CHILDREN AND THE CHURCH

Jesus brings the child to a place in the middle
Acknowledgements

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Abstract

The Child Theology Movement does not exist as one authoritative teaching but is a developing inquiry, now engaging theologians and Churches in five continents. It is based in the report of Jesus placing a child in the midst recorded in Matt. 18:3. The “child in the midst” can be considered as a correction to the theological discussion of the disciples.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the relevance of the Child Theology Movement from interviews with Children’s Pastors and Ministers in selected Churches in Melbourne, Australia. The research pays due regard to the extensive writing in various theologies of the child from which this new movement has grown. The Child Theology Movement is considered as part of the evolving nature of theological thought that can have an impact on the whole church in a similar way to the impact of Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology.

The research acknowledges that reform in the church is ongoing. Ongoing Theological Reflection in relation to children is a three-way discussion between the Christian tradition, the perceptions and experiences of those involved in the ministry with children and the emerging understanding in contemporary society.

Although limitations are acknowledged in this research related to the selection of the participant group, three aspects of theory have been identified. First, the Child Theology Movement has relevance for faith formation in discipleship, in the command to “change and become like children.” Secondly, the child Theology Movement has relevance for the vision and practice of the church, placing the child “in the midst.” Thirdly, the Child Theology Movement has relevance in the acknowledgment of the spirituality of children in the act of “blessing.”

It is hoped that this thesis will add to the interest and discussion in the ideas of the Child Theology Movement leading to greater health and vitality in the Christian Church.
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**Abbreviations**

The Child Theology Movement is represented as “CTM”

In text boxes the participant number is represented with the letter “P”
A PLACE IN THE MIDDLE

“I work very hard to understand the development and dynamic of children... it’s about inclusion... we come down to them physically emotionally and slow the speed... it’s pretty bad if you don’t do this thing with children well, corporate or individual... think of the image of the millstone” (Participant 8)

Where are the children in the church?

Jesus brings the child into the middle of the disciples

– into the middle of theological discussion about the Kingdom of God.

A place in the middle means they are not forgotten or excluded.

It is a place where we look at them and consider.

It is a place of protection and nurture.

This thesis seeks to investigate the relevance of the Child Theology Movement for those in ministry with children in selected Churches in Melbourne Australia. The leaders in eight Protestant Churches who have an established ministry with children have contributed their ideas in interviews and a Focus Group. The findings show that the words of Jesus “You must change and become like children” and his action in placing the child “in the midst” have met with strong support and acceptance. These ideas from scripture are at the centre of the Child Theology Movement and it is proposed they have potential to engage the church in new discussion regarding transformation of church life.

Key words: children, church, theology, pastoral care, mission, education
INTRODUCTION

“The church, to quote St Augustine, must be ‘semper reformanda’, always reforming.”  

This thesis aims to add to the reformation discussion.

What aspects of scripture lead us into reformation?

How does the Holy Spirit lead us to relate to contemporary culture?

**What is the specific relevance of the Child Theology Movement today?**

This thesis seeks to investigate the relevance of the Child Theology Movement for those in ministry with children in selected Churches in Melbourne. The Child Theology Movement\(^2\) has arisen from the words of Jesus,\(^3\) “Except you change and become like a little child you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven,” and the associated action of Jesus placing a child “in the midst.” The child in the story is not special in any way, it is a child alone without family or religious context, without reference to special need, ability or gender. The image of Jesus with children is one of the most common depictions celebrated visually in paintings and stained glass; this thesis questions the relevance of this image in the contemporary Church. In the face of the current child abuse scandal and the falling number of children reported as attending churches, the Child Theology Movement (CTM) stirs new interest and questioning. As White states, “Jesus is our guide... his action of placing a child in our midst... is a call to all disciples... we cannot escape the challenge of Jesus... he calls us to change”.\(^4\)

In the research design the churches selected were those who employed a specialist Children’s Pastor. These Pastors came from eight Churches representing various protestant traditions: Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Churches of Christ, Christian City Church, Salvation Army and Uniting Church in Australia. It was hoped that these selected leaders would provide a fundamental, “grass roots” understanding of the place of children in the church. The Senior Ministers in these Churches were also interviewed.

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3 From Matthew 18:1-5 and similar references in Mark and Luke.
4 Keith White *Toddling forward* (Melbourne: VCCE, Compassion, CTM, 2010).
The viewpoints of the Senior Ministers were considered an extension of the views of the Children's Pastors and provide a wider perspective of care for the whole church. Using Grounded Theory, the data was collected and analysed. The individual participant checked each interview summary and the final analysed data was presented to a Focus Group for further correction, extension and interpretation.

This introduction shows the background interests of the researcher and gives a brief outline of the associated disciplines of theology, education and science. Chapter One is a literature review exploring research and writing associated with the Child Theology Movement. Chapter Two outlines the choice and implementation of the research method. Chapter Three presents the findings in terms of categories and properties emerging from the data. Chapters Four, Five and Six discuss the findings emerging from the data. The Conclusion provides a summary of findings and some of their implications for, and applications in the Christian Church.

Objectivity is the aim in all research, but it is recognised that this is never completely possible as the experience and attitudes of the researcher affect many aspects of method, data collection and analysis. To truly hear the other, personal attitudes and issues must be recognised and “bracketed out” during the data collection process. The researcher's professional background as a Clinical Counsellor and Chaplain has been of value in listening skills, with awareness of emotional transference and counter-transference issues. As in counselling, so in the research situation, objective listening has been an aim involving ongoing vigilance with professional boundaries.

From a standpoint as a Practical Theologian, this research is based in “Theological Reflection” linking three aspects of Christian life. There is the authority and wisdom of the Christian tradition, found in the person of Jesus as revealed in the scripture and church teaching. There is personal experience, endeavouring to live the Christian life in contemporary society. This is related to the third aspect of critical evaluation of the wisdom revealed through culture, current knowledge and scientific understanding, particularly in the social sciences. As a Christian who is also a Counsellor, Researcher

and Educator the process of theological reflection is an ongoing discipline of analysis and evaluation. “Theological reflections... are not the prerogative of one university faculty... they belong to the horizon of every scientific discipline.”

Theological Reflection – the wisdom of the tradition

The Child Theology Movement is part of a wider and varied ongoing Christian concern for children. It is involved in the continuing struggle of the church to hear the words of Jesus. This is a task that engages each generation of Christians; identifying meaning within metaphor, and being mindful of aspects of teaching relevant in contemporary society, compared with those teachings related to the particular historical situation of Jesus.

The records of the life of Jesus show a dual focus: focus on the being of God and focus on the needs of people. The Kingdom of God (basilea tou theou) can be translated variously as the Kingdom of Heaven, the Realm of God or God with us and us with God (Rev. 3:20). For convenience the words “Kingdom of God” will be used in this thesis to refer to this state. The Kingdom was a central aspect of Jesus’ teaching that both elevated God and gave direction for people to find fullness in life. The Kingdom of God is not physical like eating and drinking, it is a surprise, a concept of the mind that grows and enriches life like salt in the soup, light in a dark room or yeast that makes bread rise. Jesus’ many references to the Kingdom of God show it is to be sought like a precious pearl, it is to be planted like a small seed, it is close at hand and yet also a future vision for which we hope and pray. The teaching of Jesus is concerned that people should be part of the Kingdom of God. It is not an automatic state; for adults it requires intentional turning around, discipleship, reflection and prayer leading to different attitudes and behaviour. It is a complex concept both identified in the present but also a future hope yet to be fully realized.

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7 Jurgen Moltmann, Science and Wisdom (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 18.
Theological Reflection – the wisdom of personal experience of life

My personal, professional and vocational experience has led me to value the Child Theology Movement. Initially I developed skills and understanding as an Infant Teacher, and this led to a career in education. Infant teaching, secondary teaching in Religion, Ethics and Philosophy, Multi-cultural Education and Chaplaincy have all added different dimensions to understanding and appreciating the inner potential and creative life found in childhood. In family life, I have had powerful emotional challenges that have modified much of my intellectual understanding, leading to an appreciation of the connection between intimate relationships and human development. Further understanding has been gained through the experience of psychoanalysis, showing evidence of the child within each adult and the dynamic impact of early experiences of relationship. 8 Further academic study in Play Therapy and Art Therapy, have led to a career change into Clinical Counselling for children and families. In this role there has been a focus on developmental trauma and transition issues for children. The experiences gained have transformed academic knowledge and personal concern into a deeper awareness of the rich healing resources within the child. Respect for the child “made in the image of God” has been a dominant realisation in both my educational and counselling work.

In Matthew’s gospel the child receives positive recognition from Jesus. Where Jesus is recorded as calling adults to repent, the same records show him as taking children in his arms, laying his hands on them and blessing them. Many writers have suggested that children are born with qualities that are modified or lost in the competitive and often harmful process of socialisation. 9 Children have an instinctive recognition of the need for relationship, they depend on and trust parents and care-givers for their physical and emotional health. Another aspect of childhood is the delight associated with the capacity for play and creativity. Creativity is associated with the use of imagination with an open, expectant and hopeful attitude. These attitudes have been formed in my experience, and have been published in an article in the International Journal of Children’s Spirituality. 10

8 Daniel Hughes, Attachment-Focuses Family Therapy (USA: Norton, 2007).
In my pre-research experience I have used the teaching method called “Godly Play.”11 This is an open, exploratory educational process designed by Jerome Berryman and based on the educational theory of Maria Montessori. Using the basic text of the Child Theology Movement and the Godly Play method I told the story of Matthew 18:1-5 with a small group of six children (four girls and two boys ranging from 5-11 years old). Using miniature figures in a sand-tray, the story was enacted and the children were then invited to “wonder”: “I wonder if the child had a name”; “I wonder why Jesus said that”; “I wonder what Jesus meant”; “I wonder why he put the child in the middle”; “I wonder what you would think if you were that child”; “I wonder what the disciples would be thinking.”12 As part of my own reflective practice the discussion with the children was audio-recorded and then the ideas were summarised. There was a considerable amount of free discussion, but the following words and phrases of the children seem significant:

12 See Appendix One for the full story outline using the style of Godly Play.
One outstanding feature of this experience with children was the wide-ranging interest and discussion. As an adult listening to the audio recording of the discussion, I observed that when children were only loosely directed, at least 30% of the time was taken up in unusual or random discussion and activity. For example: there was discussion about the rain outside the window; when considering the possible name of the child there was discussion about relationships to children they knew with little stories about other children; some “silly” ideas and laughter; requests for more stories; playing with hands in the sand, and making tracks in the sand; discussing what made the Jesus figure look different, and why the child figure had his/her arm in the air; much sparkling eye contact and more laughter. Maybe this random association of ideas is both the delight and the frustration of being with children and researching with children. This experience with children was a pre-research activity; further involvement of children in the project was not pursued because of ethical difficulties. However the responses recorded above give some idea of the quality of thinking as children responded to the story.

**Theological Reflection – the wisdom of contemporary scientific understanding**

This is the third focus for Theological Reflection used in this research. From Freud, through Klein, to Winnicott and the present day psychology of Guntrip and Greenspan, many and various psychological schools recognise the importance of early childhood. As in the action of Jesus, psychology places the child in the centre. The capacity of the

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13 David Wulff, *Psychology of Religion Classic and Contemporary* (USA: John Wiley, 1997). Chapters 7-13 show the various perspectives of psychoanalytic thought where the experiences of the child are recognised as important for ongoing wellbeing.
child is recognised, as well as the adult’s vital responsibility to nurture and guide. Childhood is identified as the critical time, laying the foundation for adult mental and emotional health. Aspects of psychology in psychoanalysis remind us of Jesus’ words recorded in John 3:3, “You must be born again.” There are many ways of interpreting this scripture but from a psychological viewpoint it could relate to the necessity of going back to childhood in order to repair psychic damage and create new social, emotional and mental health. The discipline of psychotherapy is diverse and continues to develop and change. Some of the methods are: Gestalt, Existential, Multimodal, Rational Emotive Therapy, Play Therapy, Psychodrama and Transactional Analysis.14 All theories and methods focus on aspects of thinking, feeling and behaviour, and within each method the influence of the experiences of the child is taken seriously. These psychotherapy methods do not only relate to the physical child but also the child “within” all adults, involving deep memories that affect ongoing human attitudes and behaviour.

Education theory has also been actively engaged in recognising the inner qualities that children bring to the classroom. No longer is the child considered to be a blank slate waiting for instruction by the teacher. Rather the teacher is challenged to “create conditions that can help students learn.”15 Pedagogical methods seek to arouse interest relevant to the student’s lives, “welcoming diversity, practicing inclusivity” and “encouraging openness, thoughtfulness and moral reflection.”16 Various methods such as Godly Play show how child-centred learning has become a contemporary focus of educational wisdom.

Another example in recognising the potential of the child can be seen through social studies in the concept of the “child-friendly city.” Dr Julie Rudner from the school of social sciences at La Trobe University and Dr Judith Wilks of Southern Cross University speak of “Young Design Ambassadors.”17 These “ambassadors” are secondary school students who consult with town planners and architects in matters of urban design. The Australian Ambassador program is part of an international movement related to the

London “Open City” and “My City Too” programs. One of the most outstanding findings of the research is that young people and children have “an overwhelming desire to be involved” and a creative capacity to help make our place more liveable. The youth consultation movement is developing across Australia; in Victoria there are 33 towns who are working towards being “child-friendly.”

In many practical ways the Christian Church in the past has shown a positive influence in the protection and care of children. However, it seems at this stage of history that the Church’s voice is small, in contrast to the explosion of new understanding and concern for children being expressed within secular society. When considering the whole church, it should be recognised that the Catholic Church has its own system where contemporary education models are inked with pastoral care. This applies to one in five children who attend Catholic Schools in Australia. This research is concerned with the Protestant Church where there is much uncertainty. Some older church members have wonderful memories of the church filled with children but find the presence of modern children very difficult, so children are consigned to “back room” Sunday School, supervised by largely untrained volunteers. In some churches there are no children in others the presence of children is celebrated through a special children’s time in worship. A few larger churches run special programs but there is usually the unspoken message that children are a less important part of the Church, the church of the future but not yet, a separate community needing to be educated and helped to grow up. Mostly children are not consulted; they do not have a voice through financial power, nor a vote in the church.

Contemporary research statistics indicate the changes in society related to church attendance. Of the total Australian population 14.4% of children under the age of fifteen are reported to attend church monthly or more frequently. 10% of teenagers attend monthly or more frequently and 6% of those in the twenty-year-old age bracket attend monthly or more frequently. These figures can be compared with 30% of those aged in their seventies who attend church monthly or more frequently. The census data show

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19 Reggie Joiner, Think Orange (Colorado Springs: David C Cook, 2009); Lucy Moore, Messy Church 2 (UK: bible reding fellowship, 2008). These are two of the programs used in the larger Churches of Melbourne.
the difference in society between 2001 and 2011. Being identified as “not-religious” has become an acceptable state. In the 2011 census 500,000 more people between the ages of ten to thirty-five identified themselves as non-religious. This number of people had identified themselves as Christian in the 2001 census. In spite of many church-related schools applying pressure on families to attend the local church, this pressure does not appear to have had a great effect. Australia wide, 33% of Primary students and 40% of Secondary students attend schools identified as Christian, but these numbers do not correspond to the attendance of children in the church.20

With these thoughts in mind the message of the Child Theology Movement is taken seriously. This movement could be considered as an extension of Liberation Theology or Feminist Theology – just as these areas of theological thought provided a “new understanding of poverty and a new regard for women, so Child Theology arises at a time when there is a change in the general consciousness about children.”21

It is possible that the Child Theology Movement is a fresh challenge in theological thinking. We are confronted with questions: What does it mean to “change and become like a child”? How is this understanding translated into practice? What does the child “in the midst” mean? The child beside Jesus can act as a lens through which we look at our relationship with God, and with being part of God’s kingdom. It can challenge our community life in the church and the vision for mission. It is hoped this study will add to the dynamic of ongoing discussion in the church regarding the Child Theology Movement.

20 These statistical details have been supplied in a private conversation on 12.3 2013 by Rev Dr Philip Hughes- director of the Christian Research Association PO Box 206 Nunawading LPO, VIC. 3131. (www.cra.org.au). The figures are based on the Australian census and other Australian research findings. 21 Keith White and Haddon Willmer, An Introduction to Child Theology, ed. Marcia Bunge, Child Theology Movement (Malaysia: Child Theology Movement, 2006)., 17.
CHAPTER ONE – LITERATURE REVIEW

Aims of the chapter

This chapter will review selected texts that are connected with the research project. The first section is concerned with an outline of the Child Theology Movement. In the second, various areas of research and interest are considered that could be complementary to Child Theology. These include: theologies of childhood, education, social justice, and awareness of children’s spirituality. The third section provides a brief review of some relevant contemporary understanding of children from secular society.

Section 1: Review of literature in the area of the Child Theology Movement

“I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 18:3 NIV)

The Child Theology Movement (CTM) literature is not extensive. At this time, the primary text is *Toddling to the Kingdom* edited by John Collier.¹ This book has contributions from nine theologians and Church leaders representing consultations in five continents over a period of three or four years. The central biblical theme of CTM comes from Matthew 18:1-5 in which Jesus gives a challenging sign to the disciples; the way to enter the Kingdom of God is to become like a child. Jesus welcomes children and blesses them; he takes a small child and places the child “in the midst.”

“Child Theology is an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology – historical, biblical and systematic – in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples. The child is like a lens through which some aspects of God and his revelation can be seen more clearly. Or, if you like, the child is like a light that throws existing theology into new relief.” (Willmer, 4.)

¹ Collier. Other smaller publications are available, such as the Child Theology Series edited by Marcia Bunge, and various papers reporting on Conferences in different cultural settings. The website www.childtheology.org (accessed 4 January 2012) gives a complete listing of the various books and reports available.
The child “in the midst” is identified by the words of Jesus. This is in contrast to the disciples debating who is the greatest. White identifies this small story as a “seed” which has remained largely dormant in Scripture and now, in our age and stage of social development, is ready to burst and grow.

According to Haddon Willmer the Child Theology Movement is not one authoritative form of teaching, but rather a network of theological enquiry into the enacted parable found in Matthew 18:1-5. This enquiry began in the UK amongst a few thinkers such as Willmer and White during 2002. Willmer reminds us that Theology is the discipline of thinking and talking (logos) about, for, and with God (theos). It is always an ongoing activity and engagement for people of faith. As God is always beyond our understanding, to do theology means that the mind is open to new truth from scripture and the Holy Spirit. The method of Theological Reflection will be examined further in the chapter relating to research method, but it should be noted here that it recognises the responsibility for Christians to be involved in ongoing questioning and consideration. Theological Reflection is part of our Judeo-Christian tradition. We need to keep challenging the accepted ways and see the world in God’s light, and “to take note of much that we overlook or ignore.” It is possible that in reflecting on the significance of Jesus placing the child “in the midst” contemporary disciples can find new insight into not just our attitude towards children, but also into some new directions for the life of Christian faith.

A variety of commentaries on the central text from Matthew 18 provide a starting point for review. Keener uses a subtitle for this passage: “The greatest is the child.” He proposes that the message of Jesus is that the Kingdom of God is for those lowly in status; the Kingdom is “inversely proportional to the status of the world” and disciples must “imitate such people of low status.” The emphasis on humility and low status is echoed in the work of Wilkins who notes that there is need for the disciples to embrace

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2 Keith White, Toddling Forward (Melbourne: Victorian Council for Christian Education, Compassion, Centre for Theology & Ministry, 2010), 11.
4 From the original work by Whitehead and Whitehead. The method has been extended by Paver.
6 Craig Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 447.
“childlike humility that comes from vulnerability.” The story in Matthew 18:1-5 can be contrasted with a similar account in Mark 9:33-34. Both show the disciples’ concern for greatness in the kingdom of God, and in both Jesus takes action in bringing a child into the centre with the words “Except you change...” The action and words of Jesus are directed to the disciples. Nolland suggests that Matthew has edited Mark’s original portrayal of a negative competition for status into a positive desire for instruction. This can also be seen in the record of Luke 9: 46-48. For all of these accounts from the synoptic gospels the word chosen for the child is diminutive, meaning pre-pubescent. In the accounts of Matthew and Mark, Jesus’ words are prefaced with the word “amen.” This is an expression, favoured by both Matthew and Mark, to mean that what is coming is of particular importance. Nolland considers that the meaning of the instruction to become like a child lies in the following verse of Matt: 3:4: the disciples need to become humble. He goes on to suggest that the later Matthean account shows that the disciples have accepted this image of humility in that they come to Jesus with a question rather than continuing in the argument. Schweizer has another opinion. He does not link the words of verse 4 regarding humility as being of great importance to the meaning of Jesus’ command. Children are already “aware of their littleness.” Rather he suggests that the instruction of Jesus is more far-reaching, a challenge to live life “vividly and consciously... with childlike lack of concern... only children are flexible and open to learning new ideas.”

It is seen in the gospel records, that the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven is a major theme in the teaching of Jesus. The theme is explored in many parables, helping the disciples to envisage and seek God’s way. The Kingdom of God is found not in following strict rules, nor is it concerned with social standing. Instead it is something mysterious and dynamic, associated with many symbols such as salt, light, yeast and a tiny seed. The Matthew passage tells the disciples that the child is a sign of the Kingdom. “The only way into the Kingdom is to come down, to lower oneself... the child is seen as socially

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10 Ibid., 362.
lowly, with the servants, the child points to a way that is not easy to follow.” Buckland states the gospel passages of Jesus with the children are about both adults and children, the child is helpless “Being able to be given something” in contrast to the following story of the rich young ruler who cannot enter the kingdom because he possesses so much. In his view the child represents the one who is receptive to the newness of God. Jesus takes a child and places the child “in the midst,” with the words “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matt. 18:3) The pre-pubescent child is unremarkable; the gender is not an issue nor is the child shown in particular need or having special ability. The child “in the midst” confronts the disciples in their ambition and anxiety. They were interested in being great, but the image of the child points to a different form of discipleship: a life of being together, in freedom from consideration of great and small. It moves from comparison and competition to a place where all share in one body. It is a place of love and reception. In receiving the child, care and reception of others who have low status becomes the norm. Willmer says “the child points to a Kingdom we were meant for, a place where we long to be, but it’s a place that runs on quite different lines from what we are used to. The disciples compete to be the greatest. Jesus talks about simply entering. Just to get inside the Kingdom is enough, it doesn’t matter what position is given there.”

White considers it is very easy for the established Church to become rigid in the understanding and proclamation of the gospel message. It can become an exclusive club for the initiated, with worship and communal living unthinkingly following the old ways accepted in the past. “Freedom and elasticity of thought is essential in both theology and biblical studies.” The text of Matt. 18, as with other aspects of scripture, challenges the assumed theology inviting our understanding through the Spirit to keep growing. White views theology as multifaceted. There is a personal form of Operative Theology where an individual’s “texts for life” are seen in personal choices and priorities. This is the first part of the hermeneutic cycle, identifying current personal behaviour and attitudes related to theological thinking. Secondly, Historical Theology takes a larger view,

11 Willmer in Collier, *Toddling to the Kingdom*, 246.
13 Ibid., 30.
showing where our current theology fits within the spread of time and place. This is a major theme of the work by Jones and Plakeland, tracing the source of what we believe.15 Thirdly, Biblical Theology involves the discipline of meditation and openness to the Bible where understanding emerges from interpretation and response to scripture. Fourthly, Systematic Theology starts from knowing scripture, and then moves to discuss and synthesise themes leading to conclusions such as the nature of God, salvation, or eschatological hope. Finally Applied or Practical Theology is concerned with contemporary human action, “What it means to do things God’s way in our lives.”16 Each of these forms of Theology is addressed in an MA course of study in Child Theology at the Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary. The primary publications by White and Willmer and the collection by Collier are linked to other aspects of Child Theology and can be found on the web site (www.childtheology.org).

Collier also directs our attention to the published discussion papers from ten different areas of the world, which show the diversity of cultures and Christian traditions contributing to this new Movement. For example the report from the South Asian Child Theology Consultation involved over twenty-five representatives of churches in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Korea, Penang and the UK. The discussion topics for the three days of the consultation led to a number of pastoral letters from the participants to the wider church. An example says “To the church of South Asia from the Square Four Church, Dear brothers, sisters and children, Believing that our Lord Jesus would have children have an equal part in the church, family and society, therefore, we beseech thee by the mercies of God to bring children into ownership and meaningful participation in the life of the church, the family and society. May the Lord bless your sincere efforts.”17

The Australasian Consultation on Child Theology in 2007 considered many of the issues and pressures on the Australian child. Children were recognised as experiencing significant emotional turmoil with anxieties for the future. There was extensive discussion regarding the impact of marketing and the media, a disturbing number of children who appear disconnection from family nurture and the recognition that boys

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16 White, 6.
are more likely to feel disconnected than girls (in the US out of six medicated children five are boys). It was recognised at that time in Australia only 7% of children had contact with a church. This presents the church with “an enormous evangelistic challenge”. At the same time as an act of compassion and justice for children the report from the consultation recommended that representation be made to Government to re-establish the Minster for Children (at the Federal level) and the creation of a National Children’s Commissioner. It was recognised that our community “is paying only lip service to the place of Australian children in Australian society.”18

It can be seen from the variety of consultations that the Child Theology Movement is not an established set of doctrinal statements. It builds on previous theologies of childhood19 and awareness of children’s spirituality.20 It recognises and adds to the concern that children should be considered seriously in terms of social justice21 and the Church’s ministry practices.22 Child Theology has a radical edge, seeking to examine and reform the themes of Christian faith though the eyes of a child, consciously placing the child “in the midst.” Bunge sees this movement as an ongoing and open process and conversation.”23 It will be expressed differently in different cultures and faith traditions, being based on the Bible, associated historical traditions and contemporary research.

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20 Once again much research and serious consideration has been given to this topic such as: Rebecca Nye, Children’s Spirituality (London: Church House, 2009). Tobin Hart, The Secret Spiritual Life of Children (Makawao HI: Inner Ocean, 2003).
23 Bunge in Collier., 34.
Section 2: Literature associated with the Child Theology Movement

Theologies of Childhood

Berryman states that until recent times Christian Theology has not shown great interest in children, as scholarly debate and doctrine have largely indicated an “ambivalent, ambiguous or indifferent view.”24 In the two thousand years of Christian thinking and up to recent times, theologians were usually male and mostly celibate. In the words of Berryman, this “is inexcusable but for the particular interest concerning children it is tragic.”25 However, Berryman moderates his negative judgment, recognizing the harshness of those early times of poverty, high infant mortality, violence, oppression and disease. In his overview of history he also acknowledges that theological attitudes to children had some positive effects, for example: the Church challenged the public practice of infanticide; Cathedral schools kept education alive during the dark ages; women mystics have had influence in caring for children; and more recent theologians like Wesley and Schleiermacher had a positive vision of the importance of the faith of children. Berryman concludes his historical overview by emphasizing the current strong and growing understanding of the scriptures that portray children as a sign of God’s grace, giving a possible high view of children in theological thinking. This is a “constructivist doctrine of children as a means of grace,”26 and secondly, portrays “Children as sacraments... a kind of communication of God’s overflowing exuberance.”27 These positive images of children come from biblical ideas of pardon, mercy, approval and love, with children as a “blessing from the Lord.”

Berryman, when analysing the various theological perspectives relating to children through history, also presents his own theology of childhood. He states a foundational assumption that “children know God in their non-specific way and they need to be respected for that.”28 They have a different way of knowing than can be appreciated by adults. In his view the command in the record of John to be “born from above” or “to be born anew” (John 3:3) can be likened to the thoughts of the “second naïveté” of Paul

24 Berryman., 33.
25 Ibid., 32.
26 Ibid., 5.
27 Ibid., 251.
28 Ibid., 7.
Ricoeur.29 Whereas in the first naïveté of childhood, children take the world of experiences in a simple and literal way, in the second naïveté the adult looks again at the complexity of reality and chooses to trust and remain open to the new, rather than embracing an alternative path of rigidity or cynicism. This is a challenging choice for adults. To be like a child, as Jesus suggests, is not easy. It is walking in trust and faith and guarding against the cynical attitude so often considered sophisticated and “mature.”

Carter,30 like Berryman, regrets the theological neglect of the value of childhood in earlier patriarchal periods. She suggests that this came from a context where children were subsumed under women, who were themselves marginalised. In spite of this neglect, insights from scripture show children in many positive ways, involved in learning, as part of the prophetic concern, in covenant with God and as a blessing. She asserts that children can be valued for their special kinds of knowing that embrace intuitive understanding, emotional, aesthetic and communal awareness. “Childhood is open to everything; childhood knows no fixity, no finality, no prison house of routine, no shell of egotistical self-interest.”31 In the appendix to her book, Carter proposes a “Charter for children and Church,” a form of practical theology giving respect to children and receiving them into the fellowship of disciples.

From an examination of the Old and New Covenants, Lane identifies sin and salvation as critical aspects in the theology of the child, causing much historical debate “it seems within the church there is no settled ‘theology of childhood’.”32 The status of the child before God in Theological writing moves from one extreme to another. From the position in Romans 5:12, “All men without exception are born in union with Adam... In union with Adam all die, for in him all sinned.” He suggests that the punishment of death proves the offence, those who die must have sinned or they would not have died. This links to Augustine’s teaching “whether a man is a guilty unbeliever or an innocent believer he begets not innocent but guilty children, for he begets them from a corrupted nature.”33 On the other hand, more recent theology has placed a greater emphasis on the grace of God in Jesus Christ. As long ago as 1869, C.H. Spurgeon wrote, “I have never

29 Ibid., 22.
31 Ibid., 28.
33 Augustine cited in Lane, 47.
at any time in my life said, believed or imagined that any infant under any circumstance would be cast into hell. I have always believed in the salvation of all infants... I do not believe that on this earth there is a single professing Christian holding the damnation of infants, or if there be he must be insane or utterly ignorant of Christianity.”

Cupit is a recent voice engaged in this debate, speaking of the reference in Romans he states, “To isolate the passage’s words about sin and judgement from what follows, as many do, contradicts Paul’s teaching intent... Paul draws parallels between Adam and Jesus to demonstrate how wonderful the gift of grace is; it so outweighs the fall.”

As well as selective use of scripture, Bunge links theological neglect or abuse of children with the older cultural norms of patriarchal dominance in the early historic period. At the same time she recognises the social constraints of poverty and violent political life, life was a struggle and children could easily be overlooked. Through her biblical research, Bunge shows that scripture has broad and complex attitudes or themes relating to children. She identifies six discernible themes in scripture that show these differing attitudes. First, children are viewed as a gift from God and a source of joy. For example the Psalmist says children are a “reward” and a “heritage from the Lord” (Ps. 127:3). Secondly, children are recognised as moral agents and as being part of the sinfulness of humans. An example comes from Genesis where the human heart is considered “evil from youth” (Gen. 8:21). Thirdly, scripture speaks of children as needing instruction as developing people. Many texts could be cited, such as “train children in the right ways” (Prov. 22:6) or bringing up children “in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (Eph. 6:4) Fourthly, there is celebration because children are made in the image of God, being fully human. This is based in the Genesis account that humankind is made “in the image of God.” (Gen. 1:27) The fifth image is of children as models of faith who are used as sources or vehicles of God’s revelation. The words of Jesus “change and become like children” (Matt. 18:2-5) show this model. Finally, Bunge identifies scripture that emphasises children as orphans, strangers or neighbours needing justice and care. For example there are the commands of Exodus 22:22-24 or Deuteronomy 10:17-18. Bunge sees danger when the church retreats from this complex and diverse view of children found in scripture. Through much of history the view of

34 Spurgeon cited in Lane, 59.
35 Glenn Cupit, Children and spirituality (Bletchley: SU, 2005).
children as sinful and needing training has been dominant in the church. There is danger in an over-emphasis on the need to “train” children with heavy discipline; this is considered by Bunge to be linked to patriarchal Christianity with domestic violence and abuse. She terms this “poisonous pedagogy.”

In an age of male-dominated, academically exact, theological discussion, the voice of Karl Rahner provided a fresh theology of children. Rahner spoke of the unsurpassable value of childhood, as children possessed a “direct relationship with God.” The child possesses “spirit and body,”... “nature and grace,” and although children grow and change it is the “pure spirit of childhood” that continues to be the mark of a person of God. Rahner's work brings a strong positive message about the importance of children. Instead of childhood being viewed as a preparatory or subordinate time children have intrinsic value: “Childhood has a direct relationship with God.” As humans grow and change they are called to realise what already is and has been in the childhood relationship of openness to God. Although “historically conditioned” by the guilt and sin of humankind “the child comes fresh from the hand of God... the partner of God.” Children are examples for us as they receive and find relationship with God through trust. In this context, parenting with proper support and protection, can encourage the quest for the ultimate support and protection of God, while poor parenting can make it difficult for the growing child to appreciate the “Fatherhood” of God.

The child comes from the hand of God... the partner of God (Karl Rahner, 38.)

Religious Education through history – a brief view

From the early writings of the church fathers there is an emphasis on discipleship training and education of the young into the faith tradition. This is a continuation of the Jewish model of education involving both the faith community and the family, with influence from the Greco-Roman culture. Burgess states that the first four centuries saw

37 Ibid., 465.
38 Rahner, Ideas for a Theology of Childhood, 3.
39 Ibid., 38.
40 Ibid., 50.
41 Ibid., 36.
42 Ibid., 39.
“creative energy”\textsuperscript{43} in religious education, with a focus on content, careful selection of committed teachers and awareness of the capacity of the student. However, over time, this vitality waned as Christian belief was codified in creed and the “Our Father.” Burgess suggests this period lasted up until the Renaissance and Reformation. Bunge recognises a further difficulty in religious education during this time. As the church generally held strong teaching on the need for repentance and conversion, educating and training of children became associated with teaching methods called “poisonous pedagogy.”\textsuperscript{44} Religious education was associated with discipline and punishment, showing the religious roots of child abuse. She maintains that the teaching of “original sin” in relation to children has been an ongoing and negative theme in Christian Education. Bunge presents a strong argument against this teaching. At the same time it is recognised that this is an enormous issue of cultural concern, handled differently in different religious traditions. Thomas Groome gives a less negative assessment of education during the Middle Ages with monasteries providing a counter-cultural influence in society by providing health care, shelter for orphans, schools, books and libraries.\textsuperscript{45} Burgess also notes that during this harsh time of religious education there were notable and influential exceptions. John Gerson (1363-1429) is one example. He is recorded as saying, “Where there is no love what good is instruction, as one neither likes to listen to it, nor properly believes the word heard, nor follows the commandments. Therefore it is better to forego fake dignity and to become a child among children.”\textsuperscript{46}

As part of the changes in theology during the Reformation and the Enlightenment, education reform became widespread. Comenius (1592-1670) of the Czech Brethren proposed education for all, rich and poor, male and female, with a new emphasis on individual differences and learning by doing. He was also the first to provide illustrated texts for children. Comenius heralded the beginning of a change in attitude: “Education... without blows... as gently and pleasurably as possible.”\textsuperscript{47} John Wesley and Robert Raikes extended the idea of education for all through the Sunday School Movement. Education

\textsuperscript{43} Harold Burgess, \textit{Models of Religious Education} (Nappanee Indiana: Evangel, 2001), 42.
\textsuperscript{44} Bunge, \textit{The Child in Christian Thought}, 5.
\textsuperscript{45}Groome. \textit{Education for life}, 406.
\textsuperscript{46} Burgess, \textit{Models of Religious Education}, 49.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 60.
was for rich and poor, with awareness that children were capable of thinking and judging rather than just reflecting facts and beliefs from the Church.

Many other Christian educators could be mentioned for their contribution such as Johann Herbart, Freidrich Froebel, Johann Pestalozzi, and Sofia Cavaletti. The book by American Horace Bushnell written in 1816, has been highly influential and reprinted many times. Luther Weigle, in the introduction to a reprint version considers that the book is an educational classic with modern psychology and sociology confirming its insights. Bushnell says, “no truth is really taught by words, or interpreted by intellectual and logical methods; truth must be lived into meaning, before it can be truly known.”

Jerome Berryman has made a more recent contribution to Christian Education for children through his method called “Godly Play.” This education method is based on earlier models from Maria Montessori. Maria Montessori urged her teachers to “guard the spiritual fire”, to “follow the child”, she showed respect for the child by adapting the teaching environment so that their “true nature” could be revealed. She wrote “I stood respectfully before the children, saying to myself: ‘who are you then?’ Have I perhaps met with children who were held in Christ’s arms and to whom divine words were spoken? I will follow you to enter with you into the Kingdom of Heaven.” Berryman has taken the Montessori model and reframes the older religious instruction of children into an education method that could be considered a form of faith formation or spiritual guidance. Each Biblical story or teaching from the Christian tradition is visually displayed for the child with the invitation to “wonder” about meaning and detail. The child is respected as having the capacity to think, understand and discover meaning in the story, with the teacher as the companion. This allows and values the child’s capacity to “do” theology.

“Education without blows... as gently and pleasurably as possible.” (Comenius in Burgess, 61.)

50 Ibid., 33.
51 Berryman. 5.
Liberation theology

The developing understanding of the child in theology has been linked with the prophetic call for social justice in awareness of the poor and oppressed. Liberation theology, from its roots in Latin America, has provided a challenge to theologians who rely on academic methods rather than responding to the challenge of personal and social injustice. Many aspects of liberation theology address political inequality, hierarchical power systems and racism. This is an ongoing debate for the church that, in the name of Christ, seeks to live out the message of God’s love for all and God’s will for care and justice.

In the words of Gutierrez “The poor person is the ‘client’ of Yehwey... poverty is opposed to pride, to an attitude of self-sufficiency; on the other hand it is synonymous with faith, with abandonment and trust in the Lord... It has the same meaning as the Gospel theme of spiritual childhood. God’s communication with us is a gift of love; to receive this gift it is necessary to be poor, a spiritual child.” The discussion continues regarding material poverty and spiritual poverty, but both can be linked to lack of power experienced in childhood.

Collier uses the following words on the cover of his book:  

“As Jesus did something significant with a child in Matthew 18 – as children make up half the world’s population – as they are the most oppressed social group – and as we all are or have been children – isn’t it time that we brought this perspective to bear on our understanding of what is meant by the Kingdom of God and how we are to live it.”

Feminist Theology

Feminist theology is another strong movement from the latter part of the twentieth century, clear in its opposition to the patriarchal reading and application of scripture. As scripture is viewed through the eyes of women new insights are gained. Many, almost

52 For example the ongoing work of awareness raising and social involvement through Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM, 2001) and Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* (Augsburg: Fortress, 2010).
53 Ibid., 169
54 Collier., cover.
overlooked, references to women in scripture are recognised, showing a new dimension of the Gospel; women are part of God’s story. In a similar way the “child in the midst” encourages us to reconsider many references to children in scripture. The well-known images of both the Jewish and Christian salvation stories come to us through the nurturing love of mothers and the experiences of a helpless child. Moses the appointed leader of the Jewish people, is born into slavery under the threat of death, while the baby Jesus, proclaimed as the promised Messiah, is born in poverty in a politically oppressed state. These stories show a God who acts, but who draws humans into the action to receive and nurture the vulnerable child, the chosen leader. Feminist Theology has also given us a view of motherhood as theology in action; it is a practical theology, not celebrated in quiet reflective spaces but rather God with us, lived out in the chaos of human experience. The idea of perfection and holiness gives way to greater openness to change, which is a challenge to rigid thinking.

Children and social justice

The church has a long history of care for children. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the influence of Christianity was seen in the abolition of the practice of infanticide in early Greek and Roman culture. Health care and education for all have come from roots of Christian compassion. Pamela Couture speaks of the indivisible link between Christian love and justice. She suggests this should be affirmed in contemporary western life where there is a danger of “cultural disengagement from vulnerable children.” It is easy for busy adults and churches to miss the “cry” of poor children, or when hearing the cry, to sink into despair at the magnitude of the problem. Caring for poor children requires awareness of the need, courage to act, and in that action to work for the dignity of children, guarding against condemning them to dependence. Couture uses the examples of Dorothy Day, John Wesley and Martin Luther King Jr. to show the possibility of work for and with children as God’s work of justice and love. Day and Wesley show “engaged spirituality” as a combination of

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55 Sally McFague, Life Abundant (Minneapolis MN: Fortress, 2001), 216.
56 Bonnie Miller-McLamore, In the Midst of Chaos (United States: Jossey-Bass, 2007); Margaret Hebblethwaite, Motherhood and God (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984). These two examples of books present a strong case for the inclusion of feminine wisdom to balance the historically and overwhelmingly male perception of relationship with God found in writing from the past.
57 Jensen, Graced Vulnerability, 1.
58 Couture, Child Poverty, 41.
“contemplative practices and social action... to build the child caregiver’s strength in reliability, resilience, compassion and deep listening.”

Jensen speaks of “graced vulnerability” elevating the theological importance of the child as the poor one. Children in their vulnerability are a model of our basic humanity and show the wonder of God taking on human nature in Christ. “The baby Jesus comes into the world not to ignore the stigma of the vulnerable, but to enflesh it... Christian hope comes in a poor child, for whom there is no room in respectable quarters.” The vulnerable child is central in reminding us of our relationship of dependence on God. At the same time, the child shows us the way that God reveals love, through choosing to live in vulnerability.

Mercer writes of the need for the Church to welcome children. She sees in the gospel a socio-political “counter narrative” where hierarchies are overturned and social relationships rearranged. She takes a high view of children in the many biblical references that show their value and their ability to have a direct relationship with God. In contrast she rejects the right-wing Christian emphasis on “submission” and “sin,” where God is over the family, the husband is over the wife, and the parents are over the children. There is a challenge in her writing to look at the abuse of children in society and at practices in the Church that can be termed abusive.

The idea of justice as a recognition of the worth of God’s children is emphasised by the work of Fr Joseph Wresinski. Coming from a childhood of extreme poverty, Wresinski was called as a priest to work with the poor in France. He established the Fourth World Movement, which recognises a separate society of the poor within “wealthy” western society. There is need to recognise poverty not as a factor of capitalism (the view from the left), nor as a moral or physical failure (the view from the right), but rather as an indication of isolation from the mainstream of society. With his new view of poverty, the poor can be viewed as those related to Christ, they are the Church. In this way serving the poor is not to manipulate, educate or supervise them but to recognise in them the

59 Ibid., 45.
60 Jensen. 21.
62 Gilles Anouil, The Poor Are the Church (Mystic CT: Twenty third publication, 2002).
Lord’s face. “Grace is the love that sees others as equal and wants them to be happier.”

This work shows an attitude of respect for the poor that can be extended to relate to children.

**Awareness of Children’s Spirituality**

Alister Hardy was a zoologist, Professor of Natural history, a Darwinian and a Christian believer. In 1969 Hardy set up the Religious Experience Research Unit at Manchester College, Oxford with the purpose of making a “scientific study of the nature, function and frequency of reports of religious experience in the human species.” He collected several thousand reports of experiences in response to the question “Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or a power, whether you call it God or not, that is different from your everyday life?” The responses were divided into six distinct categories that can be seen in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Frequency of Report of Religious or Spiritual Experience in Britain for the Years 1987 and 2000</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A patterning of events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of the presence of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of prayer being answered</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of a sacred presence in nature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of the presence of the dead</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of an evil presence</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cumulative Total</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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* This includes totals for respondents to two additional questions asked in 1987 about ‘a presence not called God’ (22%) and ‘awareness that all things are One’ (5%), i.e. the total of 76% for the year 2000 is quite likely to be relatively speaking an underestimate.

Building on the earlier research of Hardy, David Hay with Rebecca Nye conducted research investigating the spirituality of children and more recently a two-year

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63 Ibid., 15.
65 Hay and Nye.
research study of spiritual awareness in adults who had no connection with a religious community. From these studies Hay and Nye have recognised spirituality as an innate human characteristic, “a common core,” with experiences of the spiritual increasing at a time when formal church attendance was decreasing. Hay and Nye have defined spirituality as “relational consciousness.” This definition identifies spirituality in four areas of living. The first is as an awareness of a relationship with our inner self, progressively understanding our abilities and deficiencies. Secondly, there is an awareness of social relationships and understanding the web of connection. Thirdly, there is an ever-developing awareness of our relationship with nature. Finally, we have an awareness of connection with the Divine Other, the sense of relationship with God.

Further evidence from research reports that experiences of spirituality are more common in childhood. One study by Kaveri Tamminen of 1,300 children aged seven to twenty showed this difference. While the overall reports of knowing the presence of God were 76% for the whole age range, the reports of the “nearness of God” at age sixteen were one third of the number reported at age seven. Hay continues with the statement that European adults have a “very extreme form of scepticism” linked to the rise of individualism and materialism. He asserts that children have not yet learned this scepticism and remain more spiritual.

There are many definitions of spirituality. Some definitions are secular, linked to feelings or related to understandings from Eastern religions, but in the English speaking countries spiritual experiences are more usually linked to the Christian heritage. Hay’s research with adults not connected to a religious tradition showed 50% of participants interpreted their spiritual experience with Christian ideas. In the multi-cultural, multi-faith setting of Australia, the definition of spirituality as “relational consciousness” was chosen as appropriate for the research by Mountain. This research, conducted with primary school-aged children, demonstrated wide agreement on the value of prayer.

66 Hay. 151.
67 Hay and Nye. 113.
68 Tamminen cited in Hay. 128.
69 Ibid., 190.
70 Vivienne Mountain, *Children’s Perception of Prayer* (Saarsbruken: VDM, 2005). This research involved participants from schools with different philosophical positions. Six schools were involved: one Jewish school, one Muslim school, two Christian schools (one Catholic and one Charismatic) and two schools with a secular curriculum.
Although some participants said they didn’t believe in “God” all recognised there was something “up there” that could help. All participants said prayer was valuable, a resource when life was tough, something to do when nothing else helped. It was considered that this indicated some kind of deep spiritual awareness and connection for children.

From the definition of “relational consciousness,” love and interdependence become key themes when understanding children’s spirituality. Jesus is recorded as “blessing” the children and taking them up in his arms. Jesus’ eight parabolic references to children as well as his actions in the gospel stories show this loving relationship towards children that can be related to his concern for other weak or marginalised people. “God is love” (1 John 4:16) is one of the most central Christian truths, and love necessitates living in the experiences of relationship and interdependence.

From this brief review of literature, it is recognised that the definition of spirituality is complex. From the Macquarie dictionary spirit is “the principal of conscious life, from the Latin “spiritus.” Hart identifies spirituality as “a wellspring of love and wisdom.” O’Murchu reminds us that our “spiritual story as a human species is at least 70,000 years old; by comparison, formal religions have existed for a mere 4,500 years... spirituality tends to be perceived as a sub-system or offshoot of formal religion. In practice the reality is quite different... spirituality concerns an ancient and primal search for meaning that is as old as humanity itself.” In another publication O’Murchu identifies the search for meaning as found in relationship, like the relationship of the trinity using rituals and sacred rites. “The church is, first and foremost community gathered around the exploration and articulation of a deep spiritual yearning.” Cupit remind us that “God is Spirit” and it is the church’s task to discern the spirits in all parts of life, the spirit of the age, the spirit of a group, the spirit within a movement. The

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74 2.


76 Diarmuid O’Murchu, Quantum Theology (New York: Crossroads, 1997) 89.

77 Cupit, Children and spirituality (Bletchley: SU, 2005) 16
Holy Spirit is the loving force of God. In these and other writing spirituality and religion are shown to be inter related. Many other works could be cited showing the diversity of serious Christian thinking in this area. These writers provide a most respectful vision of the child, created in God’s image, with innate deep capacity for spiritual connection.

**Section 3: Contemporary understanding of children**

This section seeks to examine some of the literature in contemporary society that recognises the innate ability of the child. Previous developmental models of understanding the child operate from a model of deficiency. The child is seen as only partially useful or important, there is an implicit denigration of the stage of childhood with the need to grow up and become a real person. Although developmental change is a vital part of life, much research has shown that the mind of the child is rich, with the capacity to adapt and actively engage with the environment. The resources of childhood are valued and appreciated. Rather than considering the time of childhood as a time of deficiency, there is recognition that childhood carries within it rich qualities of life that can, conversely, highlight the deficiencies of adult life.

**Education theory**

Education theory has taken a new positive view of the capacity of children to initiate learning. The focus is not just on the teacher being able to pour knowledge into the mind of the student but the inner capacity of the child to creatively process and organize. The old image of the child as the “Tabula Rasa” has gone, it is recognised that children have an innate drive to inquire and understand. This more respectful attitude to the learner has been shown in scientific studies to enhance learning outcomes. Where the child is placed in the middle, that is, child-centred learning, the curriculum objectives are more easily fulfilled. The concepts of Multiple Intelligences and

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79 The work of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and Fowler all share this developmental model with childhood only viewed as the preliminary stage. This can be compared with the appreciation of the richness found in children in the various literature cited in the previous section on children’s spirituality.


Emotional Intelligence\(^{82}\) similarly add to the awareness of the child's inner potential and drive. Thomas Groome speaks of education as a “positive anthropology... the ability to realize ourselves has a never-ending horizon... a journey into the divine likeness, into ‘theosis’ which literally means becoming God-like.”\(^{83}\) As children are recognised in this way the task of education becomes a challenging, carefully considered adult responsibility. These ideas link to the previous historical section on education at the beginning of the chapter.

Psychology – Neuroscience

The dramatic rise in understanding of brain development through neuro-science has added to the awareness of the rich inner resources of the child. As with language acquisition, the child is “pre-programmed” to connect with others and the environment. Many research methods are used, with neuro-imaging technology as the most recent, in demonstrating the active engagement of the child in recognising and adapting to the environment.\(^{84}\) “Attachment,” “empathy” and “love” are now used as scientific terms to explain the growth of the limbic system and development of the right hemisphere of the brain.\(^{85}\) It is not just inheritance that determines human development, genes “determine much of how neurons link up with each other, but equally important is that experience activates genes to influence this linkage process. How we treat our children changes who they are and how they develop... Nature needs nurture.”\(^{86}\)

“Attachment,” “empathy” and “love” are now used as scientific terms to explain the growth of the limbic system and development of the right hemisphere of the brain. (Music, 88.)

It is common knowledge that in the physical sense, children cannot survive without the protection and sustenance of a caregiver. However, increasingly, research is showing that the child depends on loving nurture for the development of not just the body but

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\(^{83}\) Groome; ibid.*Education for life*, 83.


\(^{85}\) Ibid., 88.

also the development of the brain in emotional and mental health. The task of bonding to a caregiver is the very start of brain development: “Babies actively elicit ‘bonding’ reactions in adults, and are primed to relate to people and faces.” Winnicott says there is no such thing as a baby alone, the baby must always be considered as in a dyadic relationship with the mother or caregivers. As well as physical care the baby needs a sense of being connected. Where the mother is attuned to the emotional states of the baby and is able to give balance and security, the brain develops in a healthy, adaptive way. Seigel and Hartzell identify John Bowlby, the English physician and psychoanalyst, as the central figure in “attachment research.” He highlighted the vital role that parents play in giving children an internal sense of wellbeing that he called a “secure base.” When a baby is distressed the feeling is broadcast to the mother. The attentive mother considers and examines what the matter can be (reverie), this leads to a response by the mother to comfort and contain the distress. This is an ongoing relationship of care and empathy, a connection between the feelings of the mother and the feelings of the baby; this is pre-verbal, right-brain to right-brain communication. On the other hand, where mothers are unavailable, depressed or distressed the attachment and security of the child is threatened. The insecurely attached child has been shown through longitudinal studies to have ongoing social and emotional difficulties. The Attachment Theory of Bowlby has had a wide influence, for example, it changed the ways in which children were treated in orphanages and hospitals. “Children in these changed institutions went from dying to thriving.” This contemporary understanding has also led to awareness of the effects of trauma and neglect on brain function and growth. Neuro-imaging can now identify parts of the brain that in these conditions “atrophy” leading to “developmental delay, as well as serious deficits in the ability to empathise, regulate emotions, manage intimacy and ordinary social interaction.” In Attachment Theory and psychotherapy for children the emphasis is on attention and listening- the child is respected and held in a central position. Jesus placed the child “in the midst”, a place of focus and protection that resonates strongly with psychological understanding.

87 Music, 26.
89 Seigel and Hartzell. Parenting from the Inside Out, 118.
90 Ibid., 118.
92 Music, Nurturing Natures, 93.
The “child in the midst” is recorded as being silent while all the disciples argue in competition about who is the greatest. As an extension of the previous point, the unconscious experiences of love and acceptance, so vital for human development, are most frequently transmitted non-verbally. Feelings, facial expression and body language are part of the inner relationship between people. These are the most primitive forms of connection and yet can often be unrecognised in “rational” contemporary life. These dynamic forms of non-verbal communication are recognised in the life of the child and in the communication found in play, music, art or poetry. This can be linked to non-verbal forms of knowing and communication recognised in many aspects of Christian worship such as symbols, rituals, architecture and music.

Creativity and play as communication

One other important aspect of childhood is the use of creativity and play. When it comes to creative play children show greater ability and freedom than adults. Sartre uses the image of freedom when defining imagination. In imagination or play the human remains in the world but is free to create that which is “unreal” outside of the world. Sartre considers imagination and creativity to be at the heart of being human, “one of the four or five great mental functions”, being able to perceive objects and to “see” beyond the objects, seeing the unreal. Imagination is a higher order of mental functioning, allowing us to be “transcendentally free.” It is associated with the use of symbol and parable that is part of religious life.

Play and the use of creative imagination are recognised as important elements for mental health development. Similarly Play Therapy and Art Therapy are used as tools to repair the mind in emotional and psychological healing. Play and imagination help children to communicate on a level often recognised as being more expressive than words.

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93 Gregg Furth, The Secret World of Drawing (USA: Inner city, 2002).
95 Greenspan.
Open to the future

The child is looking forward in hope: “I will grow,” “things will change,” “soon I will be six.” The life of hope and faith and love are at the centre of Christian thinking. Hay considers that the loss of spirituality in the adult population of western nations is related to an abandoning of this holistic and hopeful view of life. He asserts that the Enlightenment freed the mind but ignored or rejected the spiritual nature of humanness, leading to “a widespread sense of ultimate meaninglessness” with the political damage of a “loss of social cohesion.” Other writers such as Richards and Privett, Berryman and Winnicott also recognise this sense of openness to the future in hope as a special gift of childhood.

With an awareness of new thinking in the earth sciences

As well as the new understanding coming from psychology and neuro-biology there are new voices from contemporary cosmology. Much debate revolves around the move from a deterministic understanding of creation to the open nature of creation and the concept of ongoing creation. The older image of a fixed creation, which can be related to a literal interpretation of scripture, is being replaced with the concept of open evolution. This relates well to the image of the child who remains open to the new, being able to accommodate conflicting ideas and avoiding rigid thinking.

Finally, in the work of Sallie McFague we can see a link between awareness and respect for the child and the need for a new ecological model of thinking. She sees the need for wealthy Christians to challenge the individualist and materialistic worldview and to recognise that “the high consumer life style is sin.”

97 Keener. Commentary on Matthew, 18.
98 Hay. xi.
100 Marcelo Gleiser, Imperfect Creation (Melbourne: Black Ink, 2010). Moltmann. Both of these authors recognise the danger of rigid thinking.
101 Sally McFague, Life Abundant, xi.
102 Ibid., 117.
Jesus shows God’s liberating love through his living; he is counter-cultural in his welcoming of the outcasts and in healing the poor and unclean. This standing against culture led inevitably to his death. The resurrection shows God’s vindication of this lifestyle of love for the poor. McFague states that as disciples, we need to identify the poor of our day: the children, the refugee, the endangered species, the very earth and air of our planet earth. Placing the vulnerable child “in the midst” links to the theme of McFague’s work, a counter-cultural move of love for the vulnerable.

Finally, it must be stated that this review of literature relevant to the research topic is limited. Following data analysis, the discussion of the findings in chapters four, five and six, some of these areas will be considered again and supplemented with additional literature linked closely to emerging themes.

“The market ideology has become our way of life, almost a religion, telling us who we are (consumers) and what is the goal of life (making money)... the grim results of this lifestyle are becoming apparent: a widening gap between the rich and the poor as well as the unravelling of the irreplaceable life systems of the planet. Is this loving nature – or our neighbours?”

(McFague, xi.)
CHAPTER TWO – THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction
The aim of the study is to investigate the relevance of the Child Theology Movement from those in ministry with children. The literature review has outlined related research and relevant literature. This chapter describes the choice of research method and the development and implementation of the research protocol.

Choice of Research Method
The research question focuses on the relevance of the Child Theology Movement (CTM) in contemporary church settings in Melbourne. These are questions that cannot be answered with exact measurement but are rather related to the complex understanding of human experience and beliefs. The research question is the starting point in determining the method used to collect and analyse the data.¹

Epistemology – Constructivism

| Theoretical perspective – Social Science – Qualitative emphasis |
| Methodologies – Grounded Theory, Narrative Inquiry & Theological Reflection |
| Method – Individual semi-structured interviews & Focus Groups |

Table Two: Framework of research design (from Crotty²)

Crotty³ proposes that there are four aspects to consider when choosing a research method, showing a need to identify the support structures that justify the data collection method. The first area of concern is epistemology, meaning the conceptual framework of knowledge that informs the study. The theoretical or philosophical research tradition is built on this foundation. For Crotty “methodology” refers to the third area of choice regarding the selection of a recognised form of method. These three foundations lead to the final selection of method, the techniques and procedures used to

² Crotty, The Foundations of Social Research, 4
gather and analyse the data. Therefore, we will look first at the underlying understanding of how we consider what is true. We will select between a quantitative or qualitative approach to the data, choose the recognised forms of data collection and analysis to fit the topic of study and finally outline the practical details of how this research is to be carried out.

**Epistemology – Constructivist**

For this research the choice of epistemological framework can be identified as Constructivist. This stands in contrast to both the Positivist and the Subjectivist understanding of truth. The positivist viewpoint is a view of truth that can be identified “with precision and certitude.”\(^5\) Within scientific method, hard or measurable science has traditionally been viewed as coming from a positivist epistemology. As this study deals with matters of belief, interpretation and meaning, the positivist interpretation is not likely to yield fruitful data. This is consistent with current understanding that we live at a time where there is “appreciation of the multidimensional nature of reality.”\(^6\)

At the other extreme from the positivist view, subjectivist epistemology regards truth as being imposed on the object by the subject. This is a relatively new structuralist and post-modern form of thinking. When using either the positivist or subjectivist viewpoints there are different attitudes to the truth. Truth may be either discovered by the positivist or imposed by the subjectivist.\(^7\)

The constructivist understanding of truth can provide a middle ground in research methodology.\(^8\) Truth is seen neither as a separate quality to be discovered nor as some kind of mind game where the interviewer imposes her ideas of truth onto the research. The new understanding suggests that truth is co-constructed, in that both the interviewer and the participant add to the final sense of understanding. This methodology is widely used in the social sciences and complements pastoral theology where mutuality is central in community and companioning that lead to the journey to find deep meaning that can be considered as truth.\(^9\)

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\(^{5}\) Crotty, 9.
\(^{7}\) Ibid., 369.
\(^{8}\) Ibid., 369.
There is no meaning without a mind. Meaning is not discovered it is constructed. In this understanding of knowledge, it is clear that different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Thus, subject and object emerge as partners in the generation of meaning.  

Constructivist epistemology holds truth in an open manner – combining the ideas of both Researcher and Participant.

In the interview situation with members of different churches who have different roles and come from different cultural experiences and theological backgrounds, the researcher sought to collect the data objectively. However, in reality the researcher does influence the data collection through the choice of questions and the interest in finding responses that relate to the topic. Recognition of this difficulty is necessary, and in fact this “difficulty” can become an analytic asset as, the researcher identifies differences in culture, attitudes and beliefs and seeks to “bracket” these and listen fully.

Hay believes that, “our task as scientists is to strive towards an insight into the reality that presents itself to us, whilst remaining aware of our very real limitations… complete scientific objectivity is an undeniable myth.” There is need for “integrity on the part of the researcher and openness about their presuppositions” as this reciprocal relationship unfolds within the rigour of sound qualitative methodologies.

Theoretical perspective – Social Science orientation and qualitative research

Van Manen considered that Natural Science studied things and objects of nature to show how they behave and for this purpose used a quantitative form of measurement and comparison. However, Human Science or Social Science, in dealing with persons or beings of higher consciousness, demands a “higher order” of investigation, a qualitative

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10 Crotty., The Foundations of Social Research, 9.
13 Hay. 181.
method. Van Manen cited Nietzsche: “whoever is searching for the human being first must find the lantern.”\textsuperscript{15} Human beings cannot be measured simply or easily. In order to understand the complexity of the human situation there must be a different form of investigation, a different way of looking and knowing.

The researcher comes to this study as an insider, sharing to some degree the Christian perspective of the participants. At the same time it is acknowledged that the data collected is unique to each participant, embedded in personal feelings, beliefs and experiences. Kvale\textsuperscript{16} contrasts two metaphors: the researcher as a “miner” digging for “gold” (the Positivist approach) or a “traveller” walking beside and sharing with the participant (the Constructivist approach). In this study the discovery of data is viewed as complex, part of the interchange between researcher and participant. The researcher needs a sensitivity that aligns with the counselling skills of reflective listening, rather like the constraints and boundaries of a therapeutic relationship. According to Augsberger\textsuperscript{17} this pattern of relationship could be identified as “interpathic.” Whereas sympathy is the emotional response to the feelings of the other and empathy is a sharing in the feelings of another through compassionate imagination, interpathy goes one step further.

Interpathy is a decentring of the self, it is a cross-cultural awareness of the situation of the other: “In interpathic caring, the process of ‘feeling with’ and ‘thinking with’ another requires one to “enter the other’s world of assumptions, beliefs, and values and temporarily take them as one’s own. Bracketing out my own beliefs, I believe what the other believes, see what the other sees.”\textsuperscript{18} This could be compared to the researcher as a “guest” coming into the “home” or life of the participant. There is an attitude of respect and care on the part of the researcher. “A phenomenology of hospitality... runs parallel to experiences in pastoral care and chaplaincy... and leads to the acknowledgement of

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{17} Augsburger, \textit{Pastoral Counselling}, 31.
\textsuperscript{18} Augsburger, 29.
reciprocity. The host learns from the guest and can at times feel a greater indebtedness to the guest than the guest to the host.”

The attitude of interpathy is an underlying aim in the method of research.

Kvale uses the obscure drawing of the psychologist Rubin in describing the creative potential of the interview situation. As two individuals come together as fellow travellers (using interpathy) new truth is discovered between them. The shape or ideas between them come from them as they interact with respect.

**Figure One:** Obscure drawing by Rubin used by Kvale

**Methodology – Grounded Theory, Narrative Inquiry and Theological Reflection**

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory was developed jointly by Glaser and Strauss. Other researchers have used this methodology, and they show the contemporary and ongoing value and evolution of the method. These researchers affirm that the original traits of Grounded Theory are still applicable and are being used in many new areas of research. The term “grounded” is used to describe the way in which the theory arises from the ground of the data. According to Sarantakos, Grounded Theory is a form of qualitative research whose “scientific interpretation of reality resembles that of an artist.” The researcher is required to collect an abundance of rich data that is engaged and analysed in a manner that could be termed interpathic. Theory can be identified as based in, or emerging out of the data. Grounded Theory involves persistent and intentional effort and engagement on the part of the researcher, through constant checking of and

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immersion in the data. There is constant comparison of spiralling cycles of data collected into dominant patterns called categories with supporting properties. From patient, sensitive and constant comparison of the data, codes, diagrams and memos are generated that grow in complexity, density, clarity and accuracy, leading to a point where categories and properties of the data emerge until a point of “saturation” or certainty is reached.

Grounded Theory is described as a “generational methodology” by Glaser and Strauss.\textsuperscript{23} That is, the focus is on generating theory rather than testing theory. As the Child Theology Movement is a new area of interest with little research available, it was considered that Grounded Theory would be suitable for a wide collection of data and a flexible style of analysis. The resulting theory is similarly held to be open to new and further research. With post-modern awareness of the complexities of life, Kearney suggests a definition of theory as “a temporarily acceptable generalization about the influences on and consequent variations in human action.”\textsuperscript{24}

When selecting participants the “Snowball” process of sample selection suggested by Hood and Sensing,\textsuperscript{25} was influential. As well as intentionally seeking participants through church networks and the Victorian Children’s Ministry Network, often one participant would suggest the name of another Children’s Pastor whom they knew, and so the “snowball” grew. As well as having practical, time-saving value, the Snowball process was considered effective in that the researcher gained admission to the practitioner community.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative Inquiry is also part of the data collection in this study. From the work of Coles\textsuperscript{26} and Clandinin\textsuperscript{27} it is recognized that knowledge has traditionally come through the telling of stories. Over the last thirty years narrative inquiry has become a recognised method in research. Case studies using small stories give specific details of truth for individuals, “allowing wondering tentativeness and alternative views to exist

\textsuperscript{24} Kearney. *The Continuing Evolution*, 148.
\textsuperscript{25} Sensing. *Qualitative Research*, 84.
as part of the research account."\textsuperscript{28} Another dimension of reality is contained in these stories. The participants in this research were encouraged to relate stories of children from their experience. It was suggested that participants consider times when children had surprised them with some kind of fresh idea or challenge. This was related to the words of Jesus that the disciples should change and become like children, a kind of role reversal where adult disciples were to learn from children. The participants related many stories showing not only the observed event but also their own perspectives as participants. Both mythic stories and parabolic narratives were collected given that myths “may give stability to our story, but parables are agents of change and sometimes disruption.”\textsuperscript{29} The collection of stories showed the participants’ attitudes of both affirmation of their faith as well as wonder and puzzlement. The stories from the interviews were recorded and kept intact in the data.

\textbf{Theological Reflection}

Theological Reflection is a complementary method of data analysis based on, amongst others, the work of Evelyn and James Whitehead.\textsuperscript{30} Their method uses a metaphor of conversation between three elements of awareness or wisdom. First is scripture, using the wisdom of biblical scholarship and Christian history. Second, is the wisdom of experience, knowing our own ideas, feelings and insights from the faith journey. Third is culture, being able to read the signs of the times, through symbols, norms and many aspects of academic investigation. It is suggested that this is the common way in which we come to decisions about faith, not just from scriptural conviction or church teaching but using these parts of revelation in a complex interaction involving our past experience and understanding of life which is related to our accepted world view of the culture in which we live.

Theological Reflection can be summarised in the following figure which indicates a continuous and dialogical pattern:

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{29} Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, \textit{Mighty Stories: Dangerous Rituals} (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998). 12. This text provides a clear distinction between these two forms of story and considers that together they give an authentic balance between faith and ambiguity.
\textsuperscript{30} Whitehead and Whitehead.\textit{Method in Ministry}, 7.
Figure Two: Image of Theological Reflection

Paver adds to the discussion of theological reflection. The task of “living an authentic life is a continuing challenge... the enemy of understanding of experience is not ambiguity or ambivalence but certitude.” As Christian people there is danger in becoming dogmatic and rigid in our thinking patterns. Rather, the truth of scripture and tradition should continue to engage with the truth of personal experience, tested against the truth of the changing culture. The method of theological reflection is at the heart of the research project in three ways. The method invites the participants into reflection as they consider the different forms of authority for their ministry. The Child Theology Movement is inviting the Church to reflect on the scripture of Matt. 18:1-5 in relation to experience and culture. For myself, as researcher, listening to stories, there is a similar engagement in theological reflection as data is collected and analysed. The stories join with the background of pastoral and professional skills, identifying connections and meaning. “What is important in collecting anecdotes is that one develops a keen sense of the point or cogency that the anecdote carries within itself. Without this point an anecdote is nearly loose sand in the hand that disperses or gathers it.”

Method – Audio taped, semi-structured Interview and Focus Groups
Ethical clearance for this research was gained through the MCD University of Divinity. The interview protocol, letters of information and consent forms were produced under the guidelines of the Human Research Ethics Committee. A copy of the relevant information is included in Appendix Two.

Design and trial

In order to test the method a pilot project was conducted with one Children’s Pastor and one Senior Minister. A semi-structured interview protocol was designed using an open interview manner influenced by a number of researchers and my own previous experience with research interviews. An awareness of Theological Reflection introduced further issues related to the Christian role and profile of the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded. Each of the questions was related to a different aspect of work with children in the church and related to the Child Theology Movement foundation texts and writing. Taking field notes, a process outlined by Sensing assisted the researcher to have more systematic observation and objective assessment.

The pilot project led to adjustment of the questions to focus more directly on aspects of the Child Theology Movement. It was also found that the participants did not complete the preliminary background reading on the Child Theology Movement. The introduction was therefore changed to include only the foundation texts. A brief one-page description of the CTM was given to participants at the conclusion of the first interview. This description was the opening page from the CTM website (See Appendix Three).

The final interview protocol was further adjusted after the first interview, because when replaying the tape it was found that the researcher used too much time when explaining the question. The aim was to encourage the free exchange of the ideas of the participant and not have any form of strong direction from the researcher. In subsequent interviews a short summary question was used. The full version of the question was available if the participant sought clarification. The interview protocol can be seen in Appendix Two.

Selection of participants

Originally the aim was to include a wide variety of different churches with different theological and cultural expressions of faith. However, as the interviews were designed


34 Sensing. Qualitative Research, 97.
to engage with professional Children’s Pastors, a limitation was experienced as only certain churches employed specialist workers in children’s ministry. The large Catholic Church sector invests heavily in education and the spiritual and pastoral care of children, but this is largely expressed through the Catholic School system and not through the local worshipping community. So it eventuated that the participant group was drawn from the Protestant churches. Again a wide selection of churches was the aim as well as a wide demographic distribution of churches from which participants would be drawn. However, as the researcher sought to achieve this aim there was difficulty in finding this variety. The eventual participant group was drawn mostly from churches that could be described as ‘evangelical’, and it proved much easier to find these churches with professional children’s pastors in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. In this way the participants could be considered a “purposive sample.”

Each participant was knowledgeable of the subject and had some vested interest that helped them meet the criteria for inclusion in this research. Children’s networks within churches were used to help select the sample and some participants were chosen using Snowball or Chain sampling as noted previously. The final sixteen participants were associated with eight churches: Assemblies of God, Anglican, Baptist, Christian City Church, Churches of Christ, Uniting Church in Australia and Salvation Army. One church was from the city centre, one from the northern area of Melbourne, one from the west and five from the east and south of Melbourne. Of the eight Children's Pastors, four were male and four were female all were in the age range of 25-35. Of the Senior Ministers, five were male and three were female, these participants came from an age range between 30-60. Seven other churches were considered and approached, but the leaders in these churches were not able to proceed with the interviews.

The Interview

There were various preparations made before the interview. Letters of information were sent to the participant, with subsequent emails and telephone calls to arrange appointment times. Consent forms were prepared before the interview and signed by the participant at the start of the interview. The key texts were printed and laminated, and the interview protocols (with both the whole question and the summarised form of

35 Ibid., 83.
36 Ibid., 84.
37 A summary of the Interview and Focus Group process is given in Appendix Five
the question) were printed and laminated. Finally a copy of the CTM \(^{38}\) information was given to give to the participant at the conclusion of the first interview. Audio-recording machines were tested.

The first part of each interview aimed to create a comfortable atmosphere of acceptance and respect. Appreciation was expressed to the participant for their time and willingness to take part in the study. The researcher asked about the role of the participant and interest was shown in discovering the ways in which children were encouraged and valued in the church. Time was taken to ensure that the participant was happy with the audio-recording. Comfortable seating positions were found in relation to windows and light. Reflective listening skills were used to encourage conversation and clarification of ideas. The body posture of the participant was reflected in the posture of the researcher, in order to give further encouragement and comfort.

**The Interview Protocol**

**Response to the key text**

Response to the key texts formed the first section of the interview. Participants were given the texts written on a laminated sheet and asked the questions: “I wonder what Jesus meant”; “I wonder what it means for us today as disciples”; “I wonder what it means for our church.” This section provided a strong scriptural foundation, and an appeal to the legitimacy of Christian tradition in this study.

**Is the CTM like a ‘seed’?**

The second section was related to the perception that theological ‘truth’ does change over time. The question was related to the image of a seed as used in some of the CTM writing. Could the enacted parable of Matt. 18:3 be like a seed lying dormant, ready to grow today? This idea was presented to participants for comment and exploration. Underlying this question was the awareness of constructivist epistemology. As with the Christian movements for the ordination of women, liberation theology or the stand against racism, certain aspects of the work of Christ have been “discovered” in different

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\(^{38}\) Child Theology Movement, "Vision, Mission and Values" (accessed 4th January 2012).
ages and stages of social development. There is a link between the readiness of the Church to accept a new idea and the legitimating words of Jesus.

**Stories about Children**

The third section related to the quote from Haddon Willmer[^39] where he questioned the ways in which children can affect adults. It was designed to encourage participants to talk about their relationship with children and to identify stories that celebrated the creative “unexpected possibilities” that participants had experienced with children.

**The child ‘in the midst’ in your church**

The fourth section centred on the biblical image of the child “in the midst” or in the middle. It was considered that this was a challenging idea for most churches where children have a children’s corner or a separate Sunday School room away from the adults. What does this say about a faith community when children are not part of the worshipping community? Therefore participants were encouraged to consider how this image of the child in the midst was expressed or experienced in their church. The researcher realised that the original idea of a creative depiction of this image of the child seemed a difficult task, so the creative task was not emphasised and the researcher kept the question in the concrete form: “Can you think of a time when you can see that children are in the middle of your church?”

Collecting stories relating to the participant’s interaction with children was part of the next section. This was part of the CTM focus on the child “in the midst” from whom the disciples can learn.

**Are you an advocate or prophet?**

Finally the participant was encouraged to reflect on the ways in which the CTM focus could help or encourage them to be advocates for children or a prophetic voice for children. This was both an affirmation of the importance of their role linking into the tradition of scripture and wider society. With each of the interview sessions the researcher wrote brief field notes related to the general conduct of the interview:

environment, choice of language, behaviour of the participant and personal musing regarding the content.

The process of data collection entailed the recording of an initial interview. The researcher travelled to the interview venue of the participant’s choosing; in all cases this was within the church building complex. At the conclusion of this interview the participant was given a copy of the CTM from the website (Appendix Three). In the analysis process, the first recording was played at least twice and the researcher made a summary and a partial analysis, identifying important words and phrases. The notes from this first interview were emailed to the participant very soon after the interview (usually after one or two days). The second interview took place usually one week after the first. Again the interviewer went to the participant’s church. The participant was invited to offer comments or corrections to the summary of the first interview. The participant was also invited to add other ideas and stories that could supplement the ideas from the original interview. Once again the interview was audio-taped and digitally recorded. In the analysis process these recordings were replayed at least twice by the researcher, corrections and additions were made to the original interview summary. This final collection of interview material was again emailed to the participant to provide an opportunity to correct any errors or add clarifying comments. This completed the phase of “member checking” as an additional part of the process of validity. Each stage of the interview process was kept on file and the interview recordings were transferred to digital files that were later burned to CDs.

Practical problems were encountered. As mentioned above most recordings were replayed twice and some were re-played three times because of the fast pace or quiet voice of the participant. In two cases the researcher took additional care in analysing the content of the recordings because of a perceived sense of disconnection between the views of the participant and the researcher. This involved awareness of counter transference in the interview situation with particular attention paid to using interpathy.

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40 Sensing, 221-223
41 The audio tape recorder malfunctioned during the second interview. In following interviews both the tape recorder and an iPhone memo recorder were used. Later an independent digital recorder was purchased and used. From interview number 4 both taped and digital recordings were used. Data was not lost, but some additional clarification of the material was needed in interview numbers 2 and 3.
The data from the interviews was analysed within the method of Grounded Theory discussed earlier. The collection of stories was held in a separate file and arranged according to content. These two data sources were used to identify tentative theory.

The Focus Group

Tentative theory was expressed through the identification of common categories and supporting concepts were shown as properties. These categories and properties addressing the research topic were the basis for the discussion in the Focus Groups. It was planned that there would be two groups meeting early in the new year, one group for the Ministers and a separate group for the Children’s Pastors. Some difficulties were recognised regarding the reliability of using a focus group. However, the groups were considered valuable as a form of additional member-checking following the interviews. Having two separate groups was considered important so that the participants in different roles in the church could speak freely. Once again an open attitude towards the analysed data was important. The researcher must “negotiate a space that allows for opening up and not shutting down, an open table where others can join the discussion” and at the same time facilitate an environment where all can contribute in “democratic dialogue.”

The Focus Groups were not easy to arrange. The final Focus Group had one Minister and three Children’s Pastors. However, the group time was highly interactive, with each member expressing new thoughts, questioning and considering differing viewpoints. The level of energy and enthusiasm was recorded with both audio and video equipment. The Focus Group started with coffee and chocolate biscuits and lasted for ninety minutes.

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42 Sensing. 120. This text provides valuable information for conducting a focus group but also warns that there are a variety of limitations. One of the main problems is that different personalities within the group can dominate or limit individual expression. The moderator must walk a “tight-wire” of encouraging freedom for all while keeping to the topic.
44 A Friday time suited me and the booking of the board-room at the University. There were many different reasons why a Friday was not suitable for some of the participants such as long-standing meetings or time off. Two of the participants had moved, one inter-state and one to a new parish. Eventually I found one time and date where six participants were available. This would be a mixed group with three Ministers and three Children’s Pastors. As the planned date approached one minister sent his apology as he had to conduct a funeral. On the day of the Focus Group a second minister sent apologies. She could not attend because her child was ill.
The protocol for the group was listed on a white board

- Introduction – Firstly there was an expression of thanks and members introduced themselves and spoke about their work.

- Matthew 18:1-5 – The initial question of the CTM was introduced with some of the responses from children regarding the meaning of Matthew 18:3.

- A first draft of findings had been prepared from the analysed interview data. This was printed and distributed, and as the session progressed participants were invited to circle important ideas, write additional thoughts or cross out what was not necessary. There were two main categories from the findings and each one had various parts or properties (See Appendix Four). The participants discussed aspects of each category, agreeing or disagreeing and adding various additional ideas.

- The small stories about children collected during the interviews had been written on separate slips of paper and roughly divided into three groups by the researcher. The first group of twenty-four stories was distributed among the participants. This was a general collection of stories that showed the ways in which children surprise us. Participants were asked to mark the two most outstanding stories with a star. They were also asked to mark stories they considered important for parents to hear with a “P”, and stories important for ministers to hear with an “M.” Then each one read out their favourite stories and time was given for discussion. The second group of fifteen stories had been considered by the researcher as important for parents and grandparents to hear. These were again distributed and participants marked with a star two that were considered important, and marked with a cross those considered not important. Again there was sharing and discussion. The third group of eleven stories had been considered by the researcher as important for Ministers and church leaders to hear. These were again distributed, marked and discussed.

- There was a final thank you to the participants and a blessing prayer for their work.

From the combined interview data and the additional Focus Group data the original finding in relation to categories and properties was revised. These findings, relating to the relevance of the Child Theology Movement, led back to the initial literature and into
further discussion and consequent development and expansion of the discussion chapters.

In conclusion, the choice of method for this research developed after careful consideration of the process and background to the method. The choice is based in the particular needs related to the subject under investigation. The focus on human belief and behaviour required attention to a variety of philosophical and practical aspects of method, all recognised as currently legitimate forms of research.

In the following chapter we move to the actual data, its diversity, richness and analysis.
CHAPTER THREE – FINDINGS

Investigating the relevance of the Child Theology Movement for those in ministry with children

The analysis of the interviews and the supplementary data from the Focus Group showed agreement that the Child Theology Movement (CTM) does have specific areas of relevance for the Church today. Children’s Pastors and Senior Ministers from eight Protestant churches around Melbourne took part in the research. Each one expressed interest in and support for the ideas presented from the Child Theology Movement and noted that this movement was relevant in their personal and church lives. The relevance was identified in two major categories of finding identified in the data. Each category has a number of properties. An additional third category was identified related to the theological concept of “blessing.” The method of selecting the categories and properties is outlined in Appendix Five.

Three findings were identified from the analysed data:

**Finding One:**
The Child Theology Movement has relevance for personal discipleship

**Finding Two:**
*The Child Theology Movement has positive significance for the Church*

**Finding Three:**
The blessing of children should take higher priority than the teaching of repentance

**Finding One – Category**
*The Child Theology Movement has relevance for discipleship with implications for religious education, faith formation – Catechesis*

The view was strongly expressed by all participants that the aspects of the Child Theology Movement, as presented in this research, has relevance for individual Christian life. The child placed by Jesus in the centre can express many aspects of what is needed to be a disciple. The responses of the participants is presented below, first in explanatory text and then in summary form. The responses from both the Children’s
Pastors and the Senior Ministers have been combined as there was almost complete agreement in identifying these properties. The ordering of the properties as listed, represents the level of participant agreement from the interview data. The properties at the top of this section were most often mentioned.

**Finding One – Properties**

**Relationship**

The first property was the recognition of the importance of relationship. There were scattered references to this property through all of the interviews but the property was not clearly identified until the time of the Focus Group. As one participant said, “it is like the elephant in the room”; children do speak of a relationship with God and with prayer as a natural part of their lives. Relationship with God was identified as part of the childhood experience. The sense of relationship with others was also evident, with friendship, caring and empathy recognised by nearly all of the participants. There was also the recognition that children could “get over things,” with the suggestion that they could have a greater ability to let go of hurts or insults. The emphasis on good relationships was considered a characteristic of discipleship that was seen in children.

**Open to the new**

The second recognised characteristic of children that might inform the idea of discipleship was an attitude of openness to the new. Adults were often represented in the interviews as rigid or closed, while children were willing to learn and consider new possibilities. This was associated with trust or simple faith and hope; children were eager for new things in life. All participants spoke of this property, and five participants spoke of children accepting problems such as illness while maintaining faith that God was with them.

**Openness to mystery**

Allied to the general openness of children to the new, a majority of participants identified the additional property of openness to mystery. Awe and wonder were recognised in the experiences of childhood with an awareness of God in many normal aspects of life, such as getting an award from school or fixing the TV antennae. This was
explained by some participants as openness to the working of the Holy Spirit. When children were encouraged to listen to God, some remarkable results were reported in healing and changes of behaviour. On another level there was recognition that the curiosity and questioning of children was part of the openness to the mystery of life, life that called for their attention and active engagement. This can be related to the current “inquiry” pedagogical approach utilised in primary schools. The student-centred approach utilizes the child’s curiosity in educational ideology.

**Honesty**

The fourth property disclosed in the data was the honesty and ingenuous nature of children. This could be identified and valued by adult disciples. Cynicism was recognised as a risk in discipleship, the disciple should resist the cynicism of society. Children were identified as not yet socialized into the web of cynicism. The image of the child beside Jesus is a natural picture of simple living without pretence. Participants extended their perception of the honesty of children to include speaking out with spontaneous courage. Through this behaviour children could be recognised as capable and gifted.

**Imagination and creativity**

Finally, imagination and creativity were seen as valuable parts of childhood. Once again the prayers of children were recognised as important. Children can imagine change and healing with an attitude of expectancy. The spiritual life of children was also seen in the ability to see God’s hand in the many gifts of life. Gratitude was mentioned a number of times through the interviews. Play and fun also came into this aspect of creativity in childhood. Many participants spoke of the importance of keeping fun and games in adult life and of not getting weighed down with “religiosity.”

**Prophetic remembering amongst participants**

A number of the participants, when speaking of children and the possible reasons that lay behind the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:3, remembered important aspects of their own childhood. In about half of the interviews the participants took time to reflect on their earlier life experiences. These seemed to hold special and positive memories. One Children’s Pastor spoke of a time when she was ten years old and felt really “lost.” She
had an experience that she “was significant to God” and this was a “real experience” that “changed her whole life.” This vivid experience in the past was one of the key motivating factors in her ministry and connection with children in the present. Similar stories were related that identified the impact of the Christian community in the early life of the child.

There were memories of celebration and worship that gave a sense of comfort and security. One Minister remembers an early experience of observing the dedication and sacrifice of those in the Church community. Another remembers particular teachers and activities where “kids were honoured and given a chance to grow in their faith.” One Senior Minister saw her own childhood experiences of faith in a loving Christian home as formational; she was like “wet cement” that was moulded with care. This could be contrasted with her present experience of so many people who come into church with bad childhood memories linked with another image of “cement, rock solid” where there is enormous effort needed to “chip away” and “remake the heart.”

Another common theme from participants was related to their role as parents and how their own children inspired or challenged their adult life. The questioning attitude of children was appreciated as it forced the participant into rethinking faith and theological dogma. Children are not content with words but keep pushing for the experiential reality of ‘God with us’. Some of these questions led the participant into the space of humility where answers were not available and, with the child, they could stand together, wonder and pray. “Being around kids helps me keep a child-like faith.”

Children of the participants were also helpful as a sounding board for ideas for worship or giving useful feedback after a worship service. “They tell me what is good and what is not.” “When preparing a message they help me and make sure I am communicating with them.”

**Summary of Finding One:**

*Category – The Child Theology Movement has positive relevance for personal discipleship*

It is considered from the data that this dominant and positive finding has implications for religious education, faith formation and the ongoing challenge of living as a disciple.
Properties

The following six supporting properties explain and amplify the category. The numbers associated with each property are an indication of the number of participants who identified this property. For example in number 1, 2 and 3 all participants recognised some of these properties. The final numbers on the list contained properties that were identified by the majority of participants but not by all:

1. Children recognise the centrality of relationship – friendship, acceptance of others, caring, getting over it (forgiveness), relationship with God, spiritual connection of empathy with others.
2. Children are open to the new – showing qualities of trust, humility, questioning, willingness to learn, simple faith, open-hearted accepting, readiness for life, courageous, capable.
3. Children are open to mystery – awe, wonder, presence of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, miracles, joy, insight.
4. Children are honest – natural, simple, naïve, not cynical, innocent, focused, gifted, curious, questioning.
6. Children have imagination and creativity – seeing spiritual connection, fun, and experimentation.

Finding Two:

*The Child Theology Movement has positive significance for the Church*

There was general agreement from all participants that the message of the CTM as presented in this research had relevance for the communal life of the church. As there was some difference between the responses from the Children’s Pastors and the Senior Ministers in relation to the properties for this category the two groups of findings are discussed separately. The first section represents findings reported by the Children’s Pastors; the following section represents findings reported by Senior Ministers.
**Properties recognised by the Children’s Pastors – Part A**

**An inclusive vision of the Church**

The importance of children was strongly expressed by all participants as part of the vision of the church. The inclusive and respectful relationship between all ages was considered to be a witness to the Gospel. Some expressed concern that different groups within the church did not hold this vision but most said this work of inclusion and valuing of children was an important task of leadership. Many said it needed to be an intentional part of church life as children could easily be overlooked.

**Community worship**

All participants identified worship as the communal expression of faith where children needed to be involved. In some churches there was a separate Children’s Church while in other churches children were part of the worship for part of the time, then went out to a special children’s program. Much discussion took place regarding the best way to show that children were part of worship. Some churches videoed aspects of Kids’ Church to show to the older congregation, some had interviews or some form of leadership from children in the senior church. All agreed that when children were in the worship time there was a more relaxed atmosphere. This pleased some members of the congregation but not all. Some participants recognised that older church members experienced distraction and anxiety when children are included in worship. On the other hand, many participants spoke of the ability of children to connect with and listen to God, and enter into times of silence.

In the Focus Group the subject of communal prayer was raised. This was viewed as central to the church’s work in outreach and care. Prayer by those in leadership with children was considered necessary. It was seen as an “underlying assumption” of the group, taking time to “actively depend on God.” It was also recognised as a way to “join us together”; “Prayer settles us” and helps any individual who “has come with an attitude.” It was recognised by many participants that the prayers of children were important in the life of the church. It was noted by many that children do pray and if encouraged can participate with adults in prayer. Children can take leadership in writing and delivering prayers in worship.
**Pastoral Care through the life cycle**

Pastoral care for children was another property of communal engagement. Being in close contact with the families, the Children’s Pastors spoke at length about the needs for pastoral care. Various ways were discussed where this could take place: there were life groups for children, life groups for families with children of similar ages, “prayer pals” and other forms of mentoring. Many spoke of the need to give children a “voice,” to take them seriously, to become involved in their struggles. Much discussion was involved in how to find the best ways to mark life transitions of children within the church community.

**Mission**

Mission to both children and families was a similarly strong concern. Most churches had involvement with the wider church in teaching Christian Religious Education in schools, or with the mentoring system called Kid’s Hope¹. One church sponsored a Chaplain in the local Primary School. Most churches also had programs for parenting support and education. At one larger church there was an established professional counselling service available for children and families who came from both within and outside of the church. Some of the churches had developed family “fun nights,” where worship was presented in a different context of games and activity, or eating together in a relaxed atmosphere. It seemed that many alternatives were on trial, such as worship in the park, worship on the beach, musical productions, Internet connection, publications to the local community with children’s competitions and activities, art and craft, after-school clubs and school tutoring. The sense of the church in mission to the wider community, reaching out with good news to families and children, was a repeated theme in the interviews.

**Advertising**

Advertising was one further aspect of communal church activity to support children. Churches had special children’s sections of the notice boards. Some churches used the

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¹ This is a program conducted by World Vision Australia, where volunteers are trained and supervised to be a friend to children identified as at risk. It is not a program for proselytization.
resources from “Think Orange”\(^2\) giving parents posters and fridge magnets, or ideas for family activities all related to the Sunday church teaching theme. Children also had web links to games and activities that supported the theme of church programs.

**Summary of Finding Two – Part A**

*Category – The Child Theology Movement has positive relevance for the Church’s Communal life – Recognised by the Children’s Pastors*

**Properties**

The following five supporting properties explain and amplify the category. The numbers associated with each property is an indication of the number of participants who identified this property. For example numbers 1-4 indicate that all or nearly all participants recognised some of these properties. Number 5 contained properties that were identified by the many of participants but not by all.

1. Vision of the whole church: Have fun together; relationship is the main thing; family and church working together; whole church open to the new; intentional inclusion of children.
2. Inclusive worship: child-friendly; children relaxed and engaged; listening to God; opportunity for leadership.
3. Pastoral Care: prayer pals; support; give children a voice; care for families.
4. Mission: schools ministry; parenting groups; family fun nights.
5. Advertising: notice boards; newsletter to parents; web resources.

\(^2\)Joiner. *Think Orange.*
Finding Two: The Child Theology Movement has significance for the church

Properties recognised by the Senior Ministers – Part B

Inclusive vision of the church

As with the responses from the Children’s Pastors, the Senior Ministers had a similar understanding of the importance of the child in relation to the communal life of the church. The vision for the church was expressed strongly as “child friendly,” but there were references to the reduced ability of adults being able and willing to change. The image of “the millstone” from Matthew 18: 6 was identified by one minister as a message for the church of today. All considered that placing children in a more central part of church life as difficult. Some participants expressed concern for the elderly more frail members of the community, who showed fear of children. There was considerable discussion about how to meet conflicting needs in the parish. A number of participants said it had to be an “intentional” effort in the face of many who were only concerned with their own comfort or sense of quiet personalized spirituality. One minister lamented the change in attitude from his experience as a younger person: “Today it’s all about ‘me’ not about ‘we’.” A “culture of encouragement” was expressed by another minister as the desired vision where all had enough confidence and strength to be able to reach out to others in encouragement. This was particularly related to children as they were identified as needing encouragement. For all, the vision of the church included children in the community of faith.

Community Worship

The worship of the whole church was considered by all participants to be a time of inclusion for children. This was often seen as a difficult issue, as the needs of different age groups were important. Some older, frailer church members can be genuinely concerned for safety by the presence and exuberance of children. These are issues of pastoral concern for all age groups. However, for all participants the presence and recognition of the value of children was part of worship, even if this meant only a short time in the traditional worship. All ministers expressed their own appreciation of the contribution of children in worship as they brought a fresh sense of joy, honesty and vitality to the community. Many ministers spoke of the need for different behaviour when children were included in worship. Children were small and needed to be able to
see, so seating needed adjustment. The minister also had to modify the message so that it was accessible by the young. This point was also raised in the Focus Group. It was considered a challenge to express the mysteries of God in language that all could understand. It was suggested that many sermons were above the heads of the congregation. This should be of concern not just for the sake of including children in the church but also for the many in the church who have limited general or theological education. To “keep it simple” did not mean making the message childish or silly, but rather to be aware of the listening audience and their capacity to engage with the subject. Following the example of Jesus, the use of visual representations, metaphors and stories, were considered to be an important part of preaching so all could engage.

**Pastoral Care through the life cycle**

The pastoral care aspect of church life was another area where all of the ministers expressed concern. As Jesus placed the child “in the midst” so ministers expressed many ideas about how the child should be treated in the church. There were simple practical ideas such as bending down to speak with a child, or speaking more slowly. There was the challenge to feel the feelings of the child, to be aware of a cut knee or a lost toy. Remembering the names of children was a sign of care and connection. One of the dominant comments from the ministers related to taking time to talk with children. One minister spoke of this as a need for education in the whole church. He was frustrated that so often an adult would interrupt when he was speaking with a child; this is a negative kind of dismissal of the importance of the child. Overall the ministers showed concern that children should be included in groups and “buddy” systems so that the large church could show a friendly face. Pastoral care for families was another part of pastoral care as children were not isolated but were part of families.

**Mission**

When speaking of the mission of the church the ministers identified family activities as a high priority. Parenting groups and life groups for parents were seen as ways to help and care, reaching into the wider community. Other areas of need for children were clubs and activities. Overall the ministers supported the relevance of concepts from the CTM for the church community with awareness of the many possibilities for mission. Advertising was not mentioned. Mission outside of the local church was another matter
of interest. Three ministers spoke of the interest and ability of children to find practical ways to help other children in special need.

**Summary of Finding Two**

**Category – The Child Theology Movement has relevance for the church**

**Recognised by the Senior Ministers – Part B**

**Properties**

The following four supporting properties explain and amplify the category. The numbers associated with each property is an indication of the number of participants who identified this property. For example numbers 1 and 2 indicate that all participants recognised some of these properties. Numbers 3 and 4 contained properties that were identified by the most of the participants but not by all.

1. Inclusive Vision: whole Church; ongoing learning; remember the “millstone”; intentional time; creativity; money; research and effort to include children; children can teach us; community not individuality; child friendly; culture of encouragement; ready to change.

2. Community Worship: children’s time in regular service; encourage leadership by young; use inclusive language; use imagination; be honest and real; put children in the middle so they can see; aim for joyful presence; cross generational with all included.

3. Pastoral Care through the life span: greet children by name; get down with kids (physically, emotionally and speed); take time to talk with kids; use “buddies”; take time to listen and reflect together; respect the child; family-centered.

4. Mission: parenting groups; family experience nights; “Mainly music” and play groups; “Church in the park”; magazine to the local community (with kids page); mission outside the local church.
Finding Three: The blessing of children should take higher priority than the teaching of repentance

Jesus is recorded as “blessing” children but calling adults to “repent”.

The question in the interview relating to “blessing” children arose from the expression in Bunge of “poisonous pedagogy.” This related to the excessive use of force and punishment used in earlier Christian education associated with the belief that the child was born in original sin and therefore needed harsh treatment to enable repentance. Rebecca Nye also addresses this topic and the question could be seen to relate to the CTM as a marker for the degree of respect for the child that is linked to expectations or the inner qualities of the child. Children can be seen as a blessing and as needing to be blessed, compared with the idea that children are sinful and needing to be called to repentance and conversion. This has been an ongoing discussion in the church especially for those with an evangelical emphasis.

This question was of interest and received serious consideration from all participants. For most it seemed to be a new area of inquiry but all had stories and opinions that showed both attention to scripture and recognition of the vulnerability of the child. For some participants both blessing and calling to repentance were important. Repentance was expressed as the need to educate children in how to repair relationships, damage to the relationship with God and relationship with others. The summary of Finding Three below shows the properties from both Children’s Pastors and Ministers.

Summary of Finding 3

Category – The blessing of children should take higher priority than the teaching of repentance

Properties

1. Five Children’s Pastors identified blessing as central: “Blessing shows God’s heart of love”; “Yes, calling out the good from within”; “Children need to be affirmed and encouraged”; “children rise to the expectations we have of them”; “blessing makes sense.”
2. Two Children’s Pastors identified the need for both attitudes: “Kind of double truth”; “both are needed (some children need more blessing)”; “Repentance is part of relationship with God and others.”

3. Four Senior Ministers identified blessing as most important: “Blessing is beautiful”; “blessing is a lost art”; “seeing the good inside children”; “attitude of encouragement”; “Children are vulnerable.”

4. Two Senior Ministers identified the need for both attitudes: “Everything in balance”; “Jesus blessed but we are still sinful”; “not sure about this.”

**Conclusion – stories related to the qualities of children**

As a conclusion to the findings a selection of the recorded stories are presented. Over fifty stories were related through the interviews. The researcher made a tentative selection and the Focus Group helped to sort these into significant themes. Eventually the stories were grouped according to the dominant qualities perceived by the participants related to children. The first section showed the appreciation of children’s relational ability. Relationship with God was recognized as a simple and natural thing for children by most participants. The ability of children with wider human relationships were also recounted, showing children have a natural and open manner towards others. These findings link with the research noted previously from the area of children’s spirituality.

Secondly participants recorded stories that showed that children have a real place within the church by virtue of their faith. Many participants commented on children’s ability in some form of leadership. Many others remarked about children’s seemingly natural approach to prayer.

It is suggested that these stories recounted by participants, provide further data, giving concrete examples strengthening the ideas of the participants that have been analyzed in this chapter.
The centrality of relationship

“Kids can relax about things. Some adults get stuck on stupid things, like this is my seat in church and they get angry if someone comes to sit there. A kid would never do that.”

“Children are trusting, they have fun, they don’t become religious, and they understand it’s all about relationships.”

“There is a spiritual connection that I can see - when a child is upset or struggling and I see another one coming alongside and comforting.”

“I can also sometimes see children genuinely joining in worship - not contrived of forced but a real, nature worship from the heart of the child, connecting with their creator.”

“I had one girl who was very shy and clingy – she had really bad eczema all over her face – she wouldn’t speak about anything – she was really excluded by the year level. She had no voice. She knew I was there – sometimes would hold my hand, play around me – I was like a safety zone – we can help them speak out, find their voice. It really does have an effect – just being there for them.”

“We have time for ‘God spacing’ (like Christian meditation) – children are encouraged to take time for quiet and listening to what God wants to say to them – they draw and write and it is exciting when they know that God speaks to them – this is different from just telling them.”

“One little girl had the traumatic experience of her father committing suicide – after that her mother did not come to church or bring her children to church. She said to me, “my mummy doesn’t believe in God any more, but I still do, but I won’t tell mummy that””

“Personally when a child says something to me like when I feel sad – in very simple words showing they understand what I felt and they are encouraging me. Very simple – they wouldn’t even know they are doing it – this child is connected and aware.”

“One church each week they would bring up a kid and interview him and say to the people ‘this is what your money is going to, the future.’ People want to give and need to have a vision of where the money is going.”
“One of our boys in Grade One said quite simply, with no doubt ‘God spoke to me and after tonight I don’t have to worry about my wheat allergy.’ This obviously meant I had to talk with the parents – it was a significant allergy. He tested it out with his parents’ permission. God had spoken to him, there was no doubt in his mind that God heals (I didn’t influence him, didn’t speak about it); it was quite amazing – he was convinced that God spoke with him.”

“I am noticing my RE kids and after school club – we are in an unchurched area – but children just make the links – they put together the faith ideas – the whole idea of God - they can accept the unexpected or unusual – they say ‘wow – I get that.’”

“A challenge to church members – wouldn’t you want a church where your grandchildren would fit in?”

“Children have faith
Children are disciples
Children are gifted

I think this movement is about giving children a voice – it’s exciting – it’s so true – children have so much – they are young men and women of God – they have a role that God has given them.”

“My own daughter – we didn’t go to a charismatic church, but she would get in her room or stand up near the microphone after church and say, ‘Now church we are going to pra-ay to Jesus’. She became a Christian when she was three.. My daughter was three and one day driving she said to me ‘now I know if I say sorry to you it doesn’t mean much but if I say sorry to Jesus he will help me.’ I was amazed – we pulled over so she could stop and say her prayer. It shocked me; I didn’t realize that a child could have such deep thoughts.”

“We have high expectations from our kids in leadership – there are many hours of training – identifying gifts of evangelism or creativity in music and drama. There is a strong change for young people when leadership is taken.”
“Once after going to a service, my daughter said to me, ‘that didn’t make sense’ – we started to talk together. Neither my wife nor I could understand the sense of the message either, but somehow we didn’t feel free to say it. My daughter was honest and spoke of it easily.”

“We were fiddling with the TV antennae (we wanted to watch the footy) my youngest went to the toilet and prayed – sure enough channel 7 started working. He didn’t tell me till bedtime, ‘I said a prayer mum that the TV would work.’”

“My wife had a difficult pregnancy with twins and lost one of them – she was grieving and crying. One day my little five-year-old daughter asked her, ‘If the baby has gone to be with Jesus why are you crying?’ From that time my wife told me she started to think differently.”

“Sometimes your see a kid who is really open to God – on a real spiritual journey – there is a little boy in Year Seven (I have known him since Year Four) he is different – it is hard to be specific – a level of assurance that he knows where he stands with God.”

“One little boy at a fathers and sons camp sitting round the campfire was running rings around us all adults in terms of his insights into life.”

“Sunday night we had testimonies and praise – it was slow – I was wrapping up and then a young brother and sister came up – they just did it – 300 people, big lights, up on stage – the 8 year old told how she had asked God to show her at school who wasn’t a Christian and who she should pray for, then the 11 year old said he was afraid of things and anxious. He said God told him not to be afraid, that he can do things, even get up here and talk like this. Everyone just went nuts, who could say anything in church after that – I learnt a lot from that – the reality of God’s activity – I just shut up and was challenged with my lack of faith.”

“We teach them to lead worship – we have a training time on Tuesday night – their confidence grows – they can speak out – they can be on sound or on the music team – so that they know they have a place in the body – they belong – these are the practical ways we encourage.”
CHAPTER FOUR – DISCUSSION
Change and become like a child

Research findings: The Child Theology Movement is relevant in three areas:

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Change and become like a child

To change and become like a child is a strange confronting idea. It is similar in complexity to the mystery faced by Nicodemus. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3 NIV). Nicodemus replied “How?” “Surely this cannot be?” Nicodemus, like us, is left to wonder. Within our wondering is a fundamental question: Who is the child? or What are the special qualities of the child? What aspects of childhood are being recommended to us? As a starting point the assumptions and foundational biblical images of the child need to be examined afresh.

*Biblical images of the Child*

Bunge, through a wide investigation of scripture, has identified six complex and often paradoxical representations of children in scripture. This has been more fully discussed in the literature review. Bunge identifies different themes in scripture, that she suggests need to be held in tension. Within each theme there are layers of meaning and relevance. As seen below some biblical images of the child could be termed negative, some positive leading to different forms of respect and treatment of children.
The child is shown as:

- Gift of God – Source of joy
- Sinful creature and moral agent
- Developing: needing instruction and guidance
- Fully human: made in the image of God
- Model of faith, source of revelation
- Orphans and neighbors needing justice and compassion

| Table Three: Biblical images of the child – Bunge |

Bunge suggests that where one aspect of scripture is elevated at the expense of others there is a risk of distorting the larger truth of scripture. As noted, it is her contention that the image of children as “sinful creatures,” carrying the stain of original sin has been over-emphasized, leading to a “poisonous pedagogy”, that is, harsh and strict educational requirements for children, with severe punishment. The child as gift, made “in the image of God” and “model of faith,” were not acknowledged for much of early Christian history. However, from the time of the Reformation and Enlightenment there has been change and greater understanding, resulting in educational methods that have a more respectful child-centered focus.¹

The comprehensive biblical study of childhood by John Pridmore² can be compared with the work of Bunge. He contrasts the attitude towards children in the Old Testament with the recorded references of Jesus’ interaction with children. Further to this he examines the Pauline references to children. Some of Pridmore’s identification of the differences in attitudes towards children have been collected and grouped by the researcher.

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¹ Burgess, Models of Religious Education. Burgess provides an extensive historical understanding of the movement in educational attitudes from an initial high view of children and education, through the dark ages of rote learning and severe discipline and into the more enlightened attitude that takes us to modern educational research and practice.

A brief overview of some images from the Old Testament

- The child is a “Gift of God”.
- Child sacrifice is consistently denounced.
- “Honour your father and mother.”
- The father has duty towards his children – “tell the story to your children”, teach them in all parts of everyday life (Deut. 6:7).
- Circumcision is a sign of belonging to the faith community. The male child is accepted and welcomed to be part of the chosen community.
- The child is like “new wine” or “new writing sheet” but not called righteous because he has not yet shown obedience to the Law.\(^3\)
- The “yezer hara” (evil inclination) in the child is limited or dormant.\(^4\)
- Having many children is considered a blessing from the Lord.
- The child can be a prophet – 1 Samuel 1-3.
- The child has wisdom Ps 8:2.

A brief overview of some images from the Gospels

- Jesus “takes a child in his arm” (Mark 9:33) lays hands on them, blesses them.
- To “receive the child” is linked to receiving Jesus. (Mark 10:15)
- “Child” is a “diminutive of affection” used for children and in reference to the disciples.\(^5\)
- Jesus identified himself with “these least” (Matt. 25:40) “in the kingdom”. The kingdom cannot be earned… disciples must learn the way of the child, which is to accept as a gift what is offered as a gift.”\(^6\)

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\(^3\) Ibid., 110.
\(^4\) Ibid., 107.
\(^5\) Ibid., 129.
\(^6\) Ibid., 140.
• Complementary affirmation and warning in “receiving” and “millstone.” (Matt. 18:1-14).

• Jesus’ use of Aramaic “abba” (my Father), a unique relational term.⁷

• Jesus used “the simple” or “the poor” linked to “babes.”

• Little children have their “guardian angels.”

A brief overview of some images from the Pauline letters

• “Grow up” – only be like children in relation to evil. (1 Cor. 14:20)

• “Children obey your parents.”

• Children, like wives and slaves, “Submit.”

• Image of the church as a family, image of father as head of the family, like Christ is head of the church.

• “Fathers do not provoke your children.”

• “Put off childish things.”

• Disparaging sense of immature Christians eating baby-food. (Heb. 5:11-14, Eph. 4:14)

Pridmore considers that Paul’s work in establishing church order was concerned primarily with authority structures that would not cause offense or ridicule in wider society. Children were to learn and seek for maturity, so therefore they should submit and obey. In historical form criticism the Pauline teaching can be considered as a response to the local culture and the particular needs of that patriarchal historical period. “By affirming the obedience due to parents Paul of course conforms to what throughout the ancient world was never questioned.” The “principle of subordination” is recognised by Pridmore as underlying New Testament catechetical teaching, however, this principle places subordination in the wider context of responsibility ultimately to God. These teachings of St Paul about children, emphasising submission and obedience, are in contrast to the words of Jesus. Jesus words in Matt. 18:3 indicate “respect in

⁷Ibid., 156.
which the child provides the pattern for the adult believer.” From the data collected in this thesis the words of Jesus have been accepted as carrying authority.

**Relationship is central**

This was a common finding in all of the data from participants in the research. Some examples are shown below. Children were considered to express relationship with God and are recognised to value attitudes of relationships with others.

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**Adults have built up many false ideas about God and get caught up in pretending to be better than others. Children are more honest, they want to love and be loved. They have fights but then they move on. (P4)**

**I think it comes down to trust – it's not an intellectual thing**

**children show trust – Perhaps an example might be Samuel – “Here I am Lord speak to me, tell me what to do”... a willingness to obey – It comes out of a direct relationship with God – open to God – a sensitivity to God Spirit's prompting (P10)**

**Children are, generally speaking, more open to accepting people as they are not caught up in judging – ready to make a new best friend (P5)**

**I think children have a simple acceptance of faith – they don’t doubt or question who God is – they do have questions about God, but basically they accept in faith – a simple faith. (P14)**

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Nye’s writing on the wide and various forms of research that have been carried out into children’s spirituality has been noted. Her research projects have used various methods, some with children from a faith tradition but many with children with no apparent background of faith. A key finding in all of these research projects is that spirituality is a natural and common feature in the lives of children. “Certainly no studies have highlighted a type of child who does not possess active spiritual capacities. From a Christian point of view, that makes sense, since it would be difficult to understand why

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*Ibid., 149-151.*
some people would be created without an instinctive capacity to respond to our creator.”

Nye states that this is a common feature of childhood that responds:

to the call to relate to more than ‘just me’ – i.e. to others, to God, to creation or to a deeper sense of Self. This encounter with transcendence can happen in specific experiences or moments, as well as through imaginative or reflective activity.

Another aspect of relational living is seen in early infant capacity and development. Child psychologist, Dianna Kenny considers relational ability as a key or fundamental capacity of the child given that, “even very young infants are co-creators of their relationships and learning experiences.” Development is related to age, but this is always held in tension with the quality of the social structure or the physical environment. A child has the capacity and drive to try to initiate a relationship with the immediate family but if the family or care-giver is unresponsive the child’s capacity is only partially realised. Kenny recognises four stages of relationship building as critical points of social transition. In the new born infant the child will engage in “mutual gaze interactions with primary care-givers,” then at about six weeks the baby’s smile becomes a social link. At about three months there is increased response from the baby to stimuli “provided by an attuned care-giver.” Then at four months the baby can respond with different facial expressions. Throughout her book Kenny affirms the basic finding from observation and neuro-science that “newborns are interpersonally competent.” Initially wired for relationship, children remind us of our homeland. Adult disciples learning to become like a child can reclaim, with God’s grace, an earlier stage of open receptivity to others and to the transcendent.

10 Ibid., 6.
11 Dianna Kenny, Bringing up Baby- the Psychoanalytical Infant Comes of Age (London: Karnac, 2013). 16.
12 Ibid., 246.
**Vulnerability**

David Jensen suggests that Christ’s vulnerability exemplifies our basic humanity and God’s nature of grace. Scripture, doctrine and practice can be summarised as “advocacy theology.”¹³ “The way of Christ is not a way into privilege, but into solidarity with the least, a way that opens us up to others.”¹⁴ To be vulnerable, to be like a child, is both revealed and demonstrated in the way of Jesus. In Jensen’s view it is the central theme of scripture, God reaching out in love. Human beings created in the image of God, are called to continue this pattern of living in grace, making themselves vulnerable to others. The child, made in the image of God, “invokes an ethic of care... discipleship takes flesh when we welcome a child.”¹⁵ The CTM shows the child as linked to Christ in this image of graced vulnerability. As we seek to become like a child or intentionally place a child “in the midst” of our thinking, we are following the way of Jesus in vulnerability. “God justifies the child and all marginalized, lowly, unworthy and alienated human beings: God puts them in the right.”¹⁶

**Kenosis**

The biblical concept of Jesus showing graced vulnerability is related to a further concept of kenosis,¹⁷ the divine self-emptying seen in scripture.¹⁸ “[Jesus,] being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” Kenosis is a central theme for our understanding of the person of Jesus as Son of God. However, the kenotic concept can be applied in a broader theological manner. Jesus, in coming to earth, gives up many of the divine attributes, a self-limiting that is necessary in order to express the love of God. Kenotic theology expands the image of Jesus voluntarily taking on the form of a servant into a general pattern showing God’s engagement as creator. John Polkinghorne has gathered the work of eleven theologians and scientists to consider many aspects of kenotic theology. From God’s side kenosis is seen in creation:

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¹³ *Graced Vulnerability*, xiii.

¹⁴ Ibid., 133.

¹⁵ Ibid., 128.

¹⁶ White and Willmer, 8.

¹⁷ Kenosis is a theological term recognised in both Catholic and Protestant traditions. www.newadvent.org/cathen/08617a.htm (accessed 8 May 2013).

¹⁸ Philippians 2:6, 7, NIV.
“God has placed limitations on God’s own power... The ‘space’ granted to humans by God to exercise freedom – for good or ill – is... an important component of the ‘generalized’ notion of divine kenosis.”19 In allowing freedom to humans and, it is argued, freedom in the sweep of evolutionary creation, God expresses kenosis.

As disciples, following the way of Christ, the idea of kenosis belongs to us as well. Another definition displays kenosis from the human side as a:

joyous, kind and loving attitude that is willing to give up selfish desires and to make sacrifices on behalf of others for the common good and the glory of God, doing this in a generous and creative way, avoiding the pitfalls of pride, and guided and inspired by the love of God and the gift of grace.20

Christ is the unique demonstration of “kenotic behaviour,” “suffering love” but we also are called to “kenotic community,” “self-giving and self-limiting.” This can be seen in many areas of life and it is suggested that kenosis is needed at this time of awareness of ecological distress. “In nature there is no altruism much less kenosis... So Ralston prefers to keep the term kenosis for the human capacity to ‘limit... the human aggrandizement’ for the sake of the planet- a supreme Christian task... for the next millennium.”21 The kenotic understanding and behaviour is seen when Jesus commands his disciples to become like children. To be like a child, adult disciples who are aware of their power, then act to limit that power for the sake of love.

Neil Pembroke links kenosis to the “Trinitarian dynamic.”22 This is often likened to a dance where both individuality and unity are held in tension in the being of God. Pembroke adds that this tension continues in human interaction. “The ideal of Christian fellowship is mutual commitment to self-emptying... a donation of time and energy... being fully present to the other.”23 This could be seen particularly in situations of unequal power, as in the case of the child with an adult. To be available to the other, to listen fully means some kind of self-loss. To limit the self for the sake of love for the other can affect all parts of Christian life. “Child theology challenges every Christian whether engaged in academic theology, pastoral ministry, church or mission to think

20 Ibid., 108.
21 Sarah Coakley is citing Holmes Rolston 111 in Pulkinghorne. 202.
23 Ibid., 46.
again about every aspect of life, faith and practice with the child placed by Jesus in view.”

**Implications for religious education and faith formation**

The identification and celebration of the child, presented by Jesus, is part of faith formation and ongoing religious education or spiritual direction. This relates to both, formal education in church and school settings, as well as the less formal attitudes and experiences in the home.

Jesus’ words about becoming like a child are somewhat ambiguous. The original words recorded in Matthew are followed by encouragement towards humility. This is a logical starting point but as Nolland has pointed out, children are naturally aware of their small presence and so it seems that there are other qualities that should be considered as well. If we view the story as an enacted parable there is freedom to wonder about other ways in which adult disciples can learn from children.

From the interview data participants identified many qualities that children exhibit that are relevant for adult discipleship and spiritual development:

- Children recognise the centrality of relationship: friendship; acceptance of others; caring; getting over it (forgiveness); relationship with God; spiritual connection of empathy with others.

- Children are open to the new: showing qualities of trust; humility; questioning; willingness to learn; simple faith; openhearted accepting; readiness for life; courageous, capable.

- Children are open to mystery: awe and wonder; presence of the Holy Spirit; wisdom; miracles; joy; insight.

- Children are honest: natural; simple; naïve; not cynical; innocent; focused; gifted; curious; questioning.

- Children pray: healing; empathy; trust; expectancy; gratitude.

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24 White and Willmer, 4.
• Children have imagination and creativity: seeing spiritual connection; fun; experimentation.

Through the research the experience of wondering or reflecting on the CTM passage of scripture resulted in the participants naming and discussing qualities that they consider important for discipleship. It is suggested that this same method of reflection would be a powerful tool in programs of faith formation or spiritual direction for adults. As a method of teaching, Socratic Inquiry with careful and skillful use of questioning has long been accepted as producing strong and lasting results. As the student or disciple engages with the question “What did Jesus mean by these words?” there is the possibility of intense personal engagement and theological reflection. As outlined in the literature review Theological Reflection engages the participant, grounding the thinking not just in a doctrinal statement but in a dynamic personal relationship with scripture as it relates to the experience of students coming from different cultural situations.

Adult faith formation and development can use the ideas of the CTM as a meditative practice where individuals wrestle with the deep meaning for themselves. As an illustration of the use of the CTM in adult education the researcher introduced the words of Jesus “become like a child” to a group of thirteen undergraduate and postgraduate students. The question for consideration was “How would my discipleship be different if I took the words of Jesus about becoming like a child seriously?” Here are some of the responses:

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27 Whitehead and Whitehead.
28 The students were in ministry training, and enrolled in the course entitled “The nurture and development of spirituality in children” at the MCD University of Divinity, Melbourne 2012.
The responses from these tertiary students (three male, ten female, ranging in age between 25-60) demonstrated a high level of positive engagement. There was no set or acceptable response but rather a rich variety of creative thinking. After writing their responses students shared ideas and expressed appreciation that this was an active and important aspect of the course of study.

**To be like a child is to have hope**

Becoming like a child can be related to many aspects of Christian discipleship, such as the focus on relationships, being open to the new, being open to mystery, creativity, and faith. A final thought to add to this discussion is the link between faith and imagination. Nye asserts that the

youngest children... can be more attuned towards an attitude of trust and hope. Soothing a crying baby with the “it’s alright” message, signals the trust that the carer has in a much greater, transcendent quality to life, an “ultimate alrightness” and consequently an inclination to hopefulness.

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Moltmann writes of the centrality of hope in Christian life, with hope as the “inseparable companion to faith.” The child is a sign of hope, a new start into the future, full of potential and trust. “Faith believes God to be true, hope awaits the manifestation of that truth... hope nourishes and sustains faith.”

The centrality of hope in Christian life is the emphasis in Brueggemann’s *Hopeful Imagination*. He finds a parallel between the Jews in exile and Christians living in the current consumer society. Both are in an environment that is counter to their faith tradition. The prophetic voice is like that of a poet who proposes new reality within the reality of the present, it is a counter-cultural call that keeps the believer in “transformative tension... maybe a life of equilibrium is not in touch with reality... to see God as the generator of conflict gives power to life not immobility.” For the Jewish people taken into captivity the prophet renamed the experience as “exile.” This is a term that links with the imagination in a positive way, giving hope of return. “The old, old story becomes the new, new song.” God through the prophet speaks of “newness out of nullity.” Like the dry bones metaphor, God is in the situation and there is hope for the new. Hope comes when God is recognised. For children, imagination and hope go

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32 Ibid., 122.
33 Ibid., 65.
34 Ibid., 29.
together. This is their common way of being in the world. Play and imagination are powerful tools to help children get through some of the complexity of life, helping them make sense of painful and difficult situations.

There is a temptation for many in our society to despair as the world problems seem too large and complex. In the face of global financial uncertainty, political struggle, violence and terrorism, global warming and ecological degradation many fall into depression and pessimism. Awareness of the child gives a counter-cultural corrective. The child standing beside Jesus speaks of renewed hope and faith in the God who is with us. The child with eyes of faith and wonder refreshes us, helping us to keep working with our focus on God’s Kingdom. Jesus said “become like a child.” We need the hope of a child, the imaginative way of faith.
CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION

Placing the child in the midst

“Watch yourselves... It would be better to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around the neck than to cause one of these little ones to stumble.” Luke 17:2 (NIV)

“I work very hard to understand the development and dynamic of children... it’s about inclusion... we come down to them physically emotionally and slow the speed... it’s pretty bad if you don’t do this thing with children well, corporate or individual... think of the image of the millstone.” Participant 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research findings: The Child Theology Movement is relevant in three areas:</th>
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<td>Relevance for discipleship</td>
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<td>“Change and become like a child”</td>
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<td><strong>Placing the child “in the midst”</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The blessing of children should take higher priority than the teaching of repentance.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Where are children in our church?

In the previous chapter some scriptural foundations were discussed regarding the concept of disciples becoming like children and the discussion explored how some of these ideas could be applied. This chapter examines the place of children in the church. The wisdom of scripture and the wisdom from other contemporary disciplines will inform the discussion.

Positive relationships and respect for children’s place within the church was a universal finding from participants in this study. Some views from participants introduce this:
Some of the participants added a cautionary note when considering the child “in the midst.” It was recognised that multigenerational churches or communities of faith can be stressful for the older generation. Some frail members of the church are anxious about the exuberance and physicality of children. This was considered to be an educational and pastoral issue for the whole church, where parents, grandparents and children could be helped to be responsible for each other. These thoughts are significant and are recognised. They are held in tension with the major theme of this chapter: the child should be “in the midst.”

**What is the church?**

The church is a conservative body. We have an old story to tell, we have an accepted canon of holy writing and we have established buildings and traditions that go back sometimes to the apostolic era. The financial and political power of the status quo cannot be denied. On the other hand, the church has a history of reform and protest, of
struggle and dissent. In earlier times this struggle was divisive, often with violence and bloodshed, seemingly denying the gospel message. However, in the present day there is a celebration of difference with many expressions of Christian diversity and a sense of unity. The Global Christian Forum\(^1\) is a relatively recent organisation that shows the desire for understanding amongst the major streams of the Anglican, Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Charismatic, Liberal, African Instituted and Holiness traditions. Similarly, the World Council of Churches, with its wide variety of ecumenical social justice initiatives, celebrates new practical unity. In the Australian community there are a large numbers of different styles of worship, existing peacefully side by side. This demonstrates a new spirit of mutual respect that often extends into joint community programs like the Share Appeal or the Samaritan’s Purse.

The person of the Holy Spirit in scripture teaches and leads disciples into new understanding.\(^2\) This can be demonstrated in the New Testament in the conversion story of Peter (Acts 10:9-29), where a new understanding of God’s inclusive love is realized. Peter said “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.” (Acts 10:28) The story of the early church in Acts shows the Holy Spirit giving courage and wisdom for change in the lives of many disciples. Through more recent church history the rise of new understanding in Liberation or Feminist Theology\(^3\) shows the ability of the church to change and read new truth into the scriptures. This is the understanding behind the CTM, the Spirit of Christ continues to speak, and as society and culture change the church responds. Just as society is now more aware of the needs and rights of children, the Spirit may be seen to be using scripture in a new way to stir the church to action, to review and learn new ways of framing the role and identity of the child.

Questioning, reflection and meditation in prayer have been the mark of saints and martyrs in church history. “The mystical experience sapientia experimentalis is always

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\(^1\) www.globalchristianforum.org/ (accessed 20 May 2013)

\(^2\) A concordance will give a complete listing, but these are some of the works of the Holy Spirit acknowledged in scripture: The Holy Spirit indwells the disciples, Acts 2:38; giving fruit, Rom. 8:23; and gifts, Rom. 15:13-17. The Spirit leads, Matt. 4:11, Acts 5:3; gives life, in 6:63, 2 Cor. 3:6; helps us, Rom. 8:26; intercedes for us, Rom. 8:26; reveals truth, 1 Cor. 2:10; is like a weapon, Eph. 6:17; gives power, love and a sound mind, 2 Tim. 1:7.

\(^3\) These Movements have been discussed in the literature review, and it has been shown how they link with the possible contribution of the CTM.
ethical and mystical at the same time. It is both a teaching about virtue, and a search for new experience; for only the pure in heart shall see God.”⁴ John Wesley, William Booth and Martin Luther King Jr,⁵ exemplified those who found new truth through their Christian spiritual disciplines. Their new insights were debated and then promoted by the Christian community, leading to radical changes in social attitudes and behaviour. The Child Theology Movement may be seen as presenting a similar new understanding, inviting the church to consider again specific scripture passages that can promote new thinking and action. It could be a model for discipleship and religious education, an invitation to reflect upon the character and nature of the child, thus valuing the child in church, and placing the child “in the midst.”

**How do we understand children?**

The old adage “Children should be seen and not heard” is still alive and well in the minds of many in the church. There is a strong focus on respect and teaching, children need to develop and change in order to be accepted into the adult church worshipping community. With the older age group dominant in most churches and with maturity in leadership being valued, children are often an uncomfortable and sometimes uncontrollable part of church life. Children can be appreciated as sweet or cute but this appreciation is sometimes limited and only acknowledged when they are kept at a distance.

In this current study all of the children’s pastors expressed concern that valuing and including children was not an easy part of church life. Some of the words of participants reveal this difficulty:

⁴ Moltmann. 56.
⁵ These people of faith and cultural influence have already been discussed in the literature review.
Maybe part of our problem in the church is a common social attitude that discounts the importance of children, considering their immaturity as a sign that they do not matter. In the disciplines of psychology and education high recognition has been given to various models that emphasize stage-based development, from researchers such as Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg and Fowler. Stage-based developmental study is a valid area of research and understanding, it cannot be denied, children do grow and develop. Development and milestones in development can be objectively measured and tested. However, these older models of child development carry with them an implicit message of the deficit of childhood. It is like an inverted triangle. The child starts life at the bottom pointy end. The child is immature and incapable, deficient, and slowly grows into full human maturity. It can be considered that the earlier developmental models of

(Unlike today) “I definitely believe children were important in the original culture of the disciples in the early church.” (P5)

“When you go into places like (the annual leadership gathering) you feel like a very small voice – because you work with children. I feel you are looked down on, you are not dealing with the brains of the church, you are seen to be telling simple stories” (P2)

“Some adults are so serious “do this, do this, do this” – we need to have a different way to show the kids they are loved. We need to be more relaxed in the service, if we are going to grow we need to make church interactive and fun, something that will attract and not turn them away. Not Boring!” (P1)

“In a church it depends how open you are to the child – sometimes you can become so traditional, bogged down and so strict, expecting things to happen all the same that you are not open. Children upset the order – in the upsetting, God breaks in – like God coming upsetting what we expect. We need to create that room and space for children to come and disturb us out of our comfort zone.” (P4)

“It needs intentional planning for children to be involved – a cultural change in attitude. It’s about the kingdom of God, God present in play and celebration. Not just about what suits me (the older person) in church but what is the mission and the future, a whole community vision” (P7).

6 Many developmental psychologists recognise the high degree of interaction between the environment and the child showing variables in development. For example Information Processing Theory reduces the emphasis on stage-based theories showing development as continuous (see P. Gray Psychology 6th ed
childhood have influenced general attitudes towards children, allowing many to dismiss the young child as having little importance until they grow up.

However, in recent times, the emphasis on developmental psychology has been challenged and modified by another attitude. Children are appreciated in a new way that changes the older concept of being in a position of deficit. Advances in neuroscience have shown children’s innate rich resources. There is complex readiness for growth and inner creative ability available in the child to seek connection and understanding. These qualities within the child are powerful and rich and require adults to have the gentle skills of nurture and encouragement. The attitudes of respect for the child and care in relationships are needed for growth to take place. Children are appreciated not just as receptive vessels, but as active participants or co-creators of understanding. The triangle is turned with the base at the bottom; childhood is a time of richness, with resources of social engagement, creativity, meaning-making, trust and hope.

A simple approach to understanding this change in emphasis is to identify these two different ways of understanding children as a “low view” and a “high view.” We can disregard children as of little worth or interest until they grow up (the “low view”) or we can look at children with amazement and respect and learn from them (the “high view”). The words of Jesus to “become like a child” encourage the high view of childhood. As we place children “in the midst” of church life, as we remember, consider and nurture them, we acknowledge the “high view.”

**Educating our Children**

Theologian Jerome Berryman uses both scripture and his extensive experience as a religious educator to affirm that the, “grace children so intensely reveal is the raw energy out-flowing from God that can be known by humankind.” The Godly Play method of Religious Education demonstrates Berryman’s appreciation of children as “grace,” a gift from God, made in the image of God. Godly Play involves telling the faith

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2010 New York; Worth). Nevertheless this is still a theory that emphasises development of the child from a low base.


8. Berryman. 27.
stories with visual aids and then inviting the children to wonder. No thoughts in the
wondering time are right or wrong. The teacher encourages the children to consider all,
to take their own time and reflect. This form of education could be viewed as a form of
spiritual direction for children. The children continue their wondering about the God
story through creative art work and a concluding “feast.” “The teacher reaches out... in a
way that does not impose or overwhelm the child’s initiative. The teacher’s presence
radiates respect, warmth, openness, generosity of soul, exuberance of being, curiosity,
collaboration, self-discipline, and a yearning to explore.”

This educational method demonstrates the child “in the midst,” their ideas and wonderings are valued in the
church as they explore their own relationship with God. The Inquiry Approach to
education in the secular school setting, where children are encouraged to wonder and question, has a similar rationale to the Godly Play method.

Berryman’s high view of children resonates with the appreciation of children expressed
by the older voice of the theologian Karl Rahner declaring that the “child comes from
the hand of God... the partner of God... The task of maturity is to remain a child
forever.”

He develops this further with the belief that “childhood itself has a direct
relationship with God – it is unique – it has value in itself – it is spirit and body – nature
and grace – childhood is openness.”

The relatively new and expanding appreciation of the inner spiritual life of children has
been examined in the literature review. Spirituality is recognized in relationship, a
connection with the inner self, others, the wider natural world and with the divine.
Various regular conferences such as the International Conference on Children’s
Spirituality, Australian Health and Spirituality Conference, National Godly Play
Conference, National Messy Church Conference and the Children’s Spirituality Network
all demonstrate this emerging trend in Australia. Many of these conferences have a link
with CTM. Until now the celebration of children’s spirituality has been a distinct field of
interest for some educators and psychotherapists. The growing number of conferences,
publications and study materials indicate that the appreciation of children’s spirituality
is starting to become a part of mainstream church conversations.

10 Rahner, Ideas from a Theology of Childhood, 36
11 Rahner. 39.
The CTM links closely with the “high views” of childhood expressed in this section. As Jesus places the child “in the midst,” and directs the disciples to become like children, there is the challenge to let go of our superior, so-called mature attitudes towards children. We appreciate their richness, their giftedness, creativity and the capacity to connect and learn. For the church, as in other areas of society, the child is to be re-examined and truly recognized and valued.

**Caring for the hurt Child**

Valuing the child, listening and nurturing their giftedness, have other important and measurable outcomes. For children who have been damaged by neglect or trauma, play therapy and art therapy are used for the repair of emotional, psychological and social life. In these therapeutic methods the therapist has a “philosophy, a way of being with children rather than a way of doing something to or for children.” This is an attitude of relational respect.\(^\text{12}\) While the child is in these therapy situations, neuro-science testing can detect changes in brain function.

> When children lead the play and we follow well, they feel valued and powerful and their brains respond by releasing opioids, which are neurochemicals supporting well-being and connection. When these cascade through the brain, stress chemicals return to normal levels, and the tendency towards aggression recedes and the children are free to engage.”\(^\text{13}\)

In our society where there is growing concern for the rise in both aggression and anxiety amongst children, the research of neuro-biology must be taken seriously. Similarly in the church, which is concerned with human welfare and flourishing, the new science and psychological insight are voices that cannot be ignored.

The newer psychological understanding, recognizing the inner richness of children, has been examined through the literature review. Attachment theory and the understanding of Mirror Neurons are now seen as central to the emotional growth of the child, linked to the social development of empathy and trust. These in turn allow the brain to develop cognitively. The appalling state of children rescued from Romanian orphanages gave the world a graphic illustration of the need for attachment. Although the children were fed and cared for physically, there was little human contact or connection. These severely

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\(^{12}\) Landreth. *Play Therapy*, 60.  
neglected children did not achieve language or relational skills. For those who died, autopsies showed that “some sections of the brain had atrophied and the brain mass was much smaller than the norm.”

Graham Music, a leading child psychoanalyst associated with the Tavistock Centre in the UK claims that "attachment," "empathy" and "love" are now used as scientific terms to explain the growth of the limbic system and development of the right hemisphere of the brain.

Seigel and Hartzell add that it “is not just inheritance that determines human development. Genes determine much of how neurons link up with each other, but equally important is that experience activates genes to influence this linkage process. How we treat our children changes who they are and how they develop... Nature needs nurture.”

In addressing childhood trauma, leading researchers and clinicians Perry and Szalavitz conclude that humans “are inescapably social beings... Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.”

Therefore it can be said that an understanding of children, that appreciates their giftedness and value, is a recognised finding of the research that can be linked with the ideas from the CTM for the church today.

**Experiences of the child “in the midst.”**

The participants had difficulty finding many examples where children were in the centre of the worshipping community. One participant identified Christmas as the main time when a child was the centre of attention in the church. Other participants identified times of baptism or confirmation. Four of the participating churches had occasional youth-led services, while another two had special family fun nights where worship was mixed with games and activities. Three participants reported that some of

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15 Ibid., 88.
16 Seigel and Hartzell. *Parenting From the Inside Out*, 34.
the activities in “children’s church” were video recorded and played in the adult worship time to give the adults a sense of connection.

Overall there was concern to involve children in the worship life of the church, but the physical presence of children seemed difficult. The necessity for adults to hear the sermon seemed a major problem. Intergenerational worship is a discussion point in many churches but is not commanding great or general interest.

A recent publication by Catterton Allen and Lawton Ross\(^\text{18}\) is a comprehensive argument for the place of children “in the midst” of the worshipping community. They suggest that segregation of age groups has only taken place in the church since the late twentieth century. This has come through shifting core values in the general culture related to age segregation and a dramatic rise in individualism. Other factors have added to this trend such as the Church Growth programs of the 1970s stressing the Homogeneous Unit Principle and the developmental models in psychology.\(^\text{19}\) Now they suggest that the practice of segregation should end. A definition of intergenerational Christian formation in a congregation is “intentionally bringing the generations together in mutually serving, sharing or learning within the core activities in the church in order to live out being the body of Christ.”\(^\text{20}\) The text argues for intergenerational church practices using a biblical and theoretical framework. Within the work of Catterton Allen and Lawton Ross reference is made to additional research from the social sciences that is related to the wellbeing of children. The Commission for Children at Risk in the United States has identified social connectedness as a chief facilitator of mental health for children. Being part of an “authoritative community”\(^\text{21}\) is presented as a basic need for children’s health and development. The list in Table Four shows the various ways in which the needs of children are met through belonging to a respectful community. This secular research shows a striking parallel with a church which places the child “in the midst”. It complements many of the aspects of the CTM. The report from the Commission delineates ten basic characteristics of an authoritative community.


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 127.
1. It is a social institution that includes children and youth.
2. It treats children as ends in themselves.
3. It is warm and nurturing.
4. It establishes clear limits and expectations.
5. The core of its work is performed largely by non-specialists.
6. It is multigenerational.
7. It has a long-term focus.
8. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
9. It encourages spiritual and religious development.
10. It is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principles of love of neighbour.

**Table Four:** “Authoritative Communities” from Commission for Children at Risk

In the present study all of the participants had stories supporting the input of children in the church, such as:

We can make them ‘practice leaders’, it’s like learning Basket Ball- you need to know the game rules and objectives, but you can’t leave children ‘on the benches’ they need to be ‘on the court’ playing (Focus Group)

“I do believe there is so much more that we can do-not just teach our kids but give them opportunity in the church to live out their faith- we have a group of children who pray, an intercessory prayer group- we give them all a chance to be part of it – we are open to children – Children can live out their faith praying for each other.” (P15)

“I hesitate to use the word testimony but children do share wonderful stories of how God has helped them or in their families – there is time for this discussion in small group time – each Sunday we have chill-out relaxed time then some worship and teaching time then small group with activities” (P13)
**Implications for Church leadership and Ministry Formation**

As we seek to place children “in the midst” there is a need to attend to the formal leadership practices of the church. Ministry or leadership formation is based on identification of calling, reflection and ministry experience. Just as in individual decision-making, the words of Jesus are taken seriously and used in theological reflection, so also in the local church setting and at the next level in the wider calling to church leadership. The university level of thinking, reflection and learning are part of a continuum, but unfortunately, as the administration group becomes more academically oriented within a set tradition, patterns become fixed and there is danger of losing touch with new issues and possibilities. Myers speaks of the need to bridge the seeming divide between "thought and practice, biblical academics and popular Bible study, religion and the rest of life, and the past as ‘dead history’ and the present as ‘real life’."\(^{22}\)

In Australian society where this research was conducted there is an awareness of the differences in Christian traditions in relation to the amount of effort, time and resources placed into work with children. Although the researcher wanted to include a variety of theological viewpoints, such as liberal, progressive and evangelical, the reality was that the churches which employed children’s pastors came largely from an evangelical outlook. This was identified in many expressions of faith, such as a focus on the authority of scripture, the use of prayer and an expectant attitude towards healing and miracles.

Burgess defines three current and different strands of faith expression in the Christian Church today. There is “Mainline”, with ecumenical and inter-faith awareness. “Evangelical”, with more emphasis on the early church model of the supernatural. Finally the “Social Science” model with a greater focus on social behaviour.\(^{23}\) He posits a probable growing division between the different expressions of Christian faith. This is a matter for further discussion. The emergence of the Global Christian Forum possibly provides a different assessment, a far more positive outlook, that different expressions of faith and tradition can be mutually respectful and supportive.

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\(^{22}\) Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man - a Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll New York: Orbis Books, 2002). xxv.

It is the opinion of the author that, as in the case of the child sexual abuse scandal, all Christians are affected when one part of the church is shown to be in error. One individual tradition does not have the luxury of feeling superior that their understanding and practice of the gospel is more true or sophisticated or enlightened than that of another church tradition. It is proposed that theological education and leadership training should embrace many viewpoints and have respect for other forms of the Christian tradition and experience. In the words of Matthew Fox, when there is a dialectical attitude of inclusion of many attitudes in theology there is a hopeful and universal sense of the creative energy of God. The words of one participant express this well:

“Kids can relax about things. Some adults get stuck on stupid things like this is my seat in the church and they get angry if someone comes in and sits there. A kid would never do that.” (P1)

Maybe in theological colleges we are stuck trying to defend our own seat, rather than seeing that there is room for all. This argues for an inclusive, open, humble, learning environment, resonating with the qualities of the child. An open attitude to new ideas and learning was one of the qualities of the child identified and valued by nearly all of the participants in this research.

The Child Theology Movement’s valuing of children and placing children “in the midst” can bring new focus that could help to break down some of the doctrinal differences between churches. Theological Education and Ministry Training are crucial times of openness to the new, giving opportunity to question, reflect, pray and listen to the Holy Spirit for future wisdom. Openness to a new future in theological education is an area of Christian life where the ideas of the CTM can be considered. Holding a child “in the midst” of theological training and ministry education would mean that there would be greater caution relating to the abuse and marginalisation of children. It is possible that the vulnerable child would act to ground theological thinking, linking orthodoxy to orthopraxis.

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CHAPTER SIX DISCUSSION – Blessing the children

“The blessing just shows God’s heart for children, he already sees what is there, he blesses them and wants to bring the good out – helping them to grow stronger and deeper – growing into love.” Participant 13

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research findings: The Child Theology Movement is relevant in three areas:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relevance for discipleship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance for the Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The blessing of children should take higher priority than the teaching of repentance</strong>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We have discussed understanding from scripture relating to the value of the child and then to the positive possibilities of including the child in the midst of church life. The third section of discussion relates to Jesus blessing the children. This was not part of the original research focus but has been strongly endorsed by the participants as central to the spirit of the CTM.

Nye in considering the work of Berryman states that:

> Children’s spiritual status calls for blessing rather than judgment or adjustment… Blessing, ‘benediction’, literally means ‘to call out the good’. So our approach needs to be sensitive to calling out the good that is really there, rather than what we’d like to project onto children. To call out what is ‘really there’, however, requires more than theory or theology about childhood; it needs a close relationship with children as unique individuals. This demands practical theology at its most practical.”

Nye writes of the need for the church to develop spiritual practices that nurture children’s spirituality. These include adults getting in touch with their own childhood experiences of the spiritual and the use of six qualities of faith contained in an acronym **S. P. I. R. I. T.** Space is needed, not just physical but emotional and auditory space for the child. **Process** refers to the ongoing commitment to spiritual growth, rather than viewing spiritual growth as a task to be accomplished. **Imagination** and creativity need to be accepted and valued in the adult/child interaction. **Relationship** qualities of

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respect and encouragement are needed. Intimacy suggests we need opportunities to delve deeper, come closer or allow risk-taking passion. Trust is the final quality, not focused on empirical evidence, but open to different ways of knowing or not knowing. In the writing of Nye the idea of blessing was tied to the ideas of the CTM:

While spiritual life for adult followers of Jesus required pretty radical change, children were treated differently. All children were welcomed and blessed, and at random Jesus set a child in the midst. He did not need to check first that the child singled out demonstrated a particular trait; just being a child in an everyday way was the only criterion that mattered.  

The question asked in this research related to Jesus “blessing” children compared to Jesus calling people to repentance. Underlying this question is the interest in finding the attitudes of the participants towards children as “gift of God” or “sinful creature,” to use the categories of Bunge. As can be seen from the findings, the blessing of children was strongly considered as relevant. The calling to repentance was not rejected but there was much discussion regarding how this element of scripture was held in tension with the perceived more important attitude of blessing children. Some responses of participants give an indication of the discussion:

“Part of it is Jesus’ gentleness, the way he approached kids, there is good in here, let’s find it before it is spoilt.” (P 9)  

“My theology is more grace than judgement and love rather than condition.” (P16)  

“I think evangelical theology is clear about the fall – that we are born in sin... (BUT) I believe blessing is a lost art, we don’t do that – I don’t think we use blessing enough, it is beautiful.” (P8)  

“Children do some things wrong but generally they are more innocent. They are vulnerable and need to be affirmed and encouraged in blessing.” (P 3)  

“The blessing just shows God’s heart for children, he already sees what is there, he blesses them and wants to bring the good out-helping them to grow stronger and deeper-growing into love.” (P 13)  

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2 Ibid., 41-56.  
3 Ibid., 10.
The topic of blessing children can be related to the work of the Dominican scholar, Matthew Fox. He proposes that there is evidence for two distinct models within the Christian tradition and scripture. As with the hypothesis proposed by Bunge there is the danger when one model will become dominant at the expense of the other. Fox considers that the “Fall/Redemption” model has become the dominant spiritual tradition. This tradition goes back to the writing of St Augustine (354-430 CE). Fox considers this a dualist, patriarchal and an out-dated paradigm. The fall/redemption model is not about creativity, justice-making, play, pleasure or the delight of God, “it fails to listen to the impassioned pleas of the ‘anawim’, the little ones of human history.”

The second model he calls the Creation-Centred Spiritual tradition that goes back to the ninth century BCE. Fox gives a comprehensive overview of the two models showing their different emphases. In his view the Creation Centred Spirituality, as the most ancient, should find greater recognition in the church. Both models demonstrate the Gospel message. The researcher has selected some of the elements showing the difference between the models of spirituality. Some of the comparison outlined by Fox is as follows:

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4 Fox, 11.
5 Ibid., 316-319. Fox lists 58 different categories of difference. A selection has been made from this list to give some of the central differences that seem most relevant to this thesis.
Fox's work links with other voices from Feminist and Liberation theology. He takes a high view of children, likening them to other oppressed or marginalised groups (the ‘anawim’). Fox’s creation-centred spirituality is concerned with so called right brain creativity, the arts, emerging mysticism and meditation. There is a spiritual recognition of the need for ecological care, “the doctrine of the incarnation is itself an invitation to all believers to love the earth, cherish it, find delight in the divine.”6 For Fox when one area of truth becomes dominant there is simplification and a danger of losing the complex and paradoxical teachings of scripture. When the Fall/Redemption model becomes dominant Fox suggests that Creation Centred Spirituality can be neglected. Instead of taking a dualist position with a focus on guilt and redemption (original sin) the model of Creation Spirituality is dialectical with the added emphasis on transformation in thanks and praise (original blessing). These two spiritual models can be applied to the attitude towards children. Blessing children is incorporated into the Creation Centred model.

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6 Ibid., 15.
Implications for mission

Individual responsibility

As we read the gospel records and consider many authors from the area of Liberation Theology we are confronted with the idea of Christ’s “preferential option for the poor.”\(^7\) The question can be asked, “Are children the poor, those needing advocacy in every community?” Children have no voice, no vote in church decision-making, and they do not have the power to make a financial contribution.

“Binding the strong man” is the title of Myer’s commentary on the gospel of St Mark. He asserts that Mark is chiefly concerned with restructuring power. The “strong man” is recognised in three major areas; political domination, patriarchy and the family system. The section on Mark 10:1-16 Myer has a subheading of “Social power and the family: the roots of violence.”\(^8\) Myer asserts that most commentators do not take seriously the words of the text “whoever does not receive the kingdom like a child, will not enter into it at all.” (Mark 10:15)\(^9\) He considers that this passage, with the child representing the “least of the least”, is a “fundamental object lesson... What if Jesus means what he says?”\(^10\) Myers argues that Mark’s concern is for radical discipleship that confronts and changes the existing socio-political system. The inclusive, non-violent way of Jesus is counter-cultural and the child epitomizes this new vision of the future kingdom.

Myers contrasts the welcome and blessing of the children, with the struggle Jesus has when trying to lead his disciples into his new way. In Mark 10:13 we find the disciples rebuking those who were bringing children to Jesus in order for him to touch them. Jesus responds with indignation. “The ‘war of myths’ rages even at the heart of the Jesus community. Jesus is committed to inclusivity, his disciples to exclusivity.”\(^11\) This section of Mark concludes with Jesus taking the children in his arms and blessing them. “Jesus rescues the children from the margins of the new community and places them at its

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\(^7\) www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O1011-Preferentialoptionforthpr.html (Accessed 17 May 2013). This quotation originally came from the Catholic Liberation Theology movement in South America but it has been more widely used as an expression of both Old Testament and New Testament teaching on social justice by many Christian traditions.

\(^8\) Myers, Binding the Strong Man, 264.

\(^9\) Ibid., 267.

\(^10\) Ibid., 264.

\(^11\) Ibid., 267.
centre.” (Mark 9:39) Myer states that the child represents a class of exploited persons, “the child is always the primary victim of practices of domination within the family,” He goes on to list the mostly overlooked experiences of childhood: loneliness, desertion, exploitation, mental cruelty, manipulation and humiliation leading to “intergenerational patterns of domination,” anger and violence. Jesus’ blessing the children is the new way.

From the start the church has proclaimed that it brings “good news” of protection and support for those in need. Both the Old and New Testaments proclaim the call for justice and protection of the poor, the widow and orphan, the stranger and traveller. Justice, protection, advocacy and blessing for the needy are part of the “good news.” In contemporary society we witness the disaster when words of good news and actions in the church do not agree. As is seen in the sexual abuse scandal, when the expectation of care and justice in the church is destroyed, the trauma and hurt to victims is amplified. It is not just the occurrence of sexual abuse but also the suffering to the victim’s sense of trust in those leaders representing God.

The participants in this research into the relevance of the Child Theology Movement all considered that advocacy for children was part of their role. For some of the Children’s Workers this advocacy involved presenting the needs of children to the adult members of the church. For others it was a general concept where any child in need in their care was viewed as a responsibility. In the interviews the second part of this question inquired if the prophetic role could also be part of their care for children. The prophetic role was not so readily recognized or embraced by participants. However, some participants discussed the link between the two concepts. When we advocate for a child, speaking out to ensure their care or nurture, we echo Westerhoff’s strong belief that we “only learn to act by acting.” It is as we start to advocate for individual children that the pattern grows into something more wide reaching, a prophetic voice.

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12 Ibid., 268.
13 Ibid., 269.
Implications for the family

As well as concern for individual children there was wide agreement between the participants that care and encouragement of the family was important. Three of the churches in the research group were using a Christian education program called Think Orange. This program is based on the idea that both church (yellow light) and family (red heart) are involved in the spiritual development of the child. The image is used of red and yellow together making orange. Other areas of family involvement have been mentioned above in the section on worship.

In the Focus Group the involvement of the family was a major discussion point. There was much concern that parents had “out-sourced” religious education and faith formation to the church in the same way that they out-sourced education to the school. It was suggested that the Children’s Pastor should involve parents, challenging them to consider what spiritual qualities should be encouraged in their children. The parents then become engaged in the discussing of how these qualities should be encouraged. This is in contrast to the more common situation of asking parents to come and help in the already existing church programs for children.

"The Gospel is not just about words in worship on Sunday, it must be real in practical ways in the ups and downs of family life" (P2)

The Focus Group expressed strong opinions regarding the need to encourage and involve parents. Many spoke of the sense of fear in parents, who expressed concern that they should allow children to make up their own minds. Other parents considered themselves to be ill-equipped, and therefore reluctant or unable to talk about God. The group wondered if this was part of our current social situation, where speaking of religion or faith was considered to be old fashioned or inappropriate. The Focus Group agreed that this was a task of education and encouragement for the church to help parents, giving opportunities to for them to express real and honest experiences and stories of faith and hope. To speak naturally about problems and dilemmas and engage children in discussion and prayer are ways that parents can more intentionally live their faith. This reflects the Old Testament directive: “Talk about them [the

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15 Joiner.
commandments] when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” (Deut. 6:7) As parents wish to pass on the best to their children, it is not just about dancing lessons or soccer training, but spiritual issues of faith and hope, choice and love. It is possible that a coalition between children’s ministry workers and parents could become an effective lobby group within the Church. Parents who work with the Children’s Pastor can bring about creative programs and changes that are linked to real life issues and concerns.

The Focus Group discussed how there was need for discussion regarding consequences in families. Parents and children could be challenged to articulate their hopes and long-term goals for character development or spiritual life. This would lead to greater awareness of the central place of the parents and make a connection to the ways in which the church community can help. As is often the case, children will miss going to church during the football or soccer season. This situation brings conflict. Is it a short-term pleasure and social experience that is being enjoyed at the expense of the long-term goal of spiritual development in Christian relationships and learning faith? From one Children’s Pastor’s perspective you “can’t build a relationship with a child who does not come to church.”

Supporting families, providing parent information nights or parenting tips in the church newsletters were all mentioned as important. Two of the churches also ran psycho-educational groups for parents, where men and women could meet separately and consider family issues. “Life groups” were another area of support for parents in most of the churches in the study. These were small groups for bible study and prayer. The participants commented that the sense of sharing family problems and praying for each other was helpful. In some of the churches children came with their parents to these life groups and there were often fun activity evenings and shared meals. Care and blessing of children with encouragement in the family was a common finding in this study. This finding resonates with the work of Westerhoff, who for many years has advocated the distinctive life-style of a church family involved in communicating the faith. He envisions children learning through doing, through interaction with the family, having common aims, children engaged as partners with parents. This is informal teaching is considered educationally honest and effective. He offers family guidelines:
Care for children outside of the local Church community

Most of the participants were involved in community work outside of the regular weekly worshipping community and they often spoke of their work and encouraged others in the church to volunteer. The majority were involved in the voluntary Christian Religious Education program delivery at local Primary Schools. About half also spoke of the Kids Hope program organized by World Vision. Some were engaged in this mentoring program while other participants organized a group of volunteers from their church to do this work. There were other activities such as playgroups, supporting mothers and babies, and kids clubs. All of these were perceived as a service of support for children and families in the local community.

On the wider world scene three churches had an established and ongoing relationship with a church in the third world. Another supported an orphanage in Africa. These were considered as whole church initiatives, with the leaders keeping the congregation informed of needs and progress. Some of the church members visited the overseas missions and thus increased awareness and commitment. Welcoming visiting missionaries or speakers from Frontier Services or World Vision was recognized as an established part of nearly all of the churches in the research group. For all of the participants, mission to the world was an accepted part of church life seen in prayer, financial giving and sometimes more practical support through travel and service.

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16 Westerhoff. *Values for Tomorrow’s Children*, 63.
Westerhoff supports the wider mission of the church as perceived by the participants in this research. He asserts that the question for Christian Education in the church is not “Are you a Christian?” but rather “How Christian are you?” There is ongoing need to challenge the organization and the religious education programs of the church from “an emphasis on ‘content (what we teach) to ‘process’ (how and where we teach).” It is a finding from this research that church and home share a joint task, nurturing the inner spiritual life of the child and supporting development towards becoming fully human as a disciple.

**Blessing for children in other cultures**

The Child Theology Movement is not portrayed as a set of doctrines but rather an ongoing conversation with the story of Jesus in scripture. It is not prescriptive in the sense of being tied to one culture but has been used with Christian groups in many different settings around the world. Grobbelaar says that bringing “the context of the African child into conversations with some perspectives from scripture and the broader Christian tradition challenges ecclesiology and children’s ministry practices.” Reporting on the consultation in South Asia, Collier summarizes some practical ideas: “Be aware of the effects of church events on family life”... “help parents with parenting and counselling skills.” “One struggle as a senior pastor is conflict among leaders. I think the Child Theology Movement is a practical thing that can help us with this.” In the preface to the consultation in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, it was recognised that 50% of the population are children. However, theological education does not provide resources for ministry to children. “It pains us to see that the training of most ministers in Africa (and elsewhere) ignores children and their needs. This means that ministers are ill-equipped to care for 50% of their congregation!” When the child is placed “in the midst” of adult discussion practical ideas emerge. As part of the meeting the twenty-eight delegates

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17 Ibid., 29.
from different seminaries, churches and NGO’s compiled a comprehensive resource list of training material to be used in churches caring for children at risk.20

The various consultations in different cultural settings show the CTM in action on a worldwide scale. In church policy planning and decision-making these scriptures of Jesus with the child “in the midst” can inform theological thinking and pastoral action. Members can imagine the child “in the midst” and share their perceptions of meaning, and through discussion, argument and prayer identify new initiatives and future planning.

Before commencing this final section of the investigation it is important to recognise one further dimension of the CTM and its association with blessing children. White and Willmer speak of two relevant, potential dangers that confront theology. The first is the danger of overlooking or undervaluing children, ”Often children have been invisible and oppressed in human history. That is still the case today. Child Theology must keep in mind and hold up the value and dignity of children.” This understanding has been affirmed in this research project. However, the second potential danger is that ”this kind of child-centeredness can be a form of idolatry, which is destructive for children and for all of us.”21 As has been shown through the discussion, Jesus’ concern for the marginalized, the poor, and the sick are associated with his concern for children. The child placed “in the midst” was not remarkable, not identified by gender, giftedness or need, but an ordinary child who in those times had no rights or privileges. In Australia today, it can be argued that children are favoured. Certainly we have laws against abuse or neglect but our affluent society can also be seen as a form of abuse in itself.22 The child can be viewed as a pawn of the consumer culture, another part of the consumption process to be groomed into the ways of materialism. CTM keeps the kingdom of God as the focus with Jesus bringing the child into the midst. This is a counter-cultural move, where the child is a representative of the marginalized, who have no claim to importance or greatness. The child is not a substitute idol for God but a “reliable clue to

20 Collier, Report of the First South Asian Consultation on Child Theology. 29.
21 White and Willmer. 6.
22 This is the main argument of Dr David Sims, “The child in American Evangelism and the problem of affluence” unpublished PhD, Durham University 2005.
the kingdom of God, so that to receive the child is to receive Jesus and the one who sent Jesus.”

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter shows the link between blessing and the Child Theology Movement. The participants all viewed the child blessed by Jesus as an important image through which to consider the kingdom of God. The way of Jesus, with the child standing beside, is the new way - the last shall be first, and the servant leader is the norm. The mission of the church is linked to Jesus blessing the children, the new order of the kingdom of God. In the words of Myers:"24

“Only non-violence can break the most primal structures of power and domination in the world and create the possibility for a new order to dawn on the world.”

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23 White and Willmer. 7.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has aimed to investigate the relevance of the Child Theology Movement for those in ministry with children. This is a small investigation, limited by the number of participants in the suburban location in Melbourne. The churches involved all had an established children’s ministry and this meant they were not representative of the whole church. This is a form of bias and limitation. Many churches have few or no children as part of the worshipping community and it is uncertain if this situation is considered acceptable or good. A useful extension to this research would involve interviews with leaders in a variety of churches where there were no special provision of ministry to children. However, with this limitation in the selection of participants in view, it is the contention of the researcher that valuable information has emerged that could be of benefit for the future direction of the church. The CTM is now having an effect on all five continents and CTM consultations are providing creative and new directions for church life in their particular localities. This research project too provides some findings and tentative applications.

As outlined in the previous chapters, from the interview data and the additional data from the Focus Group, the Child Theology Movement is recognised as relevant in three areas. These findings can be presented as recommendations:

1. “To become like a child” should be given serious consideration as part of discipleship training (for children and adults).
2. The image of the child “in the midst” should be a challenge to the life of the church community.
3. The blessing of children should take a higher priority than the teaching of repentance.

From these recommendations practical applications are suggested.

**Application One: for Religious Education**

Discussion of what it means to be a Christian forms part of Christian religious education. It is proposed that the image of Jesus with the child from Matt. 18:3 is an important contribution to this discussion. This would not be dogmatic teaching of facts
but rather an invitation to wonder and consider the words of Jesus and what they might mean for each person. Religious Education can be part of the school curriculum or part of the church faith formation program for baptism or confirmation. Ongoing adult religious education in the church can also use these themes to challenge and extend the vision of what it means to be a disciple. The ideas of Westerhoff and Groome, regarding the use of the action-reflection model of education is applicable. Education and faith formation cannot just be words but rather active engagement that involves the learner in real life issues. “No truth is really taught by words or interpretation by intellectual methods: truth must be lived into meaning before it can be fully known.”¹ A brief discussion paper with ideas from the CTM from *An introduction to Child Theology*² could be used in this application.

**Application Two: for Church Councils**

As part of ongoing discussion regarding vision and mission statements, information could be available to Church Councils. Aware that business meetings of the church can be tedious and long, a variety of short discussion points in the form of devotional material might be appropriate. Some suggestions are included in Appendix Six. These short discussion points can lead to further investigation by a committee of those interested who can report back to the wider Church Council. It is also suggested that these themes from CTM be used in discussion regarding the future vision and mission planning for the church.

**Application Three: for families and discussion groups**

Appendix Seven presents some ideas related to leading a Parents or Grandparents Group in the local church. It is suggested that with leadership from the Church Council, small groups could be formed to read and discuss some of the key elements of this thesis. Further reading groups could extend the ideas of this thesis using such books as Rebecca Nye’s *Children’s Spirituality* or selected chapters from Marcia Bunge’s *The Child in Christian Thought. Intergenerational Christian Formation* by Allen and Ross is a comprehensive text but parts related to the debate about Biblical Foundation,

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¹ Westerhoff, *Values for Tomorrow’s Children*, 44.
² White, *Introducing Child Theology*
Generational Theory or Social Science Foundations could be selected for study. In the appendix of this book there is also an extensive list of practical ideas to help foster intergenerational experiences and worship. This could provide the basis for an action/reflection group in the church involving both leadership and lay members.

**Application Four: for Theological Education**

It was noted in the interviews that the Ministers and Children's Pastors based their attitudes towards children largely on personal Christian reflection and experience. There was no mention of theological debate about the place of children in the church. This research has been at the level of the local church, however it is possible that the “grass roots” can speak to the whole church. In line with the wider emphasis of the CTM, the place of children is a theological question and these ideas could be part of theological training for ministers. The Child Theology Movement is a new theological emphasis, to be placed alongside discussion on Liberation and Feminist Theologies. The inexpensive booklet *An introduction to Child Theology* provides a concise and challenging description of the Movement that could be part of ministry education.³ It is envisioned that the discussion of CTM would be part of study units in Formation and Pastoral Education as well as Biblical Theology. The models of the CTM Consultations that have already taken place in various parts of the world, provide an additional global perspective that might be valuable in theological education.⁴

**Personal Postscript**

I first heard Keith White speak in Melbourne in June 2010. He spoke of the “seed” (Matt. 18:3) in scripture waiting and now ready to grow in our contemporary society. These ideas of the Child Theology Movement made sense, the status of children should be a matter for the whole church, a theological issue not just a concern for youth workers. The scripture of Jesus with the child, connected with me, with my faith and theological understanding, with my children, with my grandchildren, with my students and with my little clinical clients experiencing stress and trauma.

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³ Ibid.
⁴ White, *Toddling forward* (Melbourne: VCCE, Compassion, CTM 2010)
Through this study, the interviews and Focus Group, I have been encouraged by the love for and devotion to children expressed by the participants. Their work is appreciated and I thank them; their work of love is not just for the children in the church family but for so many others in the community or overseas. It has been an experience that has renewed my appreciation of church life, giving a close link to the many faithful children’s workers of the past as well as previous writing on the theologies of the child.

There is so much negative media coverage of the church. Its abuses, materialism and self-serving attitudes, but my experience has been the opposite. I have seen individuals seeking after the ways of God, the ways of love and compassion, of understanding and healing, living not just for the self, but in service for others. These speak of the kingdom of God. The pre-research experience with children, affirmed much information that was to follow in the interviews. The post-research experience with students from theological college extended the relevance of the study as adults considered the recommendation to “become like a child.”

Finally, through the reading and discussion I have found many voices who challenge and inspire. Moltmann, Nye, Rahner and Berryman are old friends who continue to provide me with fresh ideas. Myers, Fox, McFague and Jensen keep me in the area of discomfort, challenging me to consider new ideas and live my faith in action. The work of the Holy Spirit both comforts and disturbs. It is my hope that this study will speak to others, not just as an interesting new idea but as a platform for action of renewed faith hope and love, looking at Jesus who places the child in the middle.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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# APPENDIX ONE

## Story for Child Theology Movement

(The session will be audio recorded and representations photographed for analysis)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Material</th>
<th>Sit and wait.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silver box with 15 adult figures male and female, one small wooden figure for the child – central ground of sand. Time allowed for the session – 1 hr.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movements</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When children are seated expectantly open the sand container. Trace movement with your hand in the sand – walking over hills and valleys – Smoothing the sand slowly ready for the story.</td>
<td>Move the box to your side and take off the lid so children cannot see into the box.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background</th>
<th></th>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on the box.</th>
<th>Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knock on the box as if it were a door.</td>
<td>There was once someone who did such amazing things and said such wonderful things that people followed him. They listened to his stories and watched how he treated people and helped them. He moved about the country and through the towns. There are many stories recorded about what he did.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Focus on the box.</th>
<th>Words</th>
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<tr>
<td>Look, this is a story box. The box is a special colour. It sparkles. Perhaps there is something valuable inside. It is precious.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Focus on the box.</th>
<th>Words</th>
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<tr>
<td>The box has a lid on it. Sometimes it is as if these special old stories have a lid that is shut; it is hard to know what they mean. You can’t go inside even if you are ready. I don’t know why. It just happens, so don’t be discouraged. We need to keep coming back again and again.</td>
<td>Move the disciples into a circle shape. Move Jesus into the centre.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Focus on the box.</th>
<th>Words</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The box looks like a present. The stories of Jesus are presents. They were given to you even before you were born. They are old, they are older than you and they are older than I. They are even older than your grandmother or grandfather. They are almost two thousand years old.</td>
<td>Let Jesus leave the circle and bring the child shape into the middle of the circle.</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Focus on the box.</th>
<th>Words</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I wonder if there really is a story inside – let’s look and see.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Select the Jesus figure.  
This is the special leader who did such amazing things and said such wonderful things.

Select each of the other figures and place near Jesus in the sand.  
And here are some of the people who followed him. As they followed him, they walked around the country with him. They were his friends. They watched him and listened to him.

Make different patterns with the figures.  
They heard him speak about a Kingdom. The Kingdom was not like the one they were in. It was not like one anyone had visited. It was not like any Kingdom anyone had even heard about. So they asked him, “What is the Kingdom of heaven like?”

Walk them around slowly in the sand until they come together as though talking.  
He told them lots of stories about this Kingdom and they all wanted to go there. They kept on talking and wondering about the kingdom.

One day they were talking about this Kingdom of Heaven and they started to argue about it. “Who will be the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?” “I know who will be the greatest.” “No, I know.” “Someone will be greatest and it will be me.” “No, me.”  
He brought a small child with him into the middle of the group and said, “Unless you can change and become like this little child you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

They went on arguing about who would be the best or the greatest. Jesus came and stood in the middle of them.  
That was the story. It was short but we can wonder what it means.
Wondering questions:

I wonder what Jesus meant.

I wonder if the child had a name.

I wonder what the child was thinking.

I wonder how an adult disciple could learn something from a child.

I wonder how I can be more like you.

I wonder if this would make the disciples change.

Response

Children have 20 minutes of free time in which to make a representation of some aspect of the story. Various forms of art material will be available: sand tray and miniatures, paint, oil pastels, texta colours and pencils, modelling clay, collage materials, sparkle, pipe cleaners and stickers.

Feast

The representations are brought for informal conversation. The children have a party morning tea.

This session is based in the Godly Play pattern. Please see the complete text for additional details regarding how the group time is organised. Many special features are associated with this form of religious education, such as Montessori religious education method, managing relationships and guiding the wondering.


APPENDIX TWO

Title of Project: Investigating the relevance of the Child Theology Movement in selected Churches in Melbourne

Student researcher: Vivienne Mountain

Post Graduate program: Master of Arts

Dear

I am so pleased that you have shown an interest in taking part in this research project. The following information is designed to help you make a formal decision and commit some of your valuable time. Attached to this letter is the formal consent document. If you choose to be a part of this research project please sign the consent form and send it back to me via the stamped envelope. I have included duplicate letters and forms for you to keep in your file.

First a little about me – I have been involved in education research and counseling over many years. I am a mother and grandmother. My PhD research was in the area of education – specifically children’s spirituality in relation to the meaning and function of prayer. I am keen to put my time and energy into practical projects that show my Christian faith through outgoing social initiatives. I am interested in exploring the relevance of the Child Theology Movement for our Church today. If you decide to take part in this research study I will show you every respect and encouragement as you contribute your ideas.

Secondly, the aims of this research are:

To investigate the relevance of the Child Theology Movement www.childtheology.org
To gather responses to this fresh theological understanding (based on the enacted parable of Jesus in Matthew 18: 1-5), with a view to adding to our understanding of the education and mission of the Church.

To encourage a greater respect and understanding between the human sciences, social justice and a compassion for children and theology.

Thirdly, the time involved would be two 30-minute interviews (I am happy to come to you). These interviews would be approximately one week apart and would give you a chance to make sure I have recorded your thoughts adequately. Electronic communication with you will allow you to check the summary of the themes from the second interview. Then after a period of a couple of months I would invite you to take part in a Focus Group with other participants to (again) re-check the data analyzed. This Focus Group would be held at The Stirling Theological College, 44-60 Jackson Rd Mulgrave 3170, on a Saturday afternoon (or mutually agreeable time) and would last one hour. Your travel expenses can be recompensed for this session.

Finally, I am hoping your involvement in this research will be helpful to you professionally as well as adding to the life of the wider Church. Be assured that participation is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to give consent without having to justify that decision. Consent can also be withdrawn and participation discontinued during the study at any time without giving a reason.

The data collected during the project will be treated as confidential and will be stored securely. Participants will not be able to be identified in the final report, or in other presentations, reports or publications.

This study has been approved by the Human Ethics Research Committee at the Melbourne College of Divinity.

In the event that you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during the study, or have any query that the Investigator or Supervisor has not been able to satisfy you may contact Dr Mark Lindsay (9853 3177).

Any complaint will be treated in confidence and will be fully investigated.
Thank you for your consideration. Please sign and date the attached consent form if you wish to be a part of this project, and send it back to me in the enclosed envelope. I will then be in touch with you to determine a convenient time for the first interview.

Yours sincerely

(Student Researcher)             Rev Dr Alan Niven
                                  (Principal Supervisor)
CONSENT FORM

I have read (or, where appropriate, have had read to me) and understood the information above, and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in the research project, realising that I may withdraw without prejudice.

I agree that information provided by me or with my permission during the research project may be included in a thesis, presented at conferences and published in journals on the condition that neither my name nor any other identifying information is used.

Your name (in block letters):

Signature: ___________________________  Date: __ / __ / ___

Name of participant (in block letters):

Signature: ___________________________  Date: __ / __ / ___


APPENDIX TWO (cont.)

**Interview protocol** – Brief version

**Investigating the relevance of the Child Theology Movement in selected churches in Melbourne**

Open, semi-structured interviews (audio recorded) allow the participants to express their own ideas within the set questions.

**Interviewees** – Eight Children’s Pastors and the eight Ministers associated with these Pastors from a variety of Christian Churches.

**Preparation**

- Ethics documents are distributed, signed and collected – This research initially requires two 30-minute interviews and later, involvement in Focus Groups (one for Children’s Pastors and one for the Ministers).
- A short summary of the Child Theology Movement (CTM) is printed ready to be distributed after point 7 (from the Vision, Mission and Values page of www.childtheology.org accessed 4 January 2012).

**Introduction**

Thank you for your participation. I hope you don’t mind if I record our interview (it helps me remember the details of your ideas). This is an informal interview seeking to learn of your particular experiences and understanding. Nothing is right or wrong, I am collecting heaps of information from many Churches. Our conversation is confidential and the final write up will not identify you or your Church.

Can you tell me something about your role in the present Church structure, as well as some of your vision and the ways in which your church relates to children? As I said in the ethics letter of consent, my interest comes from the ideas of the Child Theology Movement.
Content

1. We talk through the story of Matt. 18: 1-5: What do you think is the significance of Jesus placing the child “in the midst”? What does it mean to “become like a child”?

   (Intention of the question: To examine the perceived authority of the words of Jesus in Scripture)

2. Keith White (a co-founder of the Child Theology Movement) speaks of this passage in Matthew as like a “seed” in the scripture that has remained dormant and is now in this age ready to grow. Do you see this story as a valuable “seed” for the church today?

   (Intention of the question: To identify awareness of and acceptance of historical theological changes over time and in relation to this movement)

3. There is a quote from the book examining Child Theology by Collier that says that the child draws us into unexpected possibilities. Do you have any stories where a child brings “unexpected possibilities”?

   (Intention of the question: To collect real stories in order to value children, their inner capacity and their faith)

4. In the Bible Jesus is recorded as welcoming children and blessing them. This could be compared with the records of Jesus calling adult disciples to “Repent”. What do you think about this?

   (Intention of the question: to consider the possible differences that Jesus showed in his attitudes when relating to children and adults)

5. Do you have an image of the “child in the midst” in the life of your Church?

   (Intention of the question: To identify church practice that could link in with the text)
6. Do you have any other ideas that come from the Child Theology Movement as you understand it? Or are there other significant stories from your work that relate to these ideas?

(Intention of the question: To collect personal stories of the participant’s work with children)

7. Is there anything you’d like to add about your role and identity at this church in the light of this discussion? Do you think there is a prophetic edge in the Children’s Ministry? Do you see yourself as an advocate for children— as giving them a “voice”?

(Intention of the question: To give space for consideration of the participant’s role and impact on the wider Church)

**Conclusion**

Thank you for giving your valuable time. I will write up my summary of this interview and email it to you. Then I would like to make a time to come back and check with you, to make sure I have recorded your thoughts correctly. There will also be time to add other ideas you think are important. The second interview will take about 30 minutes. Can we make an appointment time now? I would like to leave you with a small summary of the Child Theology Movement from the CTM web site. Thank you.
APPENDIX THREE

Vision, Mission and Values

Why does the Child Theology Movement (CTM) exist?

In obedience to Jesus’ revolutionary action of placing a child in the midst of a key theological discussion (Matthew 18), CTM is committed to reform all theological reflection and enquiry ‘with a child in the midst’ and to ensure that theology of this kind informs every aspect of the church’s life and mission, including that which relates to children.

How does CTM expect to fulfill this commitment?

CTM encourages all followers of Jesus and others to explore and engage with Child Theology by various means including:

- Facilitating workshops and consultations;
- Publishing printed and digital materials;
- Contributing to symposia, conferences, private meetings, development of curricula, etc;
- Holding open-ended theological conversations with partnering organisations and individuals, such as:
  - Denominational leaders and thinkers;
  - Seminaries and other theological research and teaching institutions;
  - Organisations that work with and for children (advocacy, care, equipping);

What values guide CTM in its work?

CTM has the following key values:

- To be a global movement, culturally aware and sensitive;
- To include and learn from minorities, the marginalised and the unempowered;
- To be non-hierarchical and to prepare for CTM to cease to exist as an organisation in 2022;
- To follow Jesus in seeking the kingdom of God of which the child is a key sign, thus valuing the spiritual life of children without making them the focus of our activity;
- To hold respectful dialogues with the Scriptures, current Christian theologies and the world, and
- To listen and to respond to others.

As registered in the founding documents, the objectives of CTM are:

The advancement of the Christian Religion, primarily but not exclusively by the carrying out of research and education on the nature and significance of children, especially as represented in Christian Religion by the teachings and practice of Jesus Christ; and by the training of church leaders to support the ministry of the Christian Church to children worldwide.
APPENDIX FOUR

Investigating the relevance of the Child Theology Movement in selected churches in Melbourne – Stirling Theological College

Research Finding 1

CTM has relevance for discipleship – personal life – faith formation – religious education for adults and children – Catechesis


4. Imagination and prayer- healing- empathy- trust- expectancy- gratitude- spirituality- creativity

Research Finding 2

CTM has significance for the church – communal life – leadership – governance and mission – Pastoral Care – Ministry Education – Missiology

- **Congregational Vision:** Have fun together – relationship is the main thing – family and church working together – whole church open to the new – intentional inclusion of children – ongoing learning – remember the “millstone” – creativity – money – research and effort to include children – children can teach us – Community not Individuality – child friendly – culture of encouragement

- **Worship:** child-friendly – children relaxed and engaged – listening to God – children’s time in regular service – encourage leadership by young – use inclusive language – use imagination – be honest and real – put children in the middle so they can see – aim for joyful presence – cross-generational with all included
• **Pastoral Care:** prayer pals – support – give children a voice – care for families – greet children by name – get down with kids (physically, emotionally and speed?) – take time to talk with kids – use “buddies” – take time to listen and reflect together – respect the child – family centered

• **Mission:** parenting groups – schools ministry – family fun nights – parenting groups – “Mainly music” and play groups – “Church in the park” – magazine to the local community (with kids page)

• **Advertising:** notice boards, newsletter to parents – web resources

**Theological discussion:** “Original Blessing” vs “Original Sin”

**Further discussion:** Developmental Psychology vs Children’s Spirituality

**Implications for Ministry Education:** Financial and political power of the status quo – Differences in Christian traditions – Value of marriage and family in formation for ministry – Possible growing division between evangelical and traditional forms

**Implications for mission:** Child rescue and relief – Evangelism and Social Justice models – family support and education – Healing

**Your suggestions:**
APPENDIX FIVE

Outline of the analysis process

- Pilot project using one Children’s Pastor and one Senior Minister
- Preparation of final consent forms and paper work for the interview
- The researcher visited each participant. Each interview was audio taped.
- These tapes were replayed two or three times and a summary was recorded by the researcher (this is in line with the work of Kvale). The summary records showed highlighted words which were repeated or spoken with special emphasis or which sometimes acted as a metaphor for an important truth. An example of the summary is given below

What are your responses to foundation texts? Importance? Meaning?

Children are ready to accept. I cannot separate my personal life from my work- this is the foundation of what motivates me. Being around kids helps me keep my child-like faith. Children come with no cynicism or world-weariness. If I believe the Bible is for everyone then I constantly try to express the abstract concepts for the mind of children who are concrete thinkers. This is a constant task for me- difficult but important

Children are honest – which adult would put up their hand up and say I am bored or my Granny’s budgie died – honesty that’s what kids have. It’s frustrating when I am in the middle of an important story but it is refreshing too. They live in the now, we are here we just hang out for a bit- it’s a different world-view – lack of cynicism- it sounds simple, maybe not very theological but maybe that’s where it’s at. (interview 9a)

Stories about children were indented in the text for easy identification. For example:

Every year at camp the children have asked to pray for the leaders. The adults have been really touched and moved through these prayers of the children – we just open the door for them to give them the chance, there is a purity and enthusiasm to do this –
One of our boys in grade 1 prayed for a leader who fell over with the prayer? – the kid looked at his hands – he was amazed – we had to sit him down and explain that God is inside of him – it was really exciting (Interview 15a)

- The summary from the first interview was sent electronically to the participant.
- During the second interview the data was corrected and additions made.
- A second summary was sent electronically for checking to the participant.
- From this broad collection of data from the interviews the researcher made sticky notes and memos of important words and phrases. These were arranged and rearranged until a sense of “saturation” was achieved, that is, the dominant themes emerged from the frequency of references.
- This summary of categories and properties was given to the Focus Group Members for further comment.
- The Focus Group was audio- and video-recorded.
- Once again the recordings were played three times, the content of the discussion summarized and important words identified.
- The draft of the findings incorporating the Focus Group findings were emailed to members of the Focus Group giving opportunity for further member-checking.

Timeline

2011 Pilot Study, official proposal and ethics clearance
2012 Semester 1 Interviews and analysis of findings
2012 Semester 2 Preliminary writing
2013 Semester 1 Focus Groups and analysis
2013 Final write-up of finding
APPENDIX SIX

Meditation for Church Council Meeting

Meditation One – Reading – Matthew 18:1-6

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. 3 And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. 6 “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (NIV)

The text from Matt. 18:2-3 is central to the Child Theology Movement. It speaks of Jesus placing the child “in the midst” and commanding the disciples to “Change and become like a child”. The Child Theology Movement suggests that these two aspects of the teaching of Jesus are important for our present understanding of God’s kingdom in our church life today.

The words of Jesus continue with a command to “receive” the child, and with the warning of the “millstone”. Receiving the child, the small one, the one without power or authority, just an everyday child, is the way to receive Jesus and the one who sent him. On the other hand, if we cause problems for a child we are in serious danger, under the threat of death. These are staggering thoughts.

For consideration:

What about us? Can a child teach us how to be better disciples?

_____________________________

1 “The Child Theology Movement, in response to Jesus placing a child in the midst of a key theological discussion (Matt18), is committed to reform all theological reflection and enquiry with a ‘child in the midst’ and to ensure that theology of this kind informs every aspect of the church’s life and mission, including that which relates to children.” From www.childtheology.org (accessed 4 January 2013).
Where is the child in our church? Is the child in the middle or pushed out to the edge?
How do we show that children are received?

Is the millstone image a warning for our church?

A prayer

Almighty God, coming to us in Jesus, you show us a counter-cultural way to live. You show us the way of love and inclusion. You show us an image of Jesus standing with the child in the middle of the disciples’ discussion about greatness. Check our anxiety and ambition; teach us your ways of vulnerability and compassion. We pray this for ourselves and for our collective witness as a church. In Jesus’ name Amen

(Prepared as part of research into the relevance of the Child Theology Movement in selected churches in Melbourne, May 2013)
Meditation for Church Council Meeting

Meditation Two – Reading – Mark 10:13-16

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” 16 And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. (NIV)

“He took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them”, this story has been celebrated in art and stained glass throughout the Christian world, but it is not just a romantic old image, rather it is one that challenges us today. In the face of the shame of sexual abuse in the church the story must be remembered and re-lived. The “blessing” of children is a central idea of the Child Theology Movement. (This is identical to footnote 1)

Blessing according to Rebecca Nye is from a root meaning of “Calling out the good from within the child”. This means valuing the child, as made in the image of God, a gift from God. The child comes to us needing our blessing. The encouragement to grow and develop needs attitudes of love and relationship from care-givers. We as a church should be care-givers, the ones who can bless.

For consideration:

How have you blessed a child this week?

How does our church bless the children who come to us?

How do we bless the children who don’t come through our church doors?

---

2 “The Child Theology Movement, in response to Jesus placing a child in the midst of a key theological discussion (Matt18), is committed to reform all theological reflection and enquiry with a ‘child in the midst’ and to ensure that theology of this kind informs every aspect of the church’s life and mission, including that which relates to children.” From www.childtheology.org (accessed 4 January 2013).
3 Rebecca Nye, Children’s Spirituality (London: Church House, 2009), 78.
Prayer

Holy God, you are a God of grace and blessing. You love the world so much that you came to live with us, to share our confusion, sadness and pain. Your love continues in trust and willingness to die - all for the sake of love. We worship you. We ask that we might walk in your way of blessing. As we have received your blessing may we pass it on to others, especially the small ones, the children. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

(Prepared as part of research into the relevance of the Child Theology Movement in selected churches in Melbourne Australia, May 2013)
APPENDIX SEVEN

Study notes for parents and/or grandparents groups

Leader’s Notes to accompany book *Children and the Church*

As can be seen from the research, both Senior Ministers and Children’s Pastors recognised the vital importance of the love and faith life of parents and the wider family. The child needs much nurture, encouragement and guidance in order to find a positive sense of self and a generous spirit of love.

There is an old children’s song, “We love because God first loved us”, that says it all. Children can only grow into loving adults through their experience of being loved. The ultimate love of God is mediated to them through the love of parents and the Church. Maybe we can all look back and recognise someone in our family of origin who made us aware of God’s love. For me it was my grandfather; I could see his life of prayer and his care for all sorts of people. My time with him was precious, he was a reliable source of affirmation, always ready to listen and understand.

Suggestions

Participants should have a copy of the book or a copy of the section for study. The group can run for eight weeks following one chapter each week or you could reduce it to six weeks by leaving out the more technical, research method (Chapter Two) and combining Chapter Six with the Conclusion. Suggested questions are available for the end of each chapter, but feel free to adapt and go with the energy and interest of the group.

As a group leader I am sure you have many skills, but here are a few reminders:

1. Welcome all to the group – let each tell something of their connection with children.  
2. Include all, make room for all to participate but don’t force it. Be relaxed.  
3. Use humour from your own parenting mistakes, be honest, and be real.  
4. Hopefully participants will read the chapter before the group time, but be prepared to do a quick 3-4 minute summary of ideas as an introduction.
5. Allow time for personal reflection and prayer at the end of each session so that participants can find ideas that relate to their own lives.

6. At the conclusion participants could combine some of the key ideas, and these could be published on the church website or in the church paper.

My prayers are for lively, encouraging and happy times together in your group.

Suggested questions for study group

For Group Discussion: Introduction

Identify examples of Theological Reflection that speak to you about the place of Children:

Wisdom from scripture and church life –
Wisdom from your own experience –
Wisdom of today's culture –

Share your wisdom with others in the group and hear their wisdom – what are the similarities and differences?

For Group Discussion: Chapter 1

Identify: What was your favourite quote or idea?

What part of the literature could be useful in your life?

Where did you disagree with the literature? What made you angry?

Share and discuss.
For Group Discussion: Chapter 2

What are some of the challenges of the research?
What other methods could have worked?
Involving children in research is a difficult ethical issue. How do you think the voice of children could be included more effectively?

For Group Discussion: Chapter 3

Which stories on the final two pages make you question matters of faith?
What stories do you have about children that surprise or inspire you?
Looking at the summary of the finding would you add further ideas?

For Group Discussion: Chapter 4

What are your responses to the biblical references to the child?
What difference would it make to your life if you became more like a child?
To be vulnerable is not a comfortable place. Think of a time when expressing vulnerability has had surprising outcomes.

For Group Discussion: Chapter 5

Can you think of ways to help older church members to be comfortable with children in church?
In what ways have you seen the church changing?
What is your opinion regarding intergenerational formation?
Where do you think the Holy Spirit is leading your own church community?
For Group Discussion: Chapter 6

Considering Westerhoff's ideas about family Christian values – Can you involve all members of your family to make your own list?

How much blessing and how much correction do you use in the family?

What are your thoughts about Fox's Creation-Centred Spirituality?

For Group Discussion: Conclusion

As a disciple what difference would it make in your life if you were more like a child?

What practical ideas do you have to place children “in the midst” in your church?

Read again Phil. 2:6-7. How can we follow this Kenotic way of Jesus?

Which author in the discussion gave you a new idea to consider?