:

- Quality interactive websites for children
- Email, chat-rooms and 'mailbox clubs' which are tools to help children to follow Jesus

¹⁰ Gospel Light News Release – <http://www.gospellight.com/publicity/index.php>

- More imaginative use of Christian television and radio
- Animations / movies that tell the Bible narrative
- Quality children's programmes (with recognised branding) produced by Christians
- Christian artists becoming role models for a generation of children
- New-media tools - 'SMS evangelism,' computer games, sharing the gospel by a "blog" (weblog), downloadable Mp3 gospel files to phones.

(a) ACTION PLAN for the local church:

1. Use existing tools such as the JESUS Film not as end in themselves but as a good basis from which to grow relationships and discipleship.
2. Link children to www.hikidz.org or other quality children's sites.
3. Work together with media experts in your community to consider how media could be developed for evangelistic use e.g. radio programmes for children; SMS messaging.
4. Advocate for Christian media experts to be enabled to use their talents with children.

(b) Global ACTION PLAN:

If children's evangelism were to use media seriously to reach the *world* rather than a *nation* or a *community*, what issues would the church need to consider?

(i) Learn from the success of the media:

- It is the branding and marketing - the momentum behind the media - that are significant to children. Is it possible for Christian media to capture a similar 'identity' that children would be eager to embrace?
- Advertisers are expert at creating both desire for and familiarisation of a product. While the gospel is in no way a product to be sold, the concept of using the media to help build a positive understanding of the gospel and of Christianity should be explored.
- It is story and character which are the key tools of media evangelism for children and not the common adult-oriented form of tele-evangelism through preaching. The most powerful aspect of media is the ability to create appealing characters that audiences want to see again and again and stories that engage the heart and mind. These characters and the stories they inhabit should draw children towards the gospel.

(ii) Define our expectations of media and evangelism:

- Until these are clarified, it will continue to be difficult for Christian artists to raise funds amongst Christians who are tied to numerical outcomes.
- We must appreciate that media is about attracting children to a 'place' where evangelism can begin, not necessarily about evangelism itself. The actual evangelism still takes place ideally in a face-to-face relationship.

(iii) Encourage, inform and partner with the experts

- Adults in the church who recognise the powerful influence of media on the world of the child may be uninformed and wary. Rather, *in partnership* with children's evangelists including children, they need to recognise skilled Christians who have a passion for media, release them and encourage them to persevere.

(iv) Globalise and contextualise

- Increasingly the impact of media and technology means that subcultures are not necessarily based on geographic location - *some* children in Ukraine and Peru are listening to the same music and playing the same computer games as *some* children in USA and Kenya. This requires us to:

- contextualise - the church has traditionally understood contextualising in terms of missionaries in 'foreign' cultures. Now we need to consider contextualising within a sub-culture of our own societies
- globalise - in a global culture it is pointless to keep reinventing the wheel, especially the western wheel.

(c) Case Studies

1. Internet - WWW.HIKIDZ.ORG (English) WWW.ALLOJUNIOR.ORG (French)

A partnership by more than 20 organisations/networks has developed a website currently in seven languages that provides children with an opportunity to explore Christianity, Jesus and the Bible.

2. Video - JESUS film for children

One globally-available media tool that is being used effectively in many languages is the *Jesus Film for Children*. Children are given a basic understanding of the gospel through the visual story of Jesus.

3. Computer game - chasm

In Australia during the Church's *Year of the Child* in 2003 an interactive 3D computer game called "CHASM" was developed for a 'showbag' that was distributed to 80,000 children at no cost. Produced by Campus Crusade and Logosdor, it was an opportunity to explore an interactive media approach to presenting the gospel instead of a traditional printed tract.

Strategy #5. New ideas of doing church

If the models of church that we have are working, why are so many children and families leaving? Or not even coming? It is legitimate and essential to improve the 'child-friendliness' of the churches (see Section F), but is there not also a need to explore new 21st century ways of doing church? Not just doing the 'traditional' things better, but dreaming new things!

(a) A new paradigm?

Traditional children's evangelism has imitated adult evangelism in assuming a linear progression: first children must **believe** certain truth: then they will **belong** to a community of faith, and finally they will **behave** in a way that reflects Jesus. But is this a biblical pattern? The disciples responded to the call of Jesus to belong. In the belonging, they grew to believe and at the same time, to adopt a way of behaving that showed they were followers of Jesus. The belonging was the 'breeding ground' for belief and action.

(b) Is it time to rethink our models of evangelism?

Begin with a faith community which invites children to **belong** and which demonstrates how Christians **behave**. In such a community, children grow to understand and embrace its **beliefs** and adopt the Christ-like **behaviours** they have seen demonstrated. In fact, it is possible that churches which place high priority on children **believing** with little consideration for such issues as relationships, modelling, and Christian action by and with the whole faith community, will not provide the appropriate seed bed for children's faith and life development.¹¹

(c) What needs to be challenged if children are to truly 'belong'?

- Many unchurched children (and adults) require stepping stones before they can cross the cultural barriers represented by *church* as it is now. The stepping stone will be a community of faith, but it is in another form e.g. a club or drop-in centre. Sometimes the stepping stone will become the child's only permanent spiritual home, not a conduit to *church* in the form of a formal service.

¹¹ Belonging, believing and behaving: A paradigm for fostering faith in children. Reprinted in *Keeping in Touch* (Scripture Union Australia, Quarterly publication, 2001) Issues 2, 3 and 4.

- Children *want* to belong and to participate. In a community, the child - and his/her family - can learn what it means to 'belong - believe – behave.'
- There is a tendency to think first of programmes and consequently to separate programmes along generational lines. Occasionally children are invited to 'join' the adults but usually the children are there to 'perform' and adults are there to enjoy - or perhaps suffer it (!), until it is time for the adults to get back to 'real church.'

(d) INTER-GENERATIONAL CHURCH - A new idea – or an old pattern rediscovered?

In the account of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, it is easy to imagine eleven disciples gathered to pray for the Spirit to come. However, from chapter 1, it is clear that there were over a hundred men gathering for prayer regularly, 'along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus.' Added together, this was a large group and is hardly likely to have been simply adults. Where there are women, there are children – a group of people of all ages. What about the Epistles? It is unlikely that these letters were read solely to groups of men – why give specific comments to wives and children if they were not expected to be present? A very different picture of normal church life emerges where children were simply part of what was going on – they were there for the arguments and there for the breaking of bread, they were there for the letters from Paul and still there when these were discussed. Nowhere is there any impression of children being taken off into separate groups while the adults worshipped alone.

This was not a new pattern. From earliest days in the wilderness, children grew in faith as they absorbed the faith expressed by their parents in worship. Together, they went to worship God; together they said the words of faith, praise and celebration; together, they learned the great stories of their faith.

Have we been 'playing church' rather than experiencing the biblical tapestry of oneness – and in so doing, made church unattractive to children? Is it possible to build the kind of community across the generations that would enrich our 'Sunday' worship and encourage those participating, of whatever age, or level of commitment, to continue the journey throughout the week? Such a model could never be the 'project' of one tired 'children's and families worker' or of a band of dedicated volunteers. It would need to be a whole-church commitment because it's not about programmes or about church numbers. It's about creating a church climate where adults and young people learn to love each other, share their life experiences, serve each other and help each other to discover more about following Jesus.

(e) Can it work?

Case study: a church in Sydney Australia

"... the children loved their leaders, but their leaders were so busy running the programme, there was no real time left for forming *meaningful relationships* with the children...The Senior Pastor knew that just adding more names to a list of people who had 'said the sinner's prayer' was not what would make *real disciples* of Jesus Christ: people of all ages who like David would 'serve their generation well' (Acts 13: 36). She was very concerned about the numerical growth without many of the children's lives and families changing.

In October 1996, the church lost its building. There was no choice but to move the whole church at a week's notice into their midweek cells on a Sunday. There wasn't even a hall so regular celebrations together happened only when one became available. As many children as possible were put into home group cells...and even when a church building became available again 16 months later, it was unanimously decided that what they had in the Sunday home cell groups was far too valuable to return to the old model. Now it is March 2004, with intergenerational groups still

meeting in homes every Sunday morning except the first Sunday of the month when they all meet together to celebrate God's goodness.

Why are we so committed to this model of 'doing' church? Because it does what all our other programmes never did – it disciples all the members, including the children. It gives everyone a 'family' to belong to, just as in Bible times. In this family of mixed ages, there is no separation due to age, sex, race, social position. Everyone learns to relate to each other. Every child has a number of teens and adults, other than their parents, with whom they can talk about life issues. They are personally disciplined by an adult or an older child/teenager, they take the opportunities to participate fully in the life of the cell group, they are not afraid to take the microphone at our celebration services. They worship exuberantly. They participate in all the outreach programmes of the church. These children have real experiences of God; they have seen Him answer their prayers. They know that following Him is an adventure and that being a Christian is not boring, they know that God believes in them because the church people believe in them and cheer them on.”

(f) What will it take?

- A change in church ethos to intentionally include 1/3 of the population in its expression of community.
- Commitment to the kind of intergenerational ministry that embraces all ages rather than endures all ages, and gives the freedom to separate when it's best. After all, no family does everything together all the time.

B. Thinking globally: a model to reach the unevangelised masses

If every local church were to embrace even one of the five strategies outlined above, considerable progress would be made towards impacting children globally with the gospel. Yet it would still reflect a scattered response when what is needed if we are to keep pace with the ever-growing numbers of children is a *cohesive strategy*. That strategy needs to resist the temptation to think that sharing the gospel once or twice through a gospel tool or evangelistic event is enough.

The Pattaya Scale

The *Pattaya Scale* was developed by this Issue Group to answer the question "What does it mean to 'reach' every child in the world?" The Group also wanted to provide new ideas that could move the vision for global children's evangelization towards reality. It is intended to:

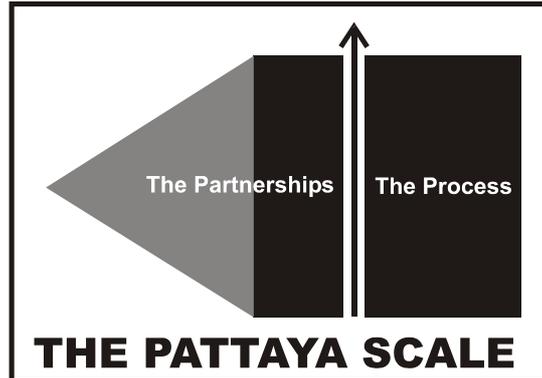
- Address the need for intentional strategies for long-term involvement with children.
- Provide a key for churches, denominations and mission agencies to use to evaluate the way their personnel, financial resources and existing structures are used in the evangelism of children at global, national or local level.
- Encourage and challenge every church and children's ministry to understand and implement the full process that should accompany any child coming to faith: from prayer to participation in ministry. In this way the children themselves will be part of the solution as fellow members in the task of evangelization both as children and as they grow into adulthood.
- Indicate how all evangelistic activity – the surprising new trends that God is using as described in the previous section (and those we are not yet aware of), and the theological thinking and models of best practice that follow – contribute to an integrated, intentional process of reaching every child for Christ.

The Pattaya Scale is made up of two intertwined parts (*full diagram on following page*):

1. **The Process of Evangelization** (*the right-hand list on the Pattaya Scale*) defines 10 levels of intentional progression for the church's mission to children.
2. **The Partnerships for Evangelization** (*left-hand triangular flowchart*) are those who serve the local church across the world by providing and identifying resources at each geographical, language or cultural level to make the intentional progression more effective globally.

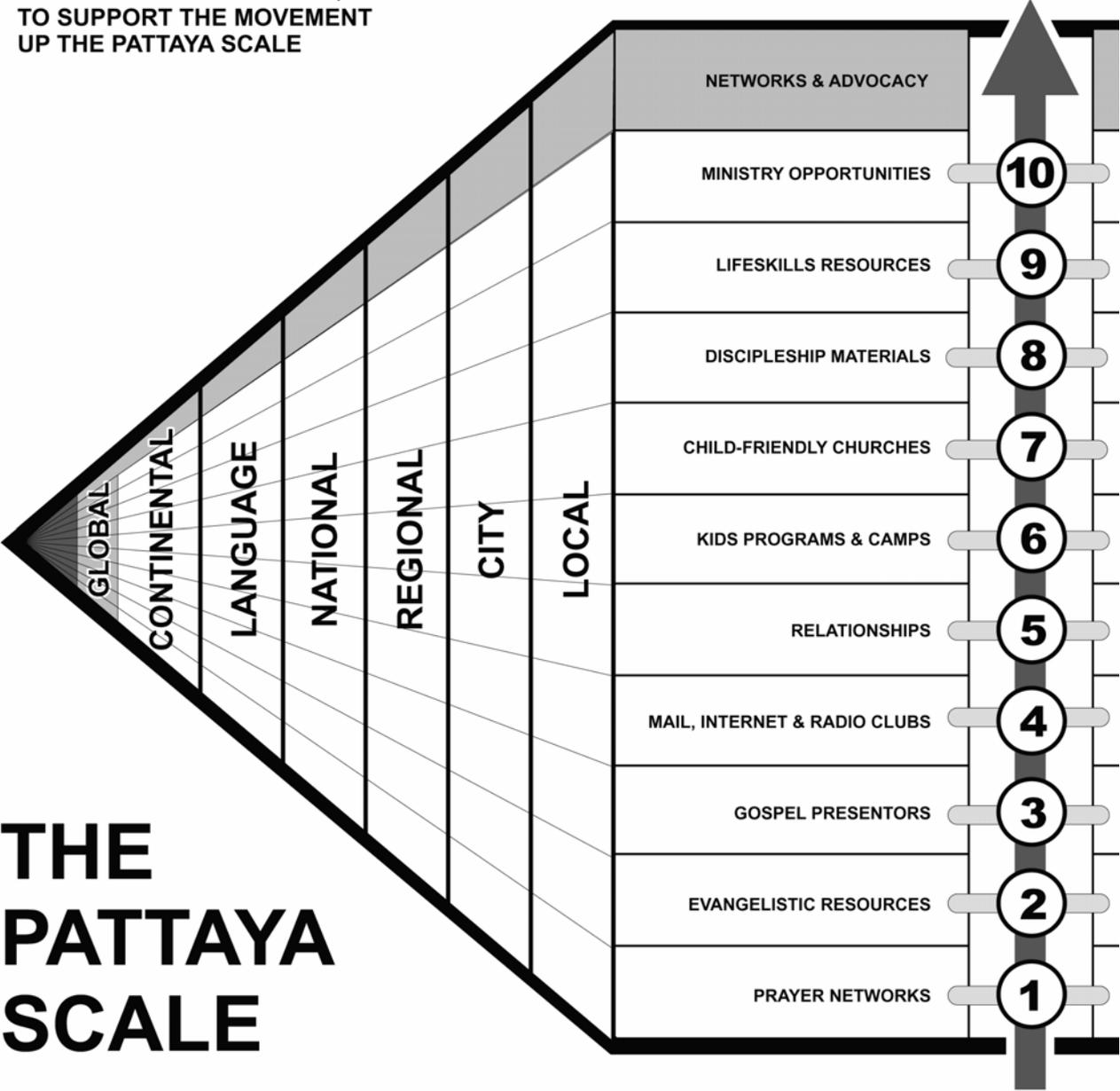
1. Notes on The Process Part of the Pattaya Scale

1. The Pattaya Scale describes the process 'from the outside' that we must seek to provide for every child if they are to develop faith 'on the inside.' It seeks to trace the path that would move a child from the position where he is to a point where he is a participating church member.
2. Faith in Jesus and choosing to follow Him may come at any point on any level of the scale. The Pattaya Scale understands that conversion is the task of the Holy Spirit; the task of a children's evangelist is to provide every opportunity for that to happen. (Before moving to level 8 and above, a child will have come into a living relationship with Christ.)
3. The intention of the Pattaya Scale is to reinforce the conviction that continuing biblical discipleship is an integral part of the work of evangelization.
4. Many children are not even at the bottom of the scale: no prayer is being offered on their behalf. This is the highest priority. Prayer tools, resources and information need to be engaged urgently.
5. Continuing the current strategies of the global church without enlarging our thinking, will keep most children at the bottom couple of steps. We must never be satisfied with simply providing an evangelistic tool and assuming the work of evangelization is done. We must strive to increase the workers, resources, training and vision at each level of the scale, until children themselves become part of the task, so multiplying the workers.
6. Children will be at different levels and their progression is not necessarily linear. For example, the first contact a child has with the gospel may be at step 6 through a children's Holiday Club where they would encounter Jesus and be able to explore the gospel at the same time. Nevertheless, every step should be made available to children where possible.



The Partnerships

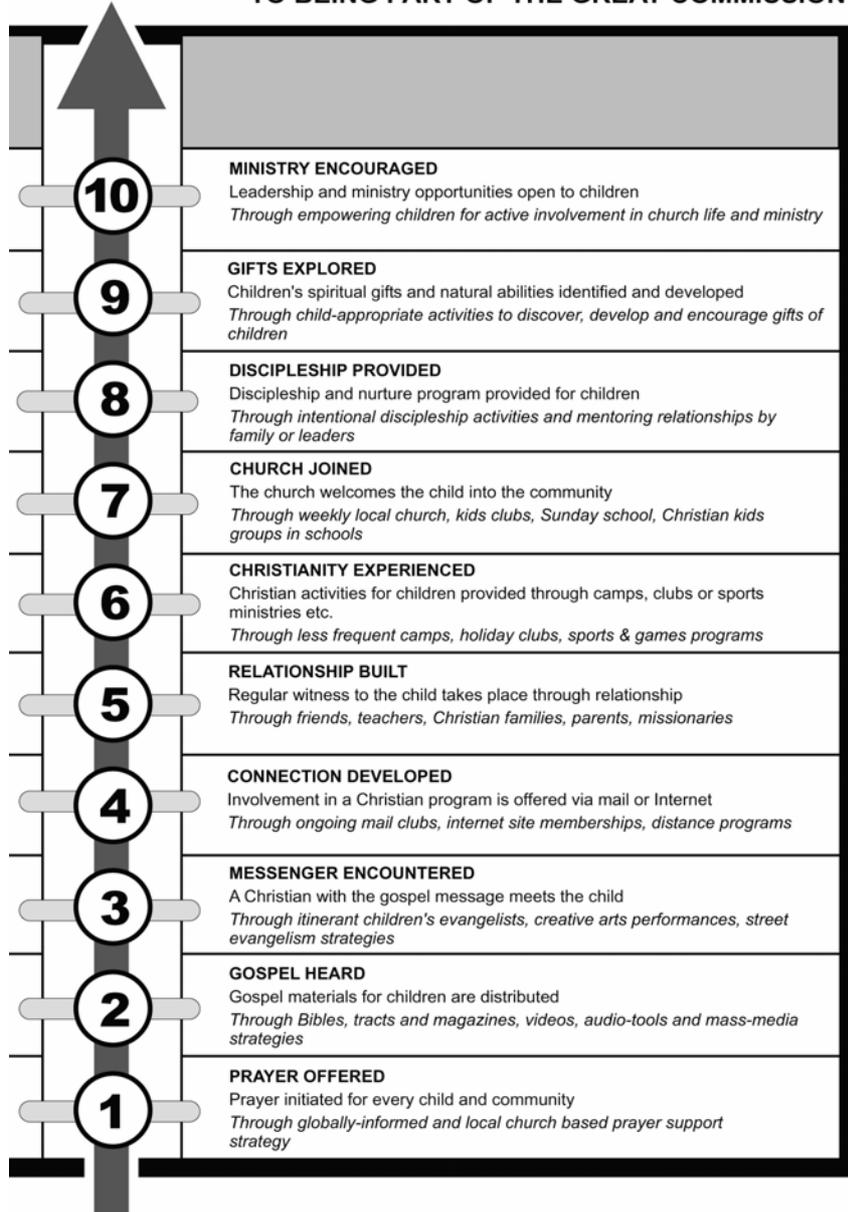
EXAMPLES OF THE TYPE OF RESOURCES & TRAINING THAT ARE REQUIRED TO SUPPORT THE MOVEMENT UP THE PATTAYA SCALE



THE PATTAYA SCALE

The Process

MOVING CHILDREN UP FROM BEING 'UNREACHED'
TO BEING PART OF THE GREAT COMMISSION



2. What the Partnerships Part of the Pattaya Scale highlights to the Global Church

Many Churches Lack the Very Basics

- It quickly becomes apparent that there are vast gaps in the current resources available to local churches and children's ministries worldwide. It is likely that at least 75% of the church worldwide lacks basic skills and adequate resources to provide ways to help children move up the scale. Many of the remaining 25% are not intentionally moving children beyond level 7.

Resources Exist to Help

- Many good tools already exist, but are not accessed because they are unknown, too costly or not available in enough languages. More new resources are also required to provide ongoing relational discipleship.

3. Accomplishing the task

Several areas require 'mapping' and addressing if the church is to be adequately resourced worldwide to do children's ministry effectively. These are issues relating, yet not limited to:

A. Models of child-sensitive communities of faith	To welcome and grow children and families	Levels 5-10
B Training and skills development	To do the work effectively	At every level
C. Strategies and models	To reach children where they live	Levels 1-6
D. Resources and tools	To help accomplish the task	At every level
E. Networks, advocates and strategists	To help serve the process	At every level
F. Technology, media and mass-communication methods	To build a foundation and reach the masses	Levels 1-4
G. Understanding the contexts and sub-cultures	To sharpen the message	At every level

Each of these aspects needs a focus at every level, from global to local church focus and in-between. For example, *Sports&Kids* mentioned earlier is *global* in development yet is *local* in its implementation. It requires coordination at a *language group* level to eliminate duplication of labour in translation and communication at a *continental* level is needed to help multiply the strategy across a *region*. The levels in such a model are loosely defined as:

1. Local church
2. Community of Churches in an area
3. City
4. Region (state, province, sub-culture)
5. National
6. Language grouping
7. Continental issues
8. Global

Global ACTION PLAN to grow The Partnerships for Child Evangelization:

1. Create a process to bring together all major stakeholders in children's evangelism.

The purpose would be to develop strategies that provide for the *least resourced* and *most unevangelised* parts of the world. For too long, the directions of children's evangelization have been determined by donor funds or the newsworthiness of a project, rather than careful global strategising. In addition, there has been tragic competition with multiple organisations creating almost identical gospel resources for one outreach while other language groups miss out entirely. We have done a great disservice to the gospel and to children - and call upon ourselves the condemnation of Jesus. The need and scale of the challenge are too great, the stakes too high and the possibilities through partnership too positive to ignore. If they could work together, all the major partners who care about the world evangelization of children could begin to address key strategic needs.

- *Identify and deploy resources to the least evangelized.* Rather than more and more resources being developed for the best-resourced parts of the world, identify the most critical *global* needs and assign different needs to different organisations based on their passions, skills and resources.
- *Develop together a 'core' of agreed globally available resources* – including print and non-print training materials for workers, and evangelization and discipleship resources for children.
- *Create a "critical mass" of organisations* to begin to influence the mass-media operators and engage media in culturally-appropriate ways (particularly in developing nations where media use is cheaper).

2. Map the major needs of children's evangelism worldwide in all ten areas.

The task of a meeting of major stakeholders would be to map out the greatest geographical and strategic needs according to the 10 major areas of the Pattaya Scale. Each member's calling and expertise could be channelled to address these needs *together*.

3. Identify excellent local, national or global resources which already exist and find ways to make them more widely available.

Much good work being done in many countries and by many organisations could be spread far further by a global partnership. *For example, imagine the difference that it would make to village churches if MegaVoice, a cheap handheld audio device were used to communicate 160 hours of quality children's ministry training for under-resourced children's workers.*

(a) What would it take?

- The will to *share* the vision
- The humility to lose our egos
- The willingness to listen to those who most need the resources more than to those who have them

(b) Case study:

An organisation in a hostile country currently training Sunday School teachers for over 30,000 children was generously supplied with both the materials and the printing costs for developing the resources in his country. *The entire cost was no more than the annual children's ministry budget for a few churches in the West.*

3. TURNING THE VISION INTO REALITY: Treating children as seriously as God does

Imagine if every church had a pastor, congregation and children's ministry team who were inspired and equipped to engage the church in thoughtful children's evangelism. Imagine how theological training and reflections might be shaped to facilitate this vision.

Children's evangelization is not 'child's play'! It deserves serious biblical thinking. This requires us to consider key theological questions and issues, and to advocate for children in theological and denominational structures.

A. Theological foundations and questions

The Bible asserts the value that God places on each child. These foundational understandings have already been described in Part 1 A.

Beyond our common ground we find many challenging theological questions. Our thinking about these questions underlies our practice and deserves serious theological reflection.

1. *The child's status before God*

- Does original sin condemn everyone?
- What is the status of the unborn child before God? What about the status of the new born child before God? Or of a baby dying within hours of birth?
- Are children born outside of the Kingdom or inside it?
- Are children with Christian parents in a different position?

2. *A child's conversion and spiritual growth*

- To what extent does the Bible view conversion as a process? Or does it view this as an event?
- At what age or stage does a child become accountable for sin?
- How do children experience the Holy Spirit?
- How can we expect the Holy Spirit to be at work in or through a child?
- What part does understanding play? How does culture affect a child's ability to understand the gospel?
- What elements of the gospel of Jesus are necessary for children to have a saving relationship with God? What is the proper place for teaching about sin within the message we present?
- What patterns of growth and development does the Bible expect in their faith and understanding?
- What responsibilities does God give children within the life of the church?
- How does our understanding of original sin impact our understanding of the child's spiritual development and eternal destiny?

3. *Children and family*

- What does the Bible say to parents about the process of handing on the faith to their children?
- How should we understand the idea that a family is 'covered' by the faith of one member? (1 Corinthians 7:14)
- What do we understand to be the meaning of 'household' salvation passages such as the Philippian jailor and Lydia? (Acts 16)

B. Theological implications: applying theology to practice

Our theology directly shapes both evangelism and networking in proclaiming and embodying the gospel among children. Some might ask whether it is legitimate to spend time on theory when so many children are ignorant of the gospel and of the Saviour. We note that theology is *not* 'theory' - it is foundational to who we are and what we do.

1. Our theology dictates the pictures we use to present the Good News to children.

The Good News is about:

- Belonging to the creator God who thinks that children are so special that He knows them all by name. He loves them as they are but has plans for what they might become in Jesus (Mark 10:13-16).
- Believing that God is able to sort out their messiness as they confess their sin. (1 John 1:9).
- Knowing God as an unseen all-powerful friend who always loves them, understands them, listens to their prayers and answers their needs (1 John 5:14-15).
- Journeying with Jesus as their role model (John 13:1-17).
- Experiencing the power of God in everyday life giving them the strength, courage, and ability to do the things they must do in their life (Matthew 14:22-33).
- Being transformed here and now – because there is nothing too big for God to deal with and that there is nothing too small for God to care about (1 Timothy 4:12).
- Enjoying life with Jesus, living life to the full (John 10:10) and celebration (Luke 14:15-24).
- Sharing the good news (2 Kings 5:1-3).

2. Our theology leads us to makes connections between this Good News and children.

The Good News is about:

- **Inner security** feeling accepted and loved in a world where a child feels scared or hated (Daniel 6).
- **Hope** that with Jesus, life is worth living in the reality of a world where children either experience or are constantly assaulted with images poverty, war, violence, famine, family breakdown and unfaithfulness (Genesis 37-50).
- **Forgiveness** that never has to be earned in a world which will always be troubled by sin (Luke 15:11-32).
- **Quenching the innate thirst** for spiritual things that is not satisfied by possessions, in a world that tells children they'll be happy if they own more (Luke 12:13-20).
- **Being personally valued by God** in a world that judges according to appearance, popularity or success (Matthew 10:29-31).
- **Courage** to be counter-cultural in a world that demands conformity (Daniel 1).
- **A secure relationship** with God in a world that is relationally fractured (Ruth).
- **Confidence in a faithful God** Who never breaks His promises in a world of broken promises (Abraham).

- **Dignity and justice** in a world of exploitation, confronting issues of justice and socio-economic problems with the compassion, commitment and grace that go hand-in-hand with the 'words' of the gospel (John 8:6–11; Luke 19:1–11).
- **Truth and wisdom** in a world that is confused: a moral framework and value system that will allow children to live a life that is healthy and fulfilling (the Ten Commandments, the Book of Proverbs, the Beatitudes).
- **Commitment** in a world that seeks the 'comfortable option' (Matthew 10:37-39).

3. Our theology impinges upon the way the Bible is used in children's evangelism

- **The Bible is the life-transforming Word** through which children can enjoy security, recognising their place with God and the part that He longs for them to play. The Bible not only helps children understand the gospel but also helps children grow as God's children. As they hear the Bible, they should be encouraged to continue to ask the big questions that will strengthen their faith. Children's evangelists will have the integrity to acknowledge when no answer is apparent.
- **The Scripture uses *narrative*** as a main means of communication. This is significant. God's rescue of His people is a story in which a child can find himself and discover Who God is. Stories allow children to connect in their imagination. Through story, children are able to understand abstract concepts even though their ability to think, perceive, act and respond will be influenced by experience, age, learning style, emotional and spiritual maturity as well as the prevalent beliefs of their culture.
- **The Bible speaks for itself.** Every passage has the potential in itself to draw the child closer to God as the Holy Spirit illuminates and teaches. It is therefore not necessary to use every Bible narrative as an entry point to the story of the Cross though this must be consistently and faithfully taught as its *pivotal* story.

The goal of children's evangelism is not superficial response but long-term commitment as disciples. For this reason, any temptation towards manipulation must be avoided since children will desire to please and also to conform to the group in which they are involved. So it is never appropriate to use methods which put emotional pressure on the child, distort the message of the gospel or offer incentives in order to get immediate response. Care must be taken to understand each child in that child's own context realising that the response a child makes may place him/her in dilemma with home or community that will need to be handled prayerfully and thoughtfully.

4. Theological Issues

Children are spiritually sensitive and capable of profound insight. The Bible affirms, and contemporary research suggests, that their values are shaped in their childhood and that the initial commitment to faith often happens during these years. This should provoke us to excellence in our work with children. It must lead us to an intentional engagement in the vital theological reflection that will shape our children's evangelism in today's world. Then the gospel will transform children and their communities.

- How can the Church retrieve the position given to children by God and emphasized by Jesus? How must the Church lead by example, showing the compassionate, inclusive attitude of Jesus, when approaching children outside the church with the gospel?

- How can the Church encourage all adults, whether or not they are parents, leaders, teachers, to grow this attitude towards children which is core to Christian living?
- How can we help Christian parents nurture the faith of their own children?
- How will we appreciate, protect and disciple the child from an unchurched family who discovers faith?

C. The agenda for advocacy

1. Theological Education:

While children's evangelism remains the passion primarily of children's evangelists only, it will continue to be marginalized in the church. What is needed is action on the part of theologians, denominational leaders and missiologists to view their disciplines through the lens of 'children.' The emerging Child Theology Movement which seeks to put 'the child in the midst' of every theological agenda is to be commended. So too are the growing number of seminaries offering academic studies in children's evangelism and the publication of serious academic books on children. To nurture this interest, it is necessary that:

a: The theological thinking expressed in this document must become familiar ground for those practitioners involved in evangelistic ministry among children throughout the world. At the heart of this discussion lies a desire to encourage theological colleges to broaden the scope of the study in all their disciplines to include reflection on children and not only adults. The goal is to train clergy/pastor/minister trainees to think instinctively about the spiritual formation of children.

b: Those whose role is to raise quality leaders who will hold pastoral responsibility for children's evangelists and enterprise need to ensure that their training is in theological study as well as in practical skills of evangelism and exploration.

c: Where theological colleges provide a rigorous place for future ministers and pastors to grapple with theological issues, the thought context must be people of every age and not limited to adults.

Three levels of Children's Ministry and Theological Training are proposed:

- Practitioner Training: to help children's workers to think theologically.
- Full-time Church or Parachurch Worker Training: to result in recognized accreditation.
- Church Leaders and Pastors: for those who will either be responsible for or oversee the Children's Ministry in a church congregation or organisation.

Case study: Denominational leaders commit to children in Ethiopia

In 2003, Compassion International Ethiopia challenged the united leadership of the Fellowship of Ethiopian Evangelical churches as to the potential of children in their country. Together, the leaders of the church wept and confessed their history of indifference to children. A covenant commitment to change was made and a five year plan is under way.

1. Core value

A commitment to the spiritual growth of the child and the need for evangelism of children need to be a core value in the ministry selection process of our churches. This in turn will provoke a need for theological thinking about children in the training process and create reflection that is ongoing and vibrant.

2. Course Content

There is need for a consensus about the nature of content that would enable colleges and theological courses to equip staff and construct a breadth of courses from basic introductions to research degrees. These will benefit children's specialists

and would give particular credibility and depth to the work of children's ministry practitioners. It will also provide the foundation for distance learning for the *grassroots* children's evangelist.

3. Theological reflections and writing

Credible theologians from a variety of disciplines are encouraged to broaden their thinking to include children. This would strengthen the academic reflection available about children and provide resources for a future generation of theological thought.

4. Learning together

Regular specialist gatherings must be held where those who want help in continuing their theological thinking about children and the gospel can receive it. In this context the Western church can humbly and deliberately learn from Christians living in the majority world.

5. Challenging denominational leaders

Denominations need an ethos where employing a children's specialist becomes as normal as recruiting a pastor and a youth pastor. They should ensure that they have personnel who specifically pursue these goals within their ranks. Training, inspiring and providing resources for lay leaders and volunteers is also key to creating the foundations for all other growth.

6. Networks of the like-minded

Every nation needs a healthy network of all those whose concern is for children in the name of Jesus: whether involved in evangelism, nurture or social action. These networks would give opportunity for common action, provide information and facilitate reflection on theological issues. They should also link into local community networks. For a possible model, visit www.childrenmatter.net.

Children deserve nothing less than the results of such theological thinking – and it is only as we are prepared to think this deeply that each child will have the opportunity to choose Jesus for themselves with real understanding and as long-term disciples.

4. TURNING THE VISION INTO REALITY: Producing Long-term Followers not Short-term Results

At whatever level a child is on the Pattaya Scale, the ideal is always that (s)he will observe, meet and be brought into relationship with Christians in a local community who seek to share Jesus. In Chapter 4, principles of best practice are outlined, followed by specific application to the evangelization of children in different social contexts.

A. A charter of best practice in children's evangelization

This charter is concerned to raise the standards in our children's evangelization and so is proposed as a checklist against which any community of faith can evaluate the focus and effectiveness of its programmes and strategies.

1. Prayer

To paraphrase Barna,¹² 'The Enemy has plans for our children – do we?' This is a spiritual battle. We ought never to be such activists that we neglect consistent prayer.

2. Recognition of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is at work in children - before, during and after our programmes - in ways beyond our imagination. We need to relinquish control to Him.

3. God-given passion

God-given passion rather than obligation – for God, for children, for the Bible.

4. Outward focus

Going to where the children are in *their* world. In every continent, there are more children outside our churches than inside: we dare not be content with hoping that children will come to visit a strange place with strange rituals and unknown people. Many children require stepping stones before they can cross the cultural barriers represented by church as it is now.

5. Genuine efforts to understand children:

- their interests, their concerns, their relationships
- their previous experiences of God or their own spiritual perceptions
- their emotional well-being
- their learning styles and developmental stages

6. Holistic evangelism

The child is not a 'soul to be saved,' but a person who needs to experience the love of Jesus in a tangible way. It is tempting to think that holistic evangelism refers only to 'children at risk,' but it is fundamental for *all* children because all children can have their longings met in a Saviour who offers safety and acceptance. Holistic ministry makes connections to the child's world by:

- Helping the child become the 'whole' child that God intends him/her to be – attending to physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs at the same time and with the same concern as spiritual needs. Bullying, hunger, disability, insecurity, lack of education may deafen a child to the 'words' of the gospel unless it is accompanied by compassionate action.
- Working within the web of relationships to which the child belongs – friends, gang, family.

¹² George Barna – advisory on the book cover.

It's not easy! This is the heart cry from a serious children's evangelist 'on the street.'

The road is long, and full of disappointments and surprises. You need to be able to take the child as he is. To respond in a Christlike way, to listen to his problems (it does not matter they are all in his/her imagination), to cope with his/her behaviour, his/her sense of humour, tantrums, tears, laughter - and earn friendship and trust. It takes long-term commitment to lead one of these 'little children' to the foot of the Cross. The answer is not in 'one-off' missions...it's easy to forget that the child is hungry not for words but for good food, human attention and care. Then after a while we can present the love of God in words – sometimes only after a long while.

7. Relationship: the foundation of holistic evangelism

- In the Old Testament, children were taught the content of their faith through everyday relationship (Deuteronomy 6). Yet so often the responsibility of teaching the faith is transferred to a 'classroom.' In incarnational relationship, children meet 'Jesus with skin on'; they experience Jesus' love, forgiveness, patience and discipline; they have the opportunity to see how followers of Jesus love, follow and serve Him.

Relationship is a powerful witness:

Consider the major contribution residential camps have made to the church in the past 50 years. The nature of such camps and programmes must constantly change if they are to remain attractive and relevant. Nevertheless, *they should still be considered a key strategy for evangelism and discipleship of children.*

Where residential camps are not affordable, consider day camps. After 12 weeks experience of a relationship-based children's outreach programme in the Middle East, one boy remarked: *Now I know that Jesus comes down and plays with me.*

- Relationship is by its nature, long-term. If it is just a 'hook' to attract children, it is a lie. Children are perceptive about words that contradict action: adults who talk about God's love, but demonstrate favouritism; a church that calls itself 'family,' but fails to make children welcome.
- Relationship that ends when an event ends is a strange relationship and should happen only where all efforts to sustain the relationship fail.

8. Biblical content: learning the Christian faith.

- 'Storying' the gospel: the Bible is largely narrative, and story is the natural medium for children. As Jesus demonstrated, a story is more effective at conveying truth and challenging life than didactic teaching
- Keeping the message uncluttered: we must never be so busy 'connecting' to the child's world that we forget the importance of the message itself: *it is the basis for his choices about following*

- The Bible is life-giving not life-draining: we ought never to reduce its richness to a list of rules. Our task is to raise followers not Pharisees. *'You and I are not to use the Bible to club the child, or to impose demands that he or she conform. We are to use Bible stories ... as a doorway to hope rather than as a nagging demand for change.'*¹³
- The Bible is the Word of God; Jesus is the Living Word. Our task is to get the message of the Bible into the hands and hearts of children who read, rather than 'telling' them what we think it says. *For children who do not read, we must create and explore audio-visual resources such as the 'Faith Comes by Hearing' project that offers dramatised bible-readings in many languages.*¹⁴

Two case studies: connecting children with the Bible:

(a) The India School Project from International Bible Society (IBS)

In a nation where the primary religion, Hinduism, claims more divine beings than there are schoolchildren, *Jesus & His Life — Gospel of Mark* introduces a new generation of Indians to the one true God. Its specially prepared notes help young readers to experience Scripture's power, recognize its relevance in their lives and respond to its challenge. By mid-2004, about 460,000 copies of this booklet had been distributed to schoolchildren. After receiving *Jesus & His Life* at school, the children and their teachers spend a month studying it. Students send a completed questionnaire to IBS-India who gives them to local church volunteers, trained to provide follow-up. They meet with the students to develop lasting, personal relationships with them, answering their questions and inviting them to church. Every student who sends in a response receives a certificate acknowledging successful completion of the book. A student from Calcutta wrote: *"This book has given me enough knowledge to know that Jesus is our Saviour and He died so that we could live...Here we understand that Jesus can do the unbelievable works for us, and He does not care how poor or rich we are!"*

IBS-India must not be viewed as inducing others to become Christians, so it proceeds with the sure knowledge that God's word speaks for itself. Many students ask for further information because their parents - even Hindu and Muslim parents - want them to grow in the knowledge of God to help combat the moral decay they see invading their culture. IBS-India's website receives thousands of hits each day from around the world. See www.childrensbible.com

(b) Arkventure

This interactive, multidimensional programme for children aged between 9 and 12 years is housed in a large mobile trailer. Its 90 minute presentation involves a computer game team challenge exploring Bible themes, language etc with the aim of identifying a code. **Arkventure** is run by the Bible Society in the Netherlands and takes place during school hours. The goal is to reach 30,000 children through Arkventure. www.arkventure.nl

9. Opportunity for the child to respond: this will require

- **Freedom:** for the child to ask questions and respond to what God is doing in her/his life.

¹³ Lawrence Richards, *Talkable Bible Stories* (USA, Fleming H Revell Co, 1983, 1991) quoted in Terry Clutterham, *The Adventure Begins* (London: Scripture Union, 2000), 117.

¹⁴ Hosanna Ministries

- **Honesty:** as the adult helps the child to discover what following Jesus means for her/him.
- **Challenge:** offering the child the opportunity and time to consider the choice to follow.
- **Action:** if the gospel transforms, change will be observable. Opportunities can be explored or created for children to express their faith in acts of service or compassion.

10. Ongoing discipleship and mentoring

Evangelism is not an activity in isolation (Matthew 28:18-19). The focus is on the follower that *the child can be today* rather than the follower *the child might one day become*. *Gospel Mission to India* reports 16 year-olds pastoring churches; churches in Argentina encourage young adolescents to mentor younger children; *Evangelism Explosion* teaches children how to share their faith.

11. Creative contextualisation

An article in *Christianity Today* urges the Western church to get up-to-date: *One of the chief challenges today for church volunteers is keeping up with technologically savvy youngsters, some of whom know how to programme a DVD player and play games on an Xbox by the time they start school...Children are bombarded with bright-coloured, fast-moving images on scores of TV channels, said Robert T. Schlipp...."Just putting together colouring book pages or flannel graphs is not creative enough for today's kids..."*¹⁵

The challenge is the same for the non-Western church even though the outcome of the contextualisation will be different. Contemporary methods and strategies link an ever-changing world to a never-changing message.

12. Interaction with the family

They are the most influential relationship on a child's connection and attitude towards the Christian faith. Our starting point in working with children will always be *respect* for parents as the primary caregivers and legal guardians *recognition* that our access to children is a privilege and *responsibility* to help create family where no family exists.

13. Community

Children long to belong. Communities of significant people (adults and children) shaper both the child's innate spirituality and their religious and faith experiences.

Current research

Westerhoff highlights the need for a vital faith community for children. His research indicates that while religion can be taught, personal owning of Christian faith does not usually come without people of a local faith community impacting on the lives of children at different levels.¹⁶

Richards identifies 5 processes from Scripture to describe how children are influenced to take on faith:

- 1) belonging in a faith community
- 2) participating in the life of a faith community
- 3) people in the faith community modelling faith
- 4) biblical instruction in the faith community
- and 5) encouraging personal choice within that faith community.¹⁷

¹⁵ John W. Kennedy, "The 4-14 Window: New push on child evangelism targets the crucial early years." *Christianity Today*, .48:7 (July 2004): 53. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/007/37.53.html>

¹⁶ John Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Press 1976)

¹⁷ Lawrence Richards 1991

Psychologist, L. S. Vygotsky found that social interaction with a community of religion (he diagrams this in the shape of scaffolding around a building) is necessary if a child is to adopt that religion.¹⁸

In a local community of faith, children witness and belong to a group of people working out what it means to follow Jesus in everyday life. However, for some children this will be an impossible leap due to the lack of support in family or community. Effective evangelization will intentionally create stepping stones including clubs, family activities, appropriate Internet contact and camps.

14. Excellence

Children's evangelism demands high standards of:

- Accountability: thoughtful planning towards child-centred outcomes that avoids the pitfall of programming out God's surprises
- Commitment at all levels
- Training: A Church of England strategy paper (2003) concluded: '*training...is patchy in quality, content and availability*¹⁹ and noted that '*the least common [subjects] are evangelism and using the bible*'. Sadly this is a pattern repeated around the globe.

How might these standards of excellence apply in particular contexts?

- Children at risk
- Children in communities that are hostile to the Gospel
- Children in multi-faith communities
- Children in faith communities
- Children in their families

B. Children at risk: Good News with compassion

Imagine a world where every child who is hungry is fed, every child who is exploited is released, every child who is abused is rescued.

(i) Who are the children at risk?

Care must be taken not only to define children at risk in relation to their problems, but also to understand them as people with the potential to become followers of Jesus. However, this potential is often unrealised because of the nature of the obstacles they face. The types of 'risk' will vary among cultures and even within one culture, as will the understanding of that which is harmful and/or sinful. As Christians, we must bring biblical witness to address these issues as well.

Children whose circumstances place them in danger of never reaching their potential include those who are:

- Traumatized: street children, children in conflict areas, displaced/refugees

¹⁸ U. Bronfenbrenner, The Ecology of Human Development (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1979)

¹⁹ Church of England's Children's Strategy Paper, 'Sharing the Good news with Children' Key Area 4: Training for Ministry among Children (London: Church House, 2003)

- Abused (physically, sexually, emotionally): including victims of drug abuse or forced abortion
- Exploited: child soldiers, child labourers, child prostitutes
- Impoverished: including child-headed households, children of prisoners
- Neglected or abandoned
- Discriminated against because of their gender - including the girl-child - age, religion, socio-economic status, special needs, physical disabilities and / or ethnicity/colour/race/nationality
- Infected or affected by HIV/AIDS
- Malnourished, diseased, and without adequate health care
- Children exposed to the practises of the occult
- Gang members

These are children who need to experience the love of Jesus in tangible ways so that their lives may be transformed. Ultimately, children at risk are children who need to hear a gospel that releases the child from all bondages that deprive them of their place and potential in the world (Luke 4:18).

(ii) Holistic evangelization: points of intervention for the Christian church

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat...” (Matthew 25:35-36).

1. Love

Many ‘children at risk’ crave friendship. So love is the first language they will understand at the initial level of any relationship. It must be offered:

- in sincerity and with patience because at first they will be very suspicious
- with encouragement that focuses on their potential as opposed to their past
- with acceptance: healing occurs if they know and believe that they are loved without precondition - when they see that ‘love covers over all wrongs’ (Proverbs 10:12).

2. Meeting the needs

Children at risk are hungry...naked...without shelter and often without education. They are human beings who have been abused, exploited, neglected, used and misused. The real and immediate needs of children at risk require real and immediate responses. When a church takes such measures, they are gateways to the children’s souls.

Flexible programmes need to be put in place but this is easier said than done, especially in many parts of the world where the church lacks the capacity to adequately engage in many of these activities. *This provides the opportunity for churches to partner across the world.* For if the church is to share the gospel in words, it should also be actively involved in providing practical help such as:

- **Interventionist care.** The nature of that care will vary according to circumstances. Consider the different needs of a girl child who has been sexually abused, a boy who has been trained to kill as a soldier, a destitute child or a child infected with HIV. As a general principle, children at risk should be given the type of care that will release them from physical, spiritual, psychological and economic bondage or diminish the effects of these. Medical care and feeding programmes are two of the obvious types of care that children at risk need. *We earn the right to talk about God who cares when they experience that care through us.*

- **Counselling and mentoring.** Often children at risk are traumatized by their turbulent circumstances. Many have been without guidance and encouragement all their lives. Counselling in areas like relationships and appropriate behaviour is key for the smooth integration of children at risk into society. Mentoring can help heal the psychological wounds. *We earn the right to offer Christ as a role model for children when we as followers of Christ are role models for them.*
- **Security.** Children at risk are highly insecure. They need safe housing (preferably within the context of a family rather than an institution), protection from exploitation and regular food. *We earn the right to talk about God the rock when He provides safety through us.*
- **Education.** Many children at risk have no opportunity for formal education or little chance to benefit from it. *We earn the right to talk about God our hope, when He provides hope through us.*

(iii) Case Study: Love sponsorship in Tanzania

Women belonging to the Arusha evangelical churches carried out a child sponsorship programme for needy children in partnership with *Compassion International* after a seminar on the unique role of women in sharing human creation with God and their special responsibility and giftedness to care for children. Each of the women who volunteered for this programme agreed to be responsible for up to five children at risk in the communities neighbouring their church. Each woman visits each child in her/his home, spending time just talking and listening. She offers practical help: from studies to hair-braiding. At times, she may bring the child to her own house for a meal, or give a small gift to the child or family if her resources permit. Her other commitment is to pray faithfully for the sponsored child. They call this love sponsorship. The love of Jesus extended to children in this fashion has helped hundreds of children at risk in Arusha town to respond positively to God, bringing miraculous transformation in the physical and emotional lives of children.

(iv) Sharing the gospel in words

There are unique challenges to reaching children at risk with the gospel.

- It's preferable not to start with *their* sin. Most children at risk have been sinned against. They have been made to sin, or have been neglected or abused by the very people who should have guaranteed their protection and care, even taught to hate and kill. *Where they are not guilty, they must be relieved of the burden of guilt. At some point they must also be challenged about their own participation in wrong.*
- It's not easy to talk to them about love because they may lack the frame of reference that helps them to understand the concept of God's love. Love must be seen.
- It's not easy to answer their questions: Why did God allow this? Who would love me? Often it is not the answer but the right to be heard that the child is seeking. Listen for their heart cry.

Have confidence that the word of God brings healing and salvation:

- It is only the Truth that will enable them to see beyond their hurts,
- It is only the Holy Spirit who will lead them to forgiveness- to forgive those who hurt them and to receive forgiveness from those that they have wronged.

It will take long-term incarnational relationship to help such children to follow Jesus.

(v) Case study: Community Development Project in Barakumba District Delhi

In partnership with *Tearfund*, a Christian group called *Sharan* has started clinics and "savings groups" for desperately poor families in the Delhi slums. They

help the families whose children are rag pickers – collecting rubbish and selling it for recycling - to enrol their children in schools and begin extra classes for children who have missed years of education. www.tearfund.org

Resources: Several Christian ministries produce resources to help. For example, the Pavement Project helps non-literate street children to express their longings and find in Jesus, someone who understands their uniqueness. www.sgm.org/sp_projects/PP_resources
Child Evangelism Fellowship sends Mailbox Bible Club courses to children of prisoners. www.cefonline.com

(vi) ACTION PLAN Empowering the church to evangelise children at risk:

By God's grace, the church has worked faithfully with children at risk – but how can we do more and do it better?

1. Put children at risk on the agenda

At every level of the church (local, national and global), there is ignorance or apathy amongst Christians about the situation of children at risk *in their own communities*. The enormity of the problems and bombardment by the media have desensitised us. We propose that:

- Churches open their doors to children at risk in the neighbourhood so they can share their dreams, their hopes and their testimonies.
- Churches in resource-rich countries share the load with churches lacking resources.
- Para-church organisations that work with children at risk bridge this gap by creating awareness about the realities of children at risk among church leaders and members.

2. Identify partnerships

Partnerships are needed that will equip Christians to demonstrate love, meet the needs and share the gospel. The energy, skills and resources needed are usually more than can be provided by one church or one organization, however large and well resourced. It takes a lot of time to reconstruct the lives of children sinned against. The answer is to develop networks and strategic partnerships at all levels.

- It is the church who should take the initiative to encourage the government, opinion leaders in the community, non-governmental organisations to engage in this task collectively.
- Parachurch organizations can provide church leaders and members with the training to equip them for ministry with children at risk. Viva Network is a key movement for this: www.viva.org

3. Seize the opportunities to share the gospel

Case study - Kerala, India:

Two children, aged 9 and 10, whose parents had died of AIDS were diagnosed as HIV positive. When the results were heard, the children were expelled from the school they attended. The local church took up the issue with the school authorities but they refused to listen. The church filed a case against the school and won: the school was ordered by the court to accept the children back. On that day the whole school was empty as all the other parents withdrew their children in protest. The pastor and the congregation took the initiative. They marched every evening through the main streets in the village, the pastor holding hands with the two children as the congregation followed. After some days, the parents slowly began to send their

children back to the school. Such was the media interest, that the President's attention was attracted. He ordered a first-hand report. The investigating officer came to the village on a Sunday morning. When he saw the way the children were sitting among the rest of the Sunday school and taking part in all the activities, he had photographers document the scene much to the surprise of the people in the church. Later when the President visited the State, he arranged to talk with the children. Hindustan Lever - a secular company that produces condoms - has undertaken full sponsorship for the children's education now. The story remains a significant example of what happens when the church cares and protects.

Case Study - Africa:

At the beginning of the HIV/AIDS crisis, Scripture Union developed a Christian response in the form of school-based resources 'Choose Freedom' and 'Adventure Unlimited' to convey biblical values of self-esteem, honesty, wise choices, self-control and respect for others. These programmes have provided entry points into thousands of schools – including those previously not accessible to Christians - and with them, the opportunity to share the Jesus of the Bible either overtly or through the lifestyle and witness of the Christian volunteers who present the programme.

www.su-africa.org

4. Understand the way the Bible speaks into the lives of children at risk.

In the story of Joseph for example, children find a dysfunctional family and a son abandoned in a foreign country. In Jesus, they encounter a refugee, a victim of deep unfairness and great cruelty. Yet each found the courage to forgive and to live life to its full. This message can speak to children whose lives have been shattered by the ordering of society. So too can the hope found in the story of Onesimus: that the most broken people are restored in Jesus: *'Formerly he (Onesimus) was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him - who is my very heart - back to you'* (Philemon 11, 12).

5. Integrate Christian childcare with evangelism.

Too often, children's evangelists come to 'add the gospel' to a childcare programme further reinforcing the separation between 'gospel' and 'social action.' The result is lack of integration because the ones who do the caring are not the ones who share the message. It's time for children's evangelists to train childcare workers and vice versa – to share one another's passions for the benefit of the Kingdom.

6. Advocate for children at risk

Lobby the government, community, church and media for a more compassionate and cohesive approach to children at risk.

C. Children in hostile communities: Good News with a cost

Imagine a world where every child in a community hostile to the gospel, not only hears the good news but is supported in their choice to follow Jesus through a community of faith that prays and cares sacrificially.

The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (*Rights*) has two opposite implications for Christians and churches seeking to work with children.

- In societies where the religion of the majority is not Christianity, the *Rights* give children the right to choose Christianity if they wish to do so. Such communities are the subject of this section.

- Where there is a multi-faith society, the *Rights* give children the right *not* to choose to follow the faith of their Christian parents. Opposition to them exercising this choice may be perceived as a lack of tolerance. This aspect is the subject of the next section.

(a) What is a community that is hostile to the gospel?

In some hostile countries, religion is banned or despised. In others, religion is a value that is appreciated and 'god' is not an alien idea, but in many of these societies there is hostility to evangelical Christianity. Among the reasons a community might be hostile to the gospel are:

1. A hostile environment

Millions of children have no opportunity to hear the gospel because of denial of human rights, war, injustice and abuse (see the previous section).

2. Narrow worldview of the community

Where legislation and cultural practices reflect a view that anything coming from outside its culture is inferior or a threat that must be rejected, a child interested in Christ may be persecuted for adopting an 'alien' belief.

3. Cultural identity

In many societies, religion is an integral part of the culture: to belong to that community means to belong to that religion. So 'god' is not an alien idea, but where that religion is hostile to evangelical Christianity, the child is under enormous pressure to conform to the traditional faith. This may be expressed through a range of social restrictions.

4. Family pressure

In such communities, the immediate source of pressure is often from the family, especially the extended family because the consequences of choosing a different faith extend beyond the punishment of the individual to the ostracism of the whole family. So children who have made some level of commitment to Jesus are removed by the family from the club in which this occurred. There are testimonies of girls who as a result of adopting Christianity have been threatened by death by their father if they did not renounce their faith.

5. Hostile ideologies

The political system in some countries is overtly anti-religion and/or anti-Christian and aggressively seeks to prevent children from hearing the gospel in any form. Christian children are persecuted.

(b) ACTION PLAN: Empowering the church to evangelise children in a hostile community: What does the church need to understand?

1. The priority is for conversion of heart not religion

Many children keep the word of God in their hearts and keep the faith until they are old enough to publicly express their desire to follow Jesus. There is evidence of this in story of Naaman's wife's servant (2 Kings 5). It has been observed by those in hostile communities that some children carry into adulthood the gospel they heard when they were children. Some have secret faith which grows through secret mentors and secret prayer times with other Christians. Other children - although rarely - have expressed their desire to follow Christ and have faced the tough consequences of following a 'new' God.

2. The child's well-being is a primary consideration

An obvious dilemma the evangelist faces is the appropriateness of calling children to stand up for their faith, yet at the same time keeping children as safe as possible in their families and communities. Be sensitive to their situations; do not expect children to immediately confess Christ publicly especially where ongoing Christian support is unlikely.

3. The 'Good News' may be perceived differently

The starting point for a child's journey to salvation in a hostile community is unlikely to be the same as for children from a Christian background or a western background. Listen and observe. Consider what is 'good' about the 'Good News' in such a situation. Is it that one person is worth more than 2000 pigs (Mark 5); is it the acceptance of the outcast (Luke 7:36-50); is it the power of God against other gods (Gideon); is it the *knowledge* of salvation and eternal life (against religions that offer no such promises)? Expect the unexpected as the Spirit captures their attention.

What does the church need to do?

1. Learn about the child's own sub-culture

It is vital to understand their language, beliefs and ideology in order to penetrate the different world in which such children live.

2. Consider our responsibility to the parents and extended family

It is in the family where the child is most likely to experience opposition, so it is wise to make every effort to build genuine relationships with the child's family. A Bangladeshi children's worker reported that people who work amongst Muslims find that an effective means of evangelism is to pray about matters of health, school and other problems with children and their families. It is perfectly acceptable to pray to Jesus (*Isa*) in this context.

- Be transparent. Where possible invite family members to your child-centred activities. Sports ministry in cities around the world is an example of where this approach is working well.
- The evangelist must be careful not to make children too dependent on himself rather than God. We can offer support, care and prayer but must be careful not to become substitutes for the parents.

3. Case Study from a Forum 2004 participant

'I live in a nation where the authorities teach children from an early age that there is no God so children have grown up without fear of anything supernatural. The result is a generation of youth not afraid of anything and now rebelling against everything. Sin is rife: prostitution, sexual promiscuity and deviation, drug addiction, alcoholism, abortion. In response to this reality the authorities have in a variety of ways, asked the church to help in building values in children and youth, opening the way to our involvement in door to door visitation. It must be noted that the response of the authorities changes from day to day, making for a very unstable environment for the church to work in. Nevertheless, in general there is an openness for the church to work with children and youth'.

4. Carefully consider our use of the Bible

- In religious communities, minimise offence in the early stages of contact by speaking of God rather than Jesus and by using Old Testament rather than New Testament stories.
- It follows that we must be true to Scripture. Obviously not every biblical story includes the whole of the good news of Jesus, so we must resist the temptation to make every story say *God loves you, you have sinned, Jesus Christ died for your sins, you must believe - and soon, lest you not receive another opportunity.*

5. Find help from Christian converts of other religions

Sometimes the evangelist creates unintentional tension through a lack of understanding of both the child's culture and his religion. We must learn directly and humbly from Christians converted from other religions and cultures to discover the key biblical teachings for the evangelism of children and their families. Those who have walked a similar path will likely make good guides on this journey.

6. Be cautious in language and attitudes

The cause of the gospel is hindered by ignorance or arrogance. Referring to the gods of other religions as idols or dead gods or the practices of another Christian tradition as satanic is likely to be considered highly offensive. Such a lack of sensitivity in the use of language along with an abrasive attitude may close the doors to further conversation or opportunity.

7. Be sensitive to the unspoken

Learn to recognise the verbal and non-verbal cues of a child who is interested but may be afraid to say so: a desire for attention or a question about school may indicate a wish to ask about faith.

8. Look for common ground and take the opportunities

- Identify and cooperate around social issues that create common concern: e.g. drugs, discipline, prostitution. Community concern about moral decline in young people is an opportunity for Christians to be proactive.
- Invite children and families to celebrate Christian festivals; be prepared for reciprocal invitations.

9. Do not tie the gospel to a foreign culture

- Separate the gospel from cultural trappings, so that children do not perceive that a choice to follow Jesus is a choice to give up their own culture.
- Plan culturally appropriate discipleship and nurturing programmes.

10. Be honest about the cost of discipleship

Beware of giving simplistic answers that dilute the gospel: "Pray, everything will be fine," "Come to Jesus and your problems will be solved." Children can understand that following Christ will be risky but God has promised His strength.

11. Use a holistic approach

In some hostile countries, children lack the basics for life such as food, shelter, clothing and health care. All children need love, joy, freedom and peace in the real sense of these words. The evangelist will be more welcome when she attempts to respond to real needs with practical concern and love. The appeal of Mother Theresa's ministry challenges one-dimensional evangelistic efforts. Be genuine in offering aid or relationships, being aware that they may be perceived as a form of bribery to lure children into the Christian faith.

12. Consider the role of children in evangelism and nurture

If Christian children could be equipped to share their faith naturally, they would be the best witnesses and encouragers to children in communities where church involvement is difficult.

Nurturing children in hostile communities

If we are to spiritually nurture children who have put their faith in Jesus but are unable to express it openly or to become part of the visible church, we must: Understand 'church' broadly as a community of believers: a church may be present even where there are no church buildings. It may be ideal for a child to attend church and be nurtured there, but God can provide this in different communities of faith

- Provide other activities where Bible exploration and prayer can be included such as academic tutoring groups or sports/computer/music/health clubs.
- Incorporate Bible teaching in social development programmes.
- Have strategies in place for being 'family' for any child who is rejected by their own family.

Understand 'nurture' broadly as a potential part of every relationship: as a child experiences attention, security, acceptance, love, praise, discipline, he experiences the gospel because it is in our lives... 'known and read by everybody... written on ... tablets of human hearts' (2 Corinthians 3:2-4).

D. Children in multi-faith communities: which Good News?

Imagine a world where every confused or indifferent child in a multi-faith community is helped to understand that Jesus is not a god or teacher who might be chosen from a multitude of equals, but the Son of God who challenges them to follow Him.

Specific challenges in a multi-faith society:

1. Tolerance and choice

Especially in post-modern societies where tolerance is the primary virtue and where Christianity is perceived to be just one of a whole range of spiritual and religious beliefs, the right of the child to choose is an important issue. Choice is assumed to be good, so Christianity becomes one of the religions of 'choice,' with young people combining pieces they like from various belief systems to create their own set of values. All choices are considered equally valid because all religions are considered of equal value. So the supermarket mentality prevails and whether an individual chooses one of them, bits of them, or none at all, is purely a personal decision. In such a multi-faith context, Christianity is seen as judgemental and intolerant: when the gospel is presented, children are confused to be told of God's absolutes when they have been taught that there are no absolutes.

Around the world

In the USA, the issue revolves around what can and cannot be done in public schools: can public prayer be said before the start of a football game; can Christian clubs meet on school property? These are often resolved in courts of law (the first being banned and the second being allowed). *In New Zealand* in order to use the Bible or any Christian teaching programme in schools, permission of all parents and the community has to be obtained. The result is that many schools have closed their doors to religious education after a local community vote has rejected it. *In England*, schools teach children aspects of all major faiths so that Divali, Hanukah and Ramadan are celebrated alongside Christmas and Easter. *In Germany* those who had little contact with Christianity during the communist rule in the east, are very likely to mix eastern religions such Buddhism or Hinduism with a belief in resurrection and 'heaven' from Christianity.

2. Differing Christian denominational responses

Sometimes the fact that Christian denominations do not agree on aspects of the gospel makes it confusing for children and difficult for those doing children's evangelism.

3. Issues of faith, family and cultural assimilation

Where Christianity is not the faith of the family or the ethnic group involved, one of the first steps in cultural assimilation for a child is sometimes to accept Christianity on a nominal level. The child identifies with Christianity and participates in Christian settings as a way of adopting the national culture and in order to participate in community life. This can be acceptable to the family - until the child decides that following Jesus is a personal matter requiring a strong level of commitment. This can become even more critical when a child begins to evangelise his/her own family.

Family members begin to resist. At this point the child is sometimes removed from Christian influence. This pattern exists in multi-faith societies where freedom of religion is a legal right, but where the power of the family over the child's life is stronger than that of the law.

4. A theological challenge

A multi-faith context raises issues which Christian evangelists and Christian theologians must address and review in their teaching content and in their practice and methods of evangelism. Questions that must be carefully considered especially by those training colleges, agencies and churches which are preparing children's evangelists include:

- How does the gospel relate to a child's life? What demands does it make?
- For children from other religious faiths, is following Jesus an individual choice only? When and how should the family be included in the evangelistic process?
- What does it mean for a child to make *Christian* choices in a society that so values tolerance?

5. Case studies

(i) **YMCA Germany:** In Stuttgart, YMCA began outreach to children with a Muslim family-background, by going to playgrounds, offering games, crafts and stories. Many children would leave if the story was about Jesus as the Son of God, some saying they were not allowed to listen to stories about Jesus. The team began to use stories from the Old Testament, which relate and partly belong to Muslim culture, and to build relationships with the families through home visits. Later the team were then able to talk about Jesus as a person who lived on earth. Most of the children accepted this approach to the story about Jesus as they already knew something about Jesus from the Koran.

(ii) **A Jewish response:** In the Jewish culture, both Judaism and the family must be respected by the evangelist as religion, family and cultural identity are closely entwined. The evangelist must be aware of the right of the family to teach their children. Therefore, to evangelise with integrity, the evangelist must work closely with the parents. So important is this that one Christian from a Jewish background has recommended that for all children under the age of 18, the evangelist should first obtain parental consent – including contact through website or literature. He suggests that appropriate strategies would include meeting the needs of *parents* and offering training in Bible knowledge to school-aged children that is sensitive to their Jewish background.

(iii) **The 'KidzKlub' concept** pioneered by Bill Wilson in New York involves adults visiting the home of each child who is registered, each week. This is an enormous commitment, but is one of very few programmes making an impact in deprived areas of inner cities, building trust and acceptance among the parents.

www.kidzklub.org.uk

6. ACTION PLAN: Empowering the church to evangelise children in multi-faith societies:

For the local church to plan evangelism that minimises offence and maximises effectiveness, it must:

1. **Commit to long-term effort**, preferably involving a partnership of interested people such as teachers or health care workers.
2. **Be well-informed about other faiths.** Read about and engage in dialogue with people of other faiths. Explore how to use Scripture in a way that connects with the cultural and religious background of children, by seeking help from converts.

3. **Remember** that children attending a Christian activity may come from homes with a different value system or a different religion. Their parents will expect the church to tolerate and not deliberately undermine those beliefs.
4. **Build strong relationships** with the family as early as possible. Respect their relationship with the child. Ensure open lines of communication. Encourage them to visit children's activities.
5. **Live the Christian faith** so that children and their families can see the difference it makes in everyday life and relationships. Research amongst adults in the UK showed that even those with very antagonistic views of the Christian faith had more positive attitudes towards Christian individuals whom they knew.²⁰
6. Be prepared to work within the limitations while taking the opportunities.
7. **Keep the message clear and simple. Take time.** Know how to express the Christian faith in child-appropriate language so that children know that it is not made up from various religious beliefs. Children need not only to learn how to become a Christian but also to be given the context of Christianity as a religion worthy of their belief.
8. Develop creative programme that communicate faith values without necessarily any deep teaching at least in initial stages. Football, craft, drama and music may be the particular activity around which a club or programme is built, but those running it are Christians who live out their Christian values in front of the children on a regular basis.
9. Consider non-traditional approaches: sometimes the same Biblical presentation is given to children regardless of cultural, religious or family background. This approach usually emphasises the child making an individual decision to follow Jesus: a decision based on cognitive understanding and acceptance of certain beliefs about Jesus. For children living in a multi-faith society, such a gospel presentation is often made at an outreach event without the framework of a faith community in which the child can develop his walk with God. A relational-narrative approach is more likely to be effective in the long-term than a cognitive event-based approach.
10. Rediscover the power of story: one response to the challenge of post-modernism has been to embrace 'story' as a key to exploring truth. What are the stories we should tell? How do we tell them?
 - *Godly Play* (Dr Jerome Berryman). The storyteller tells a Bible story using simple props, followed by a time of 'wondering,' asking open questions without critiquing the responses or seeking the 'right answer.' The children immerse themselves in the narrative and explore its possibilities together. They then respond personally through 'play': drawing pictures, writing poems, modelling clay... Through Godly Play, children experience the story rather than learn it.
 - *Chronological Bible Stories*: A method of telling Bible stories in the order in which they happened, so that the characters have a context and the listener learns how they fit into God's plan. This has been an effective tool, especially in working with Muslims.
www.chronologicalbiblestorying.com

²⁰ Nick Spencer, *Beyond Belief? Barriers and Bridges to Faith today*. (Research Paper, London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, 2002).

11. **Praying** for and with those of other religions is a good form of evangelism, remembering that when praying with Muslims, the name of Jesus can be used as He is a prophet in Islam.
12. **Speak out** in political arenas for the rights and responsibilities of children, including their right to a personal belief even if it is different from that of their family.

E. Children in relationship: Good News for the whole family

Imagine a world where every evangelistic effort towards children considered how it could connect to the child's family whatever shape that family might be; how it might 'be family' to children who need it; and how it could equip parents to disciple their own children.

(a) 'Family' is hard to define!

The modern family cannot be stereotyped. Traditionally in the West, 'family' meant two parents and their children. In parts of Africa 'family' often meant an extended family of one father, a number of wives, each with her children. There are many other 'shapes' of family today, including single parent families; families of children without parents; same-sex parents with children; blended families brought together through the remarriage of partners. There are also many situations where a group of people may have no formal connections with each other, but may consider those people 'family': street children or people staying for long periods in hospital, prison or a refugee camp. Throughout this section, 'parent' can refer to a child's principal caregiver (biological parent, grandparent, older sibling, foster parent, social worker).

(b) Case studies

In Wellington, New Zealand, no schools allow Christians from local churches to be involved in religious education programmes. However, *SupaKids* a lunch-time programme run by local churches is allowed in some schools. In USA, *Prime Time* is a church-run after-school programme that provides families with quality child care, while allowing Christians the opportunity to share the gospel. In Australia, school chaplains funded through local churches have proved to be of such value that the service is in increasing demand.

www.su-international.org

(c) Why make 'family' a focus for children's evangelism?

1. Family is the most important relationship for most children

- The Bible highlights the importance of family relationships. Particularly in the Old Testament, the family was the main source of influence on a child. This place where generations lived together was to be a place of mutual respect and love (Proverbs 17:6). The fifth Commandment places the relationship between parents and children firmly under the discipline of God (Exodus 20:12). The model given is one of both obedience and love: as parents centred their lives on God and their children honoured them, so children would learn to centre their lives on God too. 'The creation of 'family' as a unit within the broader human family was established at the very beginning of the bible because it reflects the very character of God to the world that He made.'²¹

²¹ Paul Butler, *Reaching Families* (Milton Keynes Scripture Union, 1995), 30

- Secular psychologists such as Eric Erikson also assert the importance of family. *'In the psychosocial stages of development of children, for children under the age of six, the family are the primary significant social relationships for children.'*²²
- If we are to share the gospel with children, we must take the time to understand these primary relationships. Even when the family relationships appear to be weak or dysfunctional, they hold a very important place in the life of the child, and as such must be explored and understood.
- If children are created to be in relationship and those relationships play a key role in shaping children as individuals, it is important that the church offers a source of caring relationship. Glen Cupit asserts that *'an important factor in children finding a personal foundation for the gospel is the quality of personal relationships which children share; in particular, those with Christians.'*²³

2. A child's response to the gospel can more easily be understood with a better understanding of his family. A child's family experiences will affect his perceptions of God and the Christian faith. For example:

- Children sometimes think of God as a kind of 'super-adult,' so their images of Him stem from their experience of adults within family. Not all family relationships are positive: a child whose father is abusive will react negatively to images of God as Father; families where trust has been destroyed make it difficult for children to build trust or trustworthiness.
- In Africa God's name is usually a household word even in homes that do not profess Christianity. The name of God thus becomes a part of a child's vocabulary even before Christ is introduced to such a child. A child learns from childhood that all things come by the help of God.
- A child's faith may be nurtured by his siblings. In Pacific Island cultures, it is possible for a group of brothers and sisters to come together to talk to a leader about following Jesus. They may want to stay together while they are counselled, leaving the oldest boy, as the family representative, to do the talking.²⁴
- In some families, children who wish to follow Jesus may be ostracised. Understanding and working with the family rather than the child in isolation may help to minimise the difficulties.

(3) What are the challenges to working with families to evangelise children?

(a) The issues

- How does the church reach children and their families together?
- Parents in many countries have lost the belief that faith is vital for their children. How can the church grow this conviction again?
- Parents are abdicating responsibility for the evangelism of their children to the church. How can the trend be reversed?
- How do the children of the present generation grow up into Christian parents themselves, when they have never experienced the biblical model of 'generation to generation' parenting?

Barna Research ²⁵

²² Erik H. Erikson, *Children and Society*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton 1963)

²³ Glen Cupit, *Less Observed Sources of Spirituality in Children*, (Melbourne: Zadok, Winter 1999).

²⁴ Cecily Cupit, *Come and follow*. (Homebush NSW: Anzea, 1992), 39

²⁵ George Barna p77-9

Summary of findings: Barna discovered that among churches in the USA, 85% of parents of children under age 13 believe they have the primary responsibility for teaching their children about religious beliefs and spiritual matter. *However, in a typical week, fewer than 10% of parents who regularly attend church with their children read the Bible together, pray together...or participate in an act of service as a family.*

Reasons given for relinquishing responsibility for their children's spiritual nurture to the church: the complexity of modern life, the negative influences of the media, the views and behaviours of their children's friends, the warped perspectives taught in the schools, the lack of trust children have in their parents' moral and spiritual perspectives, the counter-Christian culture, political correctness.

The result: Parents seek the best help they can find (in the church) and then get out of the way. Almost 9 out of 10 parents say they see little need to change the situation.

(b) The obstacles

- Parents may not be present when we are ministering to their children.
- Parents may be hostile towards any attempt to minister with their child. Or they may be happy for us to work with their children, but are not interested in us engaging with them as parents.
- Structures, tradition and/or programmes may hinder attempts to minister within families e.g. Sunday School classes may be structured according to age groups, with parents meeting separately and even children from a family being separated and no attempt to coordinate the input or to facilitate ongoing discipleship beyond that Sunday event.

(c) Initiating change: a two-pronged approach:

- to empower families to evangelise and disciple their own children, and
- to empower the church to evangelise children *in* their families.

(4) ACTION PLAN: Empowering families to evangelise their children:

(a) Change the focus away from the church as the prime provider of a child's spiritual nurture.

A disservice has been done to parents and children by placing too much emphasis on church/Sunday School as being the provider of spiritual nurture and evangelism of children and not enough emphasis on working with parents to help them in this task. The result is that Christian parents have minimal expectations in terms of what constitutes spiritual development in their children: (1) they want their child to receive more information about God and faith matters; (2) they want their child to be well behaved; and (3) they personally want to receive some guidance concerning their child's further spiritual development. *The church must work with its parents to help them provide spiritual nurture and the evangelization of their children.*

(b) Keep families together

People are often segregated for ministry: children's ministers for children, youth ministers for teenagers, and pastors for adults, instead of ministering with the entire family. 'Families need more from church life than segregated programmes and the occasional all-church activity. Many of our church activities actually pull family members apart from each other. Most children's ministries focus almost exclusively on individuals. Parents are an afterthought to many children's ministers ... we want to help parents teach their children about God, but our response to that desire is to tack

on one more programme that doesn't really involve parents interacting with their children.²⁶

The church must keep families together because it is these family relationships that are the strongest influence on the child's life.

(c) Help parents to succeed in their role as the children's faith developers

Christian parents need encouragement in their faith and lifestyle as these will be dynamic factors in leading their children towards Jesus.

- Teach parents (informally and formally) to have a God-centred approach to parenting - how to pray for their children's spiritual growth even in the womb; how to lead their child to Christ; how to disciple their child through word and action; aspects of obedience, giving, diligence, how to help their child to forgive. Explore appropriate resources such as Focus on the Family's *Heritage Builders* programme.
- Encourage parents to do simple faith-building activities with their children:
 - Pray together about the child's world and so encourage children to grow in their faith in a context (e.g. school) that might be quite hostile.
 - 'Walk' with their children: talking, listening and applying Bible truths to their own lives and helping the child to do the same. Review what was learned in Sunday School and church during the week.
 - Share stories of God at work in the family. As parents are open and vulnerable with their children, sharing their own struggles and failures as well as their joys and victories, so children learn what it means to follow Jesus and grow in courage.
 - Memorise Scripture as a family.
- Remember the strategic role of grandparents as 'holders of the story' especially where parents are not committed Christians.

(d) The church must provide role models and resources to assist parents in their God-given role.

ACTION PLAN: Empowering the church to evangelise children in their families.

'The vision of reaching family households together with the good news of God is, I am convinced, a right one. It fits with the nature of God, the nature of being human and the need for community, the lack of which is felt deeply throughout the disaffected, isolated, alienated and tired Western world.'²⁷ This will require a change towards an outward focus: When dealing with evangelising children whose families don't attend church, the focus should be on building relationships with the child's family and helping to provide for their needs, as well as seeking ways to strengthen the child's family relationships. In all cases we must have the permission of the family to share with the child. It is a 'both/and' situation: we must evangelise the child *both* within the family *and* as an individual person.

1. Use the window of opportunity

Parents may well have an interest in introducing values, ethics or belief frameworks to their young children. The church will be one option they may consider. Make it an attractive one!

²⁶ Sciarra, M, 'Partnering with Parents', *Children's Ministry Magazine*, May-June 2002 www.childrensministry.com

²⁷ Butler, P., in the same publication 139

2. Understand that other cultural groups may well have a different image than we do

... of the family and how it functions: for example, where family solidarity is considered a greater virtue than individualism, a family might not understand a Christian camp programme that invites children to leave their family for a week-long camp. The church would need to find alternative ways to reach such a family for Christ.

3. Earn trust

Christians are more likely to be respected and trusted with children from families outside the church when the teaching is open and inclusive.

4. Offer non-judgmental friendship

Many parents are lonely and lack confidence in their roles. They love their children but have no immediate network to help them cope. They may fear the condemnation of the church because of their lifestyle. The church can be an extended family that provides care, time-off, advice, reassurance, a listening ear.

5. Offer families activities which are suitable for children

Parents of young children have a tendency to engage in community or leisure activities that are centred around their children. These activities can become a starting point. Keep expectations realistic: parents are busy people.

6. Provide activities that do not divide the family

A child who attended Camp Breakaway, an Australian camp for partners and children of prison inmates wrote:

'My dad is in prison... I think it will be good when Dad comes home. Maybe Mum won't be so sad and grumpy then. I know she loves us but I can tell she's not happy... Mum always growls at us after seeing Dad. She tells us all the time to be careful what we say about where Dad is. But last holidays Mum took us on a camp where we had loads of fun. Mum made some Christmas cards...I didn't know Mum could do stuff like that...I got to paint a picture frame... And we got a video of the things we did at camp. We played lots of games and we made people out of dough and learnt how God made us...Mum said she and all the other mums talked about facing up to things and what God is like. She says God loves us. Mum's been different ever since camp.'

7. Build bridges to unchurched families in the community by touching their needs

- Multi-media parenting courses can be offered to help parents learn new skills in a friendly environment.
- Church members join school boards, volunteer for sports coaching. A Parent/Teacher Association in Ghana enables Christian teachers to interact with unchurched parents.
- Offer care to families who are vulnerable: The Africa Christian Mission runs a Day Care Centre in a rural town outside Accra. These children are changing whole households by sharing stories that they hear at school and by demonstrating changed behaviour in the home.
- Use the church building to provide services such as literacy programmes, women clubs etc...

8. Offer the gospel to the whole family

A Religious Education teacher in an Australian government school has run a Christianity Explained group at school for the parents of children in her classes. Not a lot of parents have attended, but many more have said they appreciated being asked.

9. Make the most of seasonal opportunities:

Christmas time and school holidays are great times to find ways to make connections with families. In India, church families deliver fruit and biscuits to other

families and sing carols. Sometimes these families of other faiths invite the Christian families in to pray for them.

F. Children in the Church: Good News that keeps children

Imagine a world where every child felt welcomed but not patronised by the church in their community.

Children who go to church very often love it: they make friends there, they enjoy the Bible stories and activities in Sunday School and they go with their family. Almost every Christian family brings their children to church. Children being born into Christian families make up more of the growth of the church around the world than those who are converted - at any age, whether evangelical or non-evangelical.

	Biological growth rate	Conversion growth rate	Total in millions in 2000
Evangelicals	1.27%	1.16%	648
Non-evangelicals	1.30%	-0.08 %	1,352
Total Christians	1.29%	1.04%	2,000
Total population	1.31%	n/a	6,055

Table 1: Types of Christian growth, annual rate worldwide, 1990-2000²⁸

So what is the issue? It is that older children are leaving the church in significant numbers around the world. In addressing the topic 'Children *in* the Church,' we must realise that the greater problem is the children who are *no longer* in the church.

(a) What motivates children to come to church?

Research in the USA has provided four reasons why children come to church, especially those whose parents attend:²⁹

1. Parents

Parents' religious values have a major role in influencing the attitudes of their children toward church. It is families, not churches, which have the most influence on the spiritual development of adolescents.

2. Recognition

Older children and teenagers want to be actively involved in their church and given opportunities to use their gifts. This makes them feel valued and strengthens their commitment.

3. Beliefs

A felt need for God and for religion is usually strongest among youth at a time of life when they are discovering their identity. Those who consider their own relationship with God/Jesus to be important have a stronger commitment to and involvement in the church.

²⁸ Brierley, Peter. 'Evangelicals in the world of the 21st century', a paper written for the Lausanne Forum, analysing figures from World Christian Encyclopaedia by Dr David Barrett.

²⁹ Rediske, K: Losing Teens After High School, Siloam Springs, AR John Brown University, 2003, quoting Dean R. Hoge and Gregory H. Petrillo (1978), Roger L Dudley (1993), Charles R Foster (1998), Ruth Powell (2000), George Barna (2003)

4. Peers

Young people value friendship highly and peer groups have a great influence on church attendance.

(b) So what is the problem?

Many children from Christian families are choosing to leave the church. If churches cannot keep the children who have been born into the families already in church, can they expect to do any better with those who have been born again and thus join it? Consider the following:

- In England an average of 1,000 children under 15 left churches in England *each week* throughout the 1990's accounting for half the numbers leaving church.³⁰
- This loss of children from Sunday School in early teenage years is also common in Russia.
- In Germany huge numbers of young people leave the two largest denominations (Catholic and Lutheran) but the age at which they leave and whether they leave entirely or move to churches of other denominations is not known.
- In Australia approximately 3% of children attend church on a regular basis and many churches have no provision for children or any outreach to them.
- In Japan only 1.6% of church attenders are aged under 10 with a further 7.3% between 10 and 19.³¹

Is this a problem for developed countries only? Evidence from Forum 2004 members indicated that:

- The problem is widespread across Africa. In Benin and Kenya, 50% of the population is under 15 years of age, and respectively 36% and less than 25% of these attend church. The percentage that leaves is not known.
- There is similar anecdotal evidence from South Korea and India.
- In Mexico, approximately half of the children involved in church leave, but accurate statistics are unavailable.

Despite limited statistical evidence and no universal demographic profiles, some interesting trends can be discerned from those statistics that are available:

- The lower rate of decline in Scotland than in England is almost certainly because many more Scottish churches have mid-week youth activities³²
- New Churches across Britain have more young people than other denominations and keep more of their children.
- Evangelicals *may* be losing fewer children than non-evangelicals.
- In the USA the greatest loss is at an older age than it is elsewhere.
- Children leave church at transition points in their lives, though these come at different times in different contexts.

(c) Why do children stop coming to church?

1. Church is boring

Those who do go to church often decide around the age of 9 or 10 that they will leave as soon as they are allowed to by their parents. Children who do *not* go to church are convinced it is boring: 87% of 10-14 year olds in a survey in England gave it as their top reason for not attending.³³

³⁰ Peter Brierley, The Tide is Running Out (London Christian Research 2000), 125

³¹ Survey of 186 churches belonging to Japan Evangelical Association, 2000

³² Peter Brierley, chapter 7 of the above publication.

³³ Peter Brierley, Reaching & Keeping Tweenagers (London, Christian Research 2002), 105.

2. Children's programmes have wrong priorities

- The attitude of adults working among children is often to try to provide recreational facilities for active children. This can lead to children's work focussing on entertainment rather than growth in faith. It is fun that will attract children but only relevance will keep them coming in a fun-filled world.
- Children's work is often focussed on what adults can do rather than what children want.

3. Parents lack conviction

- Section E described how Christian parents often lack motivation and confidence to disciple their children.
- Many Christian parents expect to have trouble with their children when they enter their teenage years and seem to accept that they are likely to leave church.
- Where parents leave church, almost certainly the children leave also.

4. Attitudes of church members are negative

Legalistic or old-fashioned attitudes mean that children do not feel accepted as part of the whole church family, or are put off by long lists of rules. Church youth workers in Scotland were asked to list the main reasons that 10-14 year-olds were leaving church. *All* of them rated the attitudes of other people in the church as the most significant.³⁴

5. Peer pressure increases with age

In the West, the vast majority of children who leave church do so within two years of entering Secondary/Senior school.

6. Teaching methods may not encourage spiritual development

- Sunday Schools have remained based on the premise that a teacher's role is to impart information and to spend most of the time speaking, despite changes in educational practice.
- On the other hand, mere adherence to more modern methods of learning may ignore the fact that spiritual growth is under God's hand, and cannot be expected to follow the educational and developmental theory.
- Authoritarian methods of control will be resisted by children for whom attitudes to authority have become more relaxed. Those teaching children in a church context are usually at least one generation older and often struggle to understand and cope with the children's attitudes. Behaviour management becomes a bigger issue than biblical content.

7. There are not enough good teachers

- 'The future of the Sunday School does not lie with whether the children will come but with whether the adults will teach,' said one elderly UK Sunday School teacher. If adults are not attending church every week, or are not committed to the spiritual growth of the children in the church, they are unlikely to want to take on regular, long-term teaching.
- Many of those teaching children in church have little training. They may not even have a clear understanding of the faith themselves. The resources available to them may be inadequate either because they are not available or because the church does not budget money to spend on children.

8. Changes in church practices may be unhelpful

We need to think carefully about the impact of change on children. For example, there was a massive exodus of children from UK churches in the 1950's,

³⁴ Private research for the Church of Scotland Board of Parish Education, Christian Research, 2000

coinciding with the closing of afternoon Sunday Schools in favour of All Age Worship in the morning service. This change led to a huge decrease in the number of children attending from non-churched families, and possibly to the attitude that children are to be kept busy while 'real church' happens in the adult service.³⁵

9. Churches attract only certain kinds of children

In many countries the church is predominantly middle class. With some notable exceptions the church does not attract the less academic children or the poor. Neither does it attract those from wealthy families.

10. Social factors

- The changing face of Sunday. Sunday is a crowded day for children in many societies, with sports, community events, shopping or visiting relatives. Where divorce means that children live with only one parent, Sunday is often the day to be with the absent parent.
- Mobility: church families who move to a new community or are displaced by such things as natural disaster, poverty or political unrest, often fail to begin attending church in the new area.

(10) ACTION PLAN: Reversing the flow so that children are kept in the church:

If we are to keep the next generation of children, we must urgently rethink church practice.

The work of the church is to minister to the spiritual needs of all those people with whom they come into contact. Therefore the ministry of the local church should not only be directed to adults, but to the whole community (almost 1/3 of which are children). It is vitally important that pastors and leaders demonstrate that children are members of the church family, equally important as adults. Children may not make much financial contribution to the church, but they can make significant spiritual contributions to it now, as well as being those who will ensure its continuance in the future.

(a) Make church attractive

- Invite children to plan services
- Allow children to actively participate in worship: through music; discussion, prayer, testimony, even preaching
- Organise the sorts of activities to which children can feel comfortable to invite their friends
- Provide opportunities for children to express their faith through acts of service.

(b) Have a clear, agreed vision for children's work as an integral part of the whole church

- Ensure that activities for children are focussed on the child's needs rather than being designed to satisfy adults
- Plan so that there is a balance between fun and relevant biblical teaching. Better still, make fun activities relevant.

(c) Encourage parents to take responsibility

- Implement ideas in Section E so that parents are helped in their role as the children's faith developers
- Keep in contact with families who stop coming to church and encourage the children to continue coming to children's activities.

³⁵ Rachel Coupe, 'The 'Fifties Freefall' in Quadrant, (London Christian Research, May 2004),1.

(d) Fight attitudes that discourage children

- Educate the whole church that children are important and should be accepted – as they are
- Church leaders should demonstrate that children matter by regularly participating in children's programmes.

(e) Acknowledge the power of peer pressure as children reach teenage years

- As children get older, programmes need to change. Choosing a club format or a different venue or a different day may help
- Mark transition points between school stages. Recognise the magnitude of changes which are occurring in the child's life and be proactive about preparing children for them
- Create an atmosphere in church that is different from school
- Help children to talk together about how to be Christians at school
- Provide models and mentors: team up young adults (or teenagers) with children.

(f) Consider the kind of teaching will help children grow spiritually

- Focus on transformation not education
- Use methods that help children to learn to think Christianly about real-life issues
- Allow time and space for God to speak
- Ensure that teachers are trained in creative, age-appropriate methods to minimise discipline issues
- Help children to discover, develop and use their spiritual gifts in the church.

(g) Treasure children's workers

- Choose and commission gifted people in the church to work with children
- Encourage children's workers towards long-term commitment, by making sure that they also have opportunities to be nurtured spiritually
- Reflect the value of teachers by allocating budget funds for their training
- Safeguard the relationships that children and children's workers develop. Building wholesome relationships with children is vital for a child's spiritual development. At the same time, take all care to ensure that all relationships are appropriate. Adhere to Child Protection laws or where none exist, create church guidelines.

(h) Take children into account when considering change

- Invite 2 children to be a part of the church's decision-making bodies.

(i) Broaden the church's mission to children to reflect the inclusiveness of Jesus

- Identify children in your community who are not being reached by the church, understand why and change programmes appropriately.

(j) Serve the community

- Consider radical changes to times and structure of church services to accommodate changes in society

- Keep in touch with children who move away and make efforts to link them up with a church in the place they move to.

‘Children believe that Church is mostly for adults unless they are included in a meaningful way.

Children believe that they have no say in what happens in the church unless they are given some ownership.

Children believe that they have nothing significant to contribute unless their input is valued and respected.

Children believe that they are always the receivers in church unless adults are open to receiving ministry from them.

Children believe that they must wait until they are older to discover their gifts and callings unless their gifts and callings are recognised and encouraged.’³⁶



Evangelization of children for the 21st century demands our best:

We can bring about a transformational shift even through the timespan of a single generation if we seriously address the challenges and opportunities that face the evangelism of *this* generation of children. May the Spirit of God move us from where we are for the sake of the one in every three people who deserve to hear: *God loved the people of this world so much that He gave his only Son that everyone who has faith in Him will have eternal life and never really die.*

³⁶ Daphne Kirk, Heirs Together (England Kevin Mayhew, 2003).

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