



# THERE ARE NO UNREACHED CHILDREN

## A Discussion Paper

### Authors: The Children's Team

*An examination of the importance of children and the emerging trends of God's work among them in the Body of Christ.*

Children are being reached from every angle by political parties, other faiths, secularism, corporations and a myriad of other causes. Above all, the children of the world need to know Jesus. They need to know the truth of His claims, to experience a personal relationship with Him and to be equipped to follow and serve Him throughout their lives.

Imagine if, as the global body of Christ, we affirmed that one of our main goals was to introduce children to Jesus and to disciple them in such a way as to encourage deep, long-lasting and community-engaging Christian faith.

In order to consider such a step we need, firstly, to examine our convictions about why children are important in the context of God, the church and the world. Secondly, we need to explore the trends which are emerging within the body of Christ in relation to children and to commit to the principles and actions which arise from these. Now is the time to consolidate our Biblical foundation for prioritising children and to join in with what God is doing amongst them!

## WHY CHILDREN? OUR FOUNDATIONAL CONVICTIONS

### God is...

*God is God for every generation in human history.* The God of our fathers never changes and he desires to enter into a life-changing relationship with our children. His unwavering intention is, and always has been, that the torch of faith would be passed to the succeeding generations through the family and the church.

"We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes and established the law, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands."

**Psalms 78:3–7**



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### The Church is...

*The church is the primary instrument of God's grace to save the world.* Since this [Lausanne] body was birthed in 1974, many church initiatives have flourished in this purpose at both local and global levels. Movements such as AD2000, the UPG Movement, and the impetus for the 10/40 Window, have carried the vision to reach and disciple the nations and those who have never heard.

Other initiatives have sought to equip and empower families to raise God-fearing children. Yet the stark reality is that neither families nor the church have done all they could or should to pass the torch of faith to the next generation. The church has not always supported families, nor properly appreciated the place and role of children.

*The church is not meeting the needs of our families and children.* The inadequacy of our efforts has left not only our children, but our very societies naked and exposed. The strength and influence of families, particularly Christian families, has diminished. Many are no longer providing stability and guidance, security and hope. The world that exists today for children and young people amply demonstrates that our efforts have not been sufficient to the task.

*The church is in a vulnerable position.* Around the world, where the church has been long established, it is now in decline. Even where the church is relatively new, energetic and growing, we see cracks and signs of decay - the growth of even these churches may be slowing. The church is seen as increasingly irrelevant with nothing to say to today's issues. There is a constant struggle for us to remain a community carrying out Jesus' Great Commission in an ever-changing world.

Yet, the very thing that could bring about radical and lasting change in society and vitality in our churches is already in our hands – the children of Christian families; the children in the communities in which the church has been planted; the children inside and outside the church. Our selfishness and indulgent lifestyles are causing us to let these precious mission partners slip through our fingers.

*For discussion: Whose responsibility is it to pass on faith to the next generation? Has too much (or not enough) focus been placed on the family unit as opposed to the community of faith?*

### The World is...

*The world is in turmoil.* Every generation can honestly claim that theirs is without precedent in need and challenge. But without a doubt our generation, with its post-modern mindset, globalization, terrorism, the internet, and accelerated technological change, creates unparalleled complexity and opportunity in this dawn of the Third Millennium.



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Information floods our senses for good or evil - far beyond the wildest imaginings of our predecessors. Children and young people today have never known a life without virtual realities. Their world is one of social media, blogs, texting, and video swapping. Never have they taken a photograph that they couldn't instantly see. Technology is their nurse and mentor. Our children have everything to live with, but nothing to live for. Their minds and lives are filled with an unimaginable overload of information, but no undeniable Truth; nothing to earth their existence, to provide meaning or purpose; nothing that suggests a reason for living more persuasive than instant gratification, or a search for escape.

*The world is unfriendly to children.* They bear the impact of the threats and perils of our times: natural and human disasters, armed conflict, rampant commercialism, environmental pollution, violence, abuse and neglect. Whether wealthy or poor, the secure walls and sure foundations of our children's lives are crumbling and broken.

### Children are...

*Children are no remote or obscure people group.* The Church today may not be looking for children, but they wouldn't have to look far to find them. They are found...

- In all countries, in all socio-economic categories and among people of all cultures
- In all communities: in families, in schools, in markets, in playgrounds, in streets
- In areas not easily accessible to the gospel
- In marginalized subcultures: children with special needs, in prison, homeless and displaced
- In high risk situations where conditions increase the likelihood that they will not have opportunity to hear the gospel: bonded slave labour, trafficked
- In resistant circumstances: children who have been harmed or neglected by those representing the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

*Children are precious in God's sight.* Some Christian leaders think the Bible says very little about children. However, as we begin to read Scriptures with *the child in the midst*, we are seeing that children are not just *present*, but *prominent* in Scripture. Indeed, there are more than 1500 references to children and childhood (including orphans, parenting and training). Very often children and youth are found playing important, even crucial roles in the outworking of God's plans.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Strachan and Simon Hood, eds. "Evangelization of Children", Lausanne Occasional Paper # 47, 2004, p.12.

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### To God, children are:

- A sign - they are God's blessing (Psalm 127:3) and are missed when not part of the covenant community.
- In need of teaching - they are to be treasured and taught at home and in community (Deuteronomy 6, 11).
- A symbol - they illustrate the relationship God wants with adults (Hosea 11:1, Matthew 18:2-3).
- Worthy of protection - God is on the side of the vulnerable (Psalm 68:5; James 1:27). When children are neglected, abused, victimised, God grieves. Jesus strongly advocates for their protection (Matthew 18:5-6, 10).
- Worshippers - they are designed to praise God (Psalm 8:2). Praise is not just something they will learn when older — it is their role now. Children praise Jesus even when adults reject him (Matthew 21:15).
- Fellow-agents of God's mission - Jesus said to let the little children come unto him for the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as them (Matthew 19:14). Therefore, we must include children as subjects and agents of the great commission and the equipping of the saints for the work of service (Ephesians 4:12).
- Examples – they are examples of the simple dependence that God's Kingdom requires of adults (Matthew 18:4).
- Unconditionally loved - Jesus has a blessing for children brought to Him: no demands, no challenges, not even a story! (Matthew 19:13-15)
- A focus in God's ministry - Jesus heals children (Luke 7, 8); welcomes them (Mark 10); uses children as examples of humility (Luke 18:17); warns of judgement for those who harm them (Matthew 18:5-6, 10) and values them (Matthew 18:12-14).<sup>2</sup>

*For discussion: • Which Biblical perspectives about children have you or your family, church or agency adopted most strongly? How might some of the other perspectives contained in Scripture influence your actions with regard to children? What ministry positions are given prominence within your church, denomination or agency and what does this imply with regards to work associated with children? Does Scripture provide a mandate for prioritising children or simply an endorsement?*

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Wendy Strachan and Simon Hood, Op. Cit., pp. 11-12.



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*Children are a suffering people group.* Almost one third of the world's population, approximately 2 billion people, are under the age of 15<sup>3</sup>. Most of the world's children, 88% of under-18s, live in the less developed world<sup>4</sup>. Experts estimate that 1 billion children will be born in the decade from 2003-2013 and over 90% of them to mothers and fathers earning less than \$US1 a day<sup>5</sup>. Extrapolating from population statistics, approximately 1 billion children live in parts of the world where they may never have heard of Jesus. Children are among the most marginalized, exploited, and suffering people groups in the world. Jesus had a very disturbing suggestion in Matthew 18:6, for those who cause any of the little ones who believe in him to sin.

*For discussion: Have we, in our Christian actions involving children, sometimes regarded evangelism and social action as mutually exclusive? How could we practically act in our context to help heal this rift?*

Children are open to the Good News. Many Christian leaders today can point to an awakening to faith in their childhood. Studies by the George Barna Research Group show that in the USA, the probability of someone coming to trust in Jesus is 32% for those between the ages of 5 and 12, but only 6% at age 19 or older. It seems that by age 13, one's spiritual identity is largely set in place.<sup>6</sup> This is the basic premise of an idea called the "4/14 Window".<sup>7</sup> Unofficial studies in many contexts strongly suggest that the openness of children to the Good News is present in cultures and societies around the world, regardless of religious or cultural background.<sup>8</sup> Any serious mission strategy will include careful and appropriate efforts to reach children and young people.

*For discussion: Is there sufficiently persuasive evidence to support the assertion that most people who are Christian in the world today made their first commitment to Jesus as children? What are the implications for our evangelism and mission strategies if this assertion is true?*

Children are shapers of their world. They are the greatest potential agents for change and transformation in the world today. Children are influencers of other children and of the adults in their lives. Many groups are seeking to use them to advance their agendas. For example, most advertising to families targets children

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<sup>3</sup> International Program Centre, US Bureau of Census 2004, <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/popclockw>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF Demographics of Children, [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

<sup>5</sup> David Young's address to the US Senate, cited in Oxford Analytica, October 2003

<sup>6</sup> Barna, G, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church's #1 Priority*, Regal Books from Gospel Light, USA 2003

<sup>7</sup> Dan Brewster, "The 4/14 Window: Child Ministries and Mission Strategies," in *Children in Crisis: A New Commitment*. Phyllis Kilbourn, Ed. Monrovia. MARC. 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Brewster, D, *Child, Church and Mission: A Resource Book for Christian Child Development Workers*, Compassion International, 2005, pp.141-142





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because they have the power to influence family decisions. We must protect them from harmful and manipulative influences and guide them to the Truth found in Christ.

Many people who came to Christ as children attest that it was friends or peers who most strongly influenced them in their faith decision. This means that not only are children a significant mission field, they are also an important mission force. The Bible is full of examples of children and young people who were used by God to do and to reveal significant things, including Miriam, Samuel, David, Josiah, Esther and Timothy, to name just a few.

Children are ready for any challenge. Indeed they thrive on tackling the seemingly impossible. We must respect their abilities, welcome their talents and nurture their gifts. They have a sensitivity to God's voice and an eagerness to serve God's purposes and are not restricted by preconceived ideas of what is possible or practical. God can and does use children and young people — their prayers, their insights, their hands, and their feet — in changing the hearts of humankind. They represent 'clean energy' to transform the world.<sup>9</sup>

### WHAT NEXT? KEY PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION BASED ON EMERGING TRENDS

With the above convictions in mind and with a passionate desire to equip the body of Christ for the task of discipling children, we offer the following principles for action, based on emerging trends we have identified. We sense a global movement of God calling the body of Christ to disciple children more effectively.

#### 1. Disciple for deep and long-lasting faith.

There is an increased realization that while the future of the church begins with child evangelism, it is accomplished by discipling and training children as ministry partners today, and developing them as the Christ-following leaders of tomorrow. Relationship development between children who are new in their faith and Christians who are further along the path is a key to this process.

*For discussion: What does it really mean to 'reach' the 2 billion children of the world and help them to be all that God intends? What role are you, your family, your church or your agency playing in this task? How could we equip children for long-lasting faith in the manner of our evangelism and discipleship? How could we equip more people for the task of discipling the world's 2 billion children? What examples from your context provide encouragement in relation to discipling children for long-lasting faith? What examples from*

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<sup>9</sup>Bambang Budijanto, "Children, The 'New' Energy for 21st Century Mission. Edinburgh 2010 – Study Theme 5." 2009. (Unpublished Mss.) 10.



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*your context cause concern in this regard? What are the implications of prioritising the discipleship of children for the way we conduct church?*

### 2. Partner with others within a Kingdom agenda.

There is an increased realization that partnership is vital to fulfilling the Great Commission, including the task of discipling the world's 2 billion children, as no single church, denomination or agency has all the answers or the capacity to do this. Families, churches, denominations, resourcing agencies, missions and care agencies are catching a global vision of Kingdom-minded partnerships for the care, evangelism and discipleship of children. In the manner of our partnerships we must return to the Kingdom values of servant leadership, humility, prayer, integrity, generosity and global equilibrium.

*For discussion: What encouraging examples can you share from your context in relation to partnerships for the sake of children? What examples from your context cause concern in this regard? Who do you need to connect or partner with in order to disciple children in a more lasting and effective way? How can we effectively equip and partner with families for the task of discipling children? How could the universal languages of culture be harnessed for evangelism and discipleship amongst children and partnership within the body of Christ?*

### 3. Reflect on children from a Biblical perspective – in Churches, Seminaries and Bible schools.

There is a sense that equipping Christian workers to care for children and youth is a significant challenge and opportunity for Churches, Seminaries and Bible schools in the coming years. Many seminaries are approaching this not as a new fad or diversion from other worthwhile training, but as the best way to achieve what they have already set out to do – equip the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world. The intent is not only to produce leaders who are better equipped to care for, evangelise and disciple children, but also to produce leaders who understand the significance of the Church's holistic ministry to children, and who can influence others at all levels and in all contexts on behalf of those children.

*For discussion: To what extent are our churches, seminaries and Bible schools including children in our teaching? What are some of the roadblocks to taking children seriously? (Is it eschatology? Is it a certain understanding of discipleship? Is it a 'disconnect' between theology and practise?) How could we practically work together to address some of these roadblocks? What are some of the most significant theological questions regarding children?*



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### 4. Recognise and encourage the potential of children.

The potential of children is clearly understood by political groups, marketing companies, environmentalists and people of other faiths and there is an emerging concern that this understanding be reclaimed by the body of Christ because it is our heritage. If children can be encouraged to develop their God-given gifts and abilities in the context of relationships with more mature believers then their faith will be grounded in everyday life and our discipleship efforts will be longer lasting. On another level, children are being understood within mission circles as important partners with us in mission. On yet another level, many of the world's current challenges are so dire that realistically they will take several generations to solve and the real hope for change lies with our children and theirs.

*For discussion: What encouraging examples can you share from your context in relation to encouraging the potential of children? What concerns do you have with regard to this? How could we promote missions strategies which appropriately estimate the importance and contribution of children? How could we encourage children to identify, use and develop their God-given gifts and abilities in order to promote long-lasting faith? How could we equip and deploy children for influence and impact in mission? How could we, in the manner of our evangelism and discipleship, equip children for mature future leadership within the body of Christ? How could we, in the manner of our evangelism and discipleship, equip children to have a role in community transformation?*

### 5. Share and contextualise resources.

In the light of the enormity of the task of discipling 2 billion children, and the reality of the lack of resources in many quarters of the church for this task, there is an increasing spirit of generosity and sharing with regards to resources for the care, evangelism and discipleship of children. It is also increasingly being recognised that resources have tended to be developed in certain parts of the world and distributed in others, and that moving forward together we must facilitate the development and sharing of appropriate, contextual material in and from all parts of the world.

*For discussion: What resources do you have for effective evangelism, discipleship and care of children? Have you considered tithing your intellectual property so that others within the body of Christ could have access to high quality resources? How could research be conducted and shared to help build momentum, focus and partnership around the needs of children? What role should context and culture play in the nature of resources used and developed for evangelism, discipleship and care of children? Do you have access to resources in your language? Do you have access to resources that are appropriate for your culture and context? What role could you play (or what help do you need) in creating, developing, sharing, translating or facilitating such resources? How could we harness technology for resource distribution, evangelism, discipleship and care in innovative ways?*





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### 6. Adapt to the technological context of children.

While stark contrasts still exist between urban and rural situations, there is an increasing awareness that the technological context of children is a significant forum in which to reach children. While adults may migrate to this context, children are becoming citizens of this context from the youngest ages. Children from all over the world are becoming more alike as a result of globalization and the internet. Technology greatly magnifies the impact of globalization, individualism and secularism on children, but it also opens up incredible opportunities for mission as well as opportunities for grounding the faith of children in everyday life.

*For discussion: How could we disciple children more effectively to thrive as Christians in this context? Have we considered encouraging children, as our mission partners, to help us adapt to the technological context? What encouraging examples can you share from your situation in relation to the technological context? What concerns do you have with regard to this?*

### CONCLUSION

God, in Christ, is reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinth 5:19). "Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it... we don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing!"<sup>10</sup> It is also true that "he creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing."<sup>11</sup> As we try to discern the will of Christ for 21<sup>st</sup> century evangelization it appears that now is the time to join in with the remarkable things God is doing through the body of Christ in relation to children. There are no 'unreached' children, the issue is 'who is reaching them?'. They are being reached from every angle by political parties, other faiths, secularism, corporations and a myriad of other causes. Above all, the children of the world need to know and follow Jesus. He is their hope, their truth, their peace and their future. The body of Christ needs children with a deep, long-lasting faith as partners in mission today and leaders of the church and the world tomorrow.

*God, in Christ, we pray that you would reconcile the children of the world to Yourself.*

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<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 2: 7-10 Scripture taken from The Message®//REMIX™: The Bible in Contemporary Language, Copyright ©2003 by Eugene Peterson

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.