



“Let  
the little children  
come to me”

Biblical-theological Tips for Ministering to **Children and Young People**

This document was prepared at the initiative of the Joint Children and Youth Movement (JCYM) to provide churches, theological institutions, Christian organizations and ecclesiastic leaders in general with an educational resource for Biblical, theological, and pastoral reflection about ministering to children, adolescents and youth. This document in no way attempts to be conclusive. Rather, it is a jumping off point for later reflection and especially to take on greater and better commitments in this ministry purpose.

The process that was followed to draft this document sought to be participatory and varied. For more than one year, the Bible and Theology Desk<sup>1</sup> for JCYM worked on different documents that were later placed into the hands of more than 120 church leaders for it to be discussed, corrected, and improved.<sup>2</sup> This text is the result of a long process with the participation of male and female pastors, theologians, educators and other leaders of different churches in the Americas related to adolescents, young people and adults.

The document will now be the property of the people who would like to join this participatory process: reading it, discussing it, and meditating on it. Our prayer is that what started as written text will become, because of the grace of God and the commitment to his People, a movement that, along with children and young people, will make an inclusive Church possible where people who have always been considered to be small today become the starring role in the Mission and the ministry's central core.

Let us recall what the Master taught us: "Let the little children come to me. Do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that those who do not trust in God the way a child does may not enter the kingdom of Heaven." (Luke 18:16-17).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Contributions are included that arose from the work of a group of more than 100 participants in the Mesoamerican Congress titled Children, Heart of the Mission, held in San Salvador, El Salvador in October 2014 that was convened by the Joint Children and Youth Movement.

<sup>3</sup> All the Biblical texts have been taken from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/>.

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# INTRODUCTION

0. Children and adolescents represent the most numerous sectors in our Latin American societies and, at the same time, they are the most vulnerable within the context of poverty, injustice and lack of protection.<sup>4</sup> They are part of the groups that are most affected by diverse problems such as poverty, HIV/Aids, violence, migration, etc. The outlook is not very strange; instead, it is part of the daily reality in our communities and churches. To face this situation, we should research, not just statistics and reports, but also mostly the sources of these problems and how we can act from our perspective of faith. As churches we should ask ourselves about what the Biblical text tells us, rethink our Christian ethics, and evaluate our missions and the concrete possibilities that we have in the Americas to contribute to overcoming this situation.

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4 See the 2014 UNICEF report <http://www.unicef.org/spanish/sowc2014/numbers/>



# Our children today

# Children in a social risk situation, vulnerable violated children

1. The statistics and studies about the situation of children and adolescents in Latin America show us an image that should seriously concern us: the “infantization of poverty.” The largest sub-group within the impoverished and indigent sectors are children. Poverty is understood to not just be financial scarcity, but also a lack of access to basic services related to health and education and to spaces for participation and protection. Violence, abandonment, discrimination, exclusion, lack of protection and propagation of disease, etc., occur with a greater magnitude within the context of poverty.

2. In Latin America, 6,000,000 million children suffer physical abuse, including abandonment. More than 80,000 boys and girls under 18 years of age die each year due to abuse by their parents. The five countries with the highest percentages of violence toward children are Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Peru, Costa Rica, and El Salvador. This situation also reaches the churches, especially based on a partial interpretation of physical punishment within the Biblical context. In many cases it is used as a sort of foregate or as a means of legitimizing situations involving abuse and violence within the bosom of Christian families.
3. In research carried out in Peru and Bolivia about evangelicals and domestic violence, in the section on beliefs and punishment and discipline practices toward children, the records show that on average more than half the evangelical families agree with or partially agree with physical punishment (more than one-third claim that they use physical instruments such as belts, sticks, or other objects). It was also shown that, in Peru, physical punishment in evangelical homes is used more frequently than in other homes in Peruvian society. In Bolivia, despite the drop in the use of physical punishment in the family setting, psychological punishment climbed.<sup>5</sup>

The research also shows that girls suffer the most from physical punishment and sexual abuse. Some 90% of the cases pertain to girls and the most common perpetrators were family members or people who were known to the victim. The sexual abuse percentages in adolescents between 15 and 19 years of age is 20% in various countries in the Americas.

4. The problem with trafficking<sup>6</sup> is growing in the Americas. In Latin America, two million children and adolescents are victims of commercial or labor-related sexual exploitation.
5. The impact that the HIV and Aids epidemic is having on children is devastating. More than two million children live with HIV and Aids in the world, and 47,000 are calculated to be in Latin America and the Caribbean. Although progress has been made in the care and treatment of adults, this does not occur with children. Without the protective setting of their families, vulnerable children or who are orphaned due to HIV and Aids face a greater risk of lack of nutrition, violence, exploitation, and abuse.
6. There are other problems that could be added, such as migration, levels of illiteracy, shortages in the health area, etc. The previously mentioned statistics are just one example of an evident situation in our context: children and adolescents represent the sector with the most vulnerability in relation to social problems in our societies.

## A problem for “adults”

7. The previous section shows a reality in figures that we see around ourselves on a daily basis. Now, the question is: Why are children in the Americas the most vulnerable group? What is so special about this sector in particular to be a victim of such circumstances?
8. The answer to these questions lies in fundamental elements such as how we understand and define who children are and what place they hold in Latin American

5 Report Inside Four Walls. Evangelicals and Domestic Violence in Peru and Bolivia: <http://institutopaz.net/recursos/resumen-ejecutivo-dentro-de-las-cuatro-paredes>, <http://institutopaz.net/recursos/resumen-ejecutivo-dentro-de-las-cuatro-paredes-bolivia>

6 Trafficking represents illegal commerce in people for sexual exploitation, forced labor and other types of slavery.

societies (in families, schools, neighborhoods, and churches). In other words, how we answer the basic question of “what does it mean to be a boy or a girl?” will result in diverse ways of acting and viewing reality. That is why we find different ways of understanding and discourses that are derived from different ways of acting. An example would be the belief that children are inferior beings or people who are less developed than adults.

9. This indicates to us a central issue to take into account, i.e., that there are diverse conceptions of what being a boy or girl is. We do not ask ourselves about it since we take for granted that we understand it. But doing so is a determining factor in our work. In other words, the way we intervene will depend on what we understand childhood to be. Practices and the circumstances of exclusion often times are produced due to naturally forcing the condition on children in certain programs and structures. Thus, there is a question that we will ask throughout this document: What place do children have in our communities and churches? Where is it defined? What type of understanding is it an answer to? Surely those places legitimize, from a broader outlook, other risk circumstances that they experience in their immediate context, such as the family, the neighborhood, or school?
10. The risk situation to which children are exposed is not tied only to conjunctural problems; rather it is something deeper so it is problematic: the images and ideas that circumscribe, limit, locate, and open their place within the community. Even more so, it answers, primarily to the adult-centric cosmic vision that governs our societies. What do we mean by that?
  - a. Children have a position of inferiority in relation to adults.
  - b. A distinction governs that is frequently marked by “things that have to do with children” and “adult things.” This produces distinctions in power and value relationships themselves (from the family to the churches).

- c. Natural divisions exist (i.e., that are not discussed but rather “they’re just like that because”) about the characteristics of the diverse groups that make up our societies. Thus, all sorts of situations are legitimized from mistreating senior citizens to boys and girls, men and women “because that’s the way it should be.”
  - d. There is an “adult logic” and a “child’s logic” in relation to how to look at life, that are played off each other and, obviously, the latter is considered to be “inferior.”
11. In short, we would like to emphasize the fact that work committed in depth in relation to children and adolescents would imply not just taking care of the consequences of certain practices and context, but also of visions, ideology, and discourses that make said circumstances possible and that (whether or not we would like it) we ourselves would give way to naturalizing diverse understandings of the world, people, the church, and God himself.

### Adult-centricity in our churches

12. The adult-centricity present in our societies gives rise to our children being victims of mistreatment, violence and exclusion because there are naturalized understandings about the supposed inferiority that they have. Now, does this affect our churches? Sadly, the answer is yes.
13. We can view this adult-centricity present in our ecclesiastical communities in the secondary place that children and adolescents have in the church organization, and the fact that they do not play the leading role very often in activities that are considered to be exclusively for adults. From an even broader perspective, we see these dynamics in the ways that the doctrines and images of God are understood. They are an adult, masculinized vision that does not fit the Biblical text and the place that the children and mothers disparage. We could also mention some practices and doctrines, such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, liturgy, etc., where children and adolescents are often times excluded.

### Where are our children?

14. Faced with this outlook, a proposed change necessarily implies getting to the bottom of these problems: the cosmos-visions (social, cultural, and religious) that sustain and underpin children’s position of vulnerability. In other terms, children need a new place in our families, our communities, our schools, and our churches. Therefore, today much is said about children as subjects of law where their capacity to choose, create, grow, participate, and have a voice is recognized.

# Children in the kingdom of God

*“And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them: If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them; and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them: Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me.” (Mark 9:35-37)*



# What it is and what it could be

15. Jesus set a child in the midst of the disciples to teach them who is first in the kingdom of God. What, then, is the kingdom? The term comes from the Old Testament, when the people of Israel were faced with pressure from the empires in power. The “kingdom of the heavens” that was approaching represented God’s involvement that occurred in response to this oppressive situation, where peace was reached and the expected justice would be implemented through a completely different kingdom, directed by the Messiah. This vision is expressed in the prophetic writings and especially in Isaiah: salvation would be forever (51:6), a radical change would take place in the people (60), with a new Heaven and Earth (60:19, 65:17, 66:22). In other words, the kingdom of the heavens would be an integral transformation of Israel in all areas: more just justice, more egalitarian policy, a more community-based economy.
16. Luke 17:20-24 shows us that, on the one hand, Jesus himself proclaimed and incarnated this kingdom and, on the other hand, He is still yet to come. No calculations, no models, no times. In Jesus’ follow-up, this paradox was recognized: the presence of the kingdom that transforms history today, and in turn gives hope in its final consummation as the goal that we pursue in an active hope, guided by the Spirit (Jn 16:5-15).
17. The kingdom practiced and proclaimed by Jesus was about opting for the more disadvantaged of society at that time: attending to the poor; the prisoners and fighting against injustices in the legal, political, and religious settings (Mt 5:3, Lk 4:16-20). The kingdom, for Jesus, also meant acts of inclusion and “breaking” with the customs of the time, such as when he was in the house of Mary and Martha (Lk 10:38-42) whose image is that of the master of her apprentices, a practice to which women were totally relegated. We also see it in the story of the dealings with the Samaritan (Jn 4:1-26), whose radicalism not only lies in approaching a person from Samaria (repudiated and discriminated against by the Jew due to their “ethnic impurity”), but also for being a woman, consoling her and announcing the good news.
18. Jesus shows that the kingdom has come through his words and actions (Mt 12:28, Lk 11:20, 17:20). He uses the language of the “compliance” to describe his ministry and mission (Lk 4:21, 6:20, 7:22, 16:16, Mt 11:15). He presents the kingdom as a “human experience” and open to the grace of God (Lk 12:32). This kingdom is not a despotic kingdom like the surrounding empires, but an inclusive and loving kingdom (Lk 6:20, 7:22, Mt 11:5).
19. Nor does this kingdom belong to an uncertain future but rather Jesus Christ makes himself manifest in the here and now. This is reflected by different images expressed by Him: pardoning the sins (Mk 22:5, 2:17, Lk 7:50, 15:2, Jn 8:11), which was not a legal transaction or religious rite, but rather a true act of liberation from interior guilt, fear and the person’s social exclusion to return it to the community (Lk 19:1-10); restore life, reflected in his ministry of healing and expulsion of demons, which have not been isolated yet, once again, integral redemption; by sharing the table with everyone without exception (Mk 2:15, Lk 7:36, 11:37, 14:1, 15:2, 19:5), a sample of openness in love for all people without social restrictions.
20. In summary, the subject of the kingdom of God, spread throughout the Bible, poses three premises that define it:
  - a. God is the originator and promoter of the kingdom so He is the undisputed sovereign.
  - b. All human actions are subject to God. Praying the Our Father, Jesus stated “Thy will be done” (Mt 6:10) indicating that only a person who follows the will of the Father will have access to the kingdom of God (Mt 7:21), such that everything depends on His will. To resoundingly accentuate the sovereignty of God over everything that was created gives priority to the vulnerable and weak as a privileged trait of those who are part of the kingdom. Therefore, Jesus (along with other Biblical testimonies) will teach with full clarity that the kingdom of the heavens is for the poor and children (Lk 6:20; Mk 10:14)
  - c. The exercise of the kingdom has a universal amplitude. Both the Old and New Testaments present the action of God as king and governor outside the religious, racial, and ethnic setting. The mere fact of starting the Holy Scriptures with the creation of the world indicates that the action and sovereignty of God has no limit whatsoever. In addition, the exodus, the core event in Biblical faith, occurs within the framework of the total openness of the liberating action of the Lord toward those who live in oppression and slavery. That is how the prophet Amos understood it, when he said: “Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt? and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?” (Am 9:7).

## Little boys and girls in the kingdom

21. From the Old Testament we can see the central nature that people have who are excluded from Israel for the mission of God. That is how we find that orphans, widows, and foreigners should be especially cared for and taken care of (Ex 22:22; Dt 10:18; 27:17). Jesus takes his ministry on that same direction on its path, taking care of the infirm, widows, and complying with, through His sayings and words, the special action of God toward those who suffer from contempt and oppression (Mt 5:1-12; Lk 4:16-19).

22. Often times these are called God's little children, whom he especially accepts due to their situation of exclusion and vulnerability. God shows Himself in the text of the Bible as a God of justice, equality, and love, who acts directly when faced with human injustices and lack of protection. He is a God who is solidary with human pain.

### The kingdom and family

23. The subject of the family in the Bible enters, of course, into this proposed kingdom of God as a central depositary of education, social harmony, relationships, and growth through faith. First of all, the Bible should be recognized as not presenting any unique model or paradigm of what could be called the ideal or Christian family, as many people tend to believe. There are diverse stages that the people of God lived through, especially in the times of the Old Testament -- a formative period, a monarchical epoch, of exile and post-exile -- offer facets of being a family, from the size, on through its make-up through considering the roles within the family.

24. Nevertheless, we can find, both in the Old and New Testaments, some characteristic elements of what the family core is understood to be: the presence of more than two generations in the home (grandparents, parents, and children), the inclusion of people in non-blood relationships within the families and the demand for maintaining communities of equality (widows, orphans, and exiles or slaves of war or due to financial reasons and other people whose lives were in clear danger due to not having a home in which to live safely and significantly). Thus, family represents a space of protection, growth, and learning, where children grow as individuals in society from the relationship with people close to them, from insertion into the family and knowledge of a story (the importance of memory) and from the link between faith and matters throughout the community.

### Children: the kingdom's theological subjects

“At that same time, Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said: I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Yes, Father, because that is how you liked it.”

25. While Mk 9.35-37 reflects how Jesus places children as a metaphor in the kingdom, that verse evidences the active place that they have. Everything that the followers found with Jesus, they had lived through, everything that made them happy and filled them with glory, had been hidden from the wise and the understanding of the law and the religious leaders of the time and was revealed to children. As we saw, God's little children represented a core concept in the theology of Israel. Therefore, within this context, it should be understood that children were conceived as a “voice of divinity,” both in the Jewish tradition and in the religiousness of Greco-Roman antiquity.

26. In this tale, Jesus offsets two types of logic: that of the wise and understanding -- adults who supposedly knew all the authorized details and interpretations in the religious documents -- and that of the little children. The former represent reason, intelligence, calculation, control, all those names that define the cusp of supposed maturity that makes it possible to speak with objectiveness, determination, wholeness, and right, in this case God Himself. But in the end, the ones who were chosen to receive the divine mysteries are children. Jesus uses them as a symbol, as theological subjects as a key to revelation.

27. Jesus uses the image of little children as a metaphor for the kingdom on various occasions (Mt 18.1-2, 19.13-14, Mk 10.15-16, Lk 18.14-17). This has been interpreted as an affirmation in several ways: as a personal aptitude, a social place, an attitudinal trait, etc. But it is precisely the contrast that is explicit in the passage that shows us a better comprehension of its meaning. Using the image of little children is

to make an ironic investment in the rigidity of the Law, which, as is stipulated in those times, does not require any follow-up or compliance on the part of children. From this perspective, Jesus may be said to have offered a notion of the kingdom as a reality that goes beyond compliance with a religious standard and thus, a particular way of viewing God himself, revolving around an interpretation by adult men who knew the law.

28. As we well know, the Biblical texts are not just stories that describe a linear progression of events. On the contrary, they are occurrences that have a very profound symbolic meaning. What does it mean, then, for children, and not the people who supposedly have the authority (moral, spiritual, institutional, or academic) to view God? We are able to conclude that these two types of logic present in the passage represent different ways of viewing God in and of themselves. And we are not just referring to specific images or discourses. Instead, we are referring to different ways to approach what is divine.

29. In short, returning to verse Mk 9.35-37, the child put in the middle as a metaphor of the kingdom has several meanings. First, the child represents Jesus' affirmation that the kingdom implies a special commitment with those people that society has excluded, whose situation involves vulnerability and injustice. While there are some who maintain those unjust borders, God acts to include and create justice. But, in second place, Jesus' action is an affirmation of empowerment, where little children symbolize a metaphor for the revelation of God, in juxtaposition to what is believed to be correct and true. These types of searches are characteristic of adulthood.

# From the Patriarchic God to the God of Love



# Images of God

30. We already know that different images of God exist. But where do they come from? God decides to reveal himself throughout history. And that is where we name Him when we call Him “Father,” “Friend,” “Savior” or use expressions such as “Love,” “Merciful,” “Compassionate,” etc. In other words, understanding God and the way we describe and know Him has a direct relationship with how we experience our faith on a daily basis and follow the Word. Even more so, the images of God that we use are tied to the practices, and cosmic visions that we promote.
31. But it bears stating that these images are just partial expressions since God is always more than what we can put into words, know, and describe. No discourse can describe Him in a final, finished fashion. Therefore, nobody can say that they have a full knowledge of God. Religious discourse becomes dangerous when it does not recognize those dynamics. We tend to believe that our particular ways of understanding and defining God are absolute. We forget that we are always interpreting his Actions, from when we read the Bible to the diverse experiences of the Spirit that we have. It is even more dangerous when, in practice, a discourse, an action or a cosmic vision in particular attempts to represent itself as being absolute in the name of God and it, therefore, views itself as being exempt from questioning. Therefore, we should ask ourselves: What conception of God does adult-centralism in our churches uphold? To which image of God are we referring when we speak about the kingdom?
32. Something that is common in this direction has to do with the diverse attributes that we place on the name “Father,” which is frequently used in the Bible. Often times, God is spoken of as the Father, who

punishes, safeguards, controls, and applies the law. The question is: Are these visions Biblical? Don't they reflect a closed comprehension instead, one that is adult-centric and patriarchic of the “paternal” -- very present in our culture -- applied to the person of God?

33. When viewing the story of Jesus, the figure of the Father can be understood in light of His historic mission. Jesus describes Himself as being sent by Him, describing Him as a companion in his pilgrimage. (Jn 14.21), whose central purpose is to give life (Jn 5.21). Even more so, what is essential in Jesus' ministry is to show the love that he lives with the Father and thus, together with the community of followers, to live in that same love (Jn 15.10)
34. We know that this is a complex subject for churches. But we believe that it is important to open it up for discussion since any religious practice and theological discourse acts fundamentally for social actions and cosmic visions. In turn, all of this is sustained by comprehending God. Therefore, this also refers to delving deeper: into the theological conceptions that give rise to the boys' and girls' and other social sectors' vulnerability.

## About the Trinitarian God community and the family

35. But another central, yet basic, subject here is Christian theology, which often times is cast aside: when we speak about God, we speak about the Trinitarian God. Therefore, invoking the relationship between the Son and the Father cannot forget the role of the Spirit. The Spirit also assists the community of believers in the mission (Jn 14.14,25-26), guiding us on the mission's path and in living the faith, with all things reflecting the love between the Father and the Son (Jn 16.12-15). In short, what characterizes God are means of relating, based on love, between three people and humanity itself.
36. In summary, God is presented as a Trinitarian community of love that accepts and assists its

daughters and sons in the story's pilgrimage. So we can ask ourselves: What are the preponderant images that we use of God? What emphases do we place on them? If God is a Trinity and is manifested through loving relationships, why do we tend to emphasize masculine images and legitimize types of social relationships that are adult centric and patriarchic?

37. The subject of a Trinitarian God that emphasizes God's community constitution is already a theological Biblical argument that invites us to consider the subject of being human as an image of God, with an exegetic perspective, especially taking into consideration the first chapter in the Bible (Genesis 1.26-28).

In this passage, the community concept, both as divinity and as a creature, are emphasized: “Now let us make the human being as we are.... That is how God created the human being like God.” The human being created by that community (Trinitarian) God represents a plural where equality is not emphasized; instead concordance and harmony within the difference are emphasized. In other words, □ Adam (humanity) is created in the image of God as a “man” (Zakar) and “woman” (Nekeba), because the trinity is that plurality where the different parts are joined together in eternal harmony. The image of God in the human being occurs in that plurality of masculinity and femininity; and it is interesting that we unite what is said in Genesis 5.1-4 -- “God created the human being in His likeness.” He created man and woman, then he blessed them and called them “human beings”... Adam had a son who looked like him in everything and “he called him Seth. He also had more sons and daughters” -- the difference is expanded by also including other people, not just in the gender difference, but also in the generational difference.

With these two texts from Genesis, it may be considered, with exegetic and hermeneutical support, that what was created in the image of God is more than the individual, families, which are recognized, in their different types, in practically all societies, ancient and modern, as a smaller component of society.



# Churches that learn to play

# The logic of playing

38. One of the characteristics of childhood is playing (although sadly it is not always fulfilled because even the right to play is taken away from them). This is not only a recreational activity; it is the way used by children to learn to socialize and understand the world around them. Playing is differentiated a great deal from the way that being adult-centric attempts to comprehend reality: enjoyment is positioned above compliance, spontaneity about rules, the body and emotions above reason; esthetics above writing.
39. In this sense, churches also need to start with the logic of play. What do we mean by that? That the church's being openly reflects the characteristics of playing and thus overcomes the rigidity of adult-centric concepts and practices reflected in the forms of the liturgy, institutional organization, leadership patterns, preaching and teaching, etc. This means that affection, the place for spontaneity, bodily movements and the plurality of ways of doing things -- the way that most children live day to day -- take a core position in our ecclesiastical communities. We should be original and use our creativity in our services, the liturgies should be more inclusive, and there should be more participation by the voice of children in making decisions and in the ecclesiastical projects, including other elements that we could mention. Playing should not be entertainment; it should be a way of understanding the context, of learning to criticize our dogmatism and adult customs. Therefore, little children should not be a sector that has to be attended to; it should be a sector that we learn from and include. Opening up to the logic of playing is not just organizing different activities; it represents a different way of seeing life, the mission, and spirituality.

## Children at the core

40. From everything that has been developed so far, we might say that a church that walks on the paths of the kingdom of God makes its children one of its main agents. What we want to insinuate with this is that children should be a unique subject to take into account from the kingdom's perspective. What we want to realize is that, when faced with the current situation of little children and adolescents in our societies and churches, there should be a place with more centrality. Even more, understanding the kingdom in this key shows us the importance of making a commitment to any person and any circumstance that reflects the presence of injustice and exclusion.
41. As we said, speaking about children at the core is to give a more leading role to a sector whose vulnerability comes from making them invisible and excluded. Why? Because that implies empowering them, recognizing their creative capacity, the right to speak and, thus, it implies committing ourselves to building a new way of seeing children. The result will be a broader vision of their situation and, through that, a concrete practice to fight against those circumstances of injustice that places it in a place of vulnerability and risk. This means, then, a new way of seeing the church, how it is organized, how it understands community dealings, its spirituality and its ministries.

## Theology and playing

42. Every way of understanding faith, spirituality and the church start with a vision of God, i.e., of a theology. In other words, the ways in which we understand and define God will give rise to, will allow, will make possible (oh, no!) certain practices and cosmic visions. By making this claim, we are basing ourselves on the fact that theology is a practice that every believer and every church develops in their daily life when they view their circumstances in the light of faith. We have already seen that a preponderant adult-centric image of God exists, which also legitimizes and promotes certain practices, cosmic visions, and dynamics. That

is why we wonder: How do you build a theology that is more inclusive and sensitive to our children?

43. The road we need to travel is by facilitating a theology based on children. This means building spaces where children are listened to about matters of faith, the Bible, and the Church. Of course, adults have a great deal to teach. But we can also create spaces where children's appreciations and images teach us more about God. Why? Because God speaks through them. Even more so, the act of allowing them to speak and of listening to them in and of itself is an action of recognition and inclusion, so it is just.
44. This means huge changes in how the church recognizes itself as a community of learning. That is why we wonder: How do you build educational offices in churches? Are children able to create theology -- to manifest their vision of who God is and how to act -- or are they just vessels for things taught by an adult?

## Mission for children: conversion, evangelization, discipleship and pastoral

45. To consider the mission from the children's point of view is to change our Churches' traditional types of logic. In our ecclesiastical practices, it tends to be the adults who evangelize children and try to steer them to Jesus, turning them into vessels for evangelization and not into subjects of mission.
46. This way, conversion occurs within the framework of an adult-centric, pragmatic experience where the boy or girl follows a predetermined formula (raise your hand, say the prayer, and go to the altar) to be saved. This comprehension should be analyzed by observing what the Bible tells us about little children, especially when Jesus says "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19,14). This shows that they stop being passive agents for evangelization to turn into active subjects for it. In the adult-centric perspective, little children are just a passive vessel; in the mission's practice of Jesus, they turn into a place and experience for evangelization (Mc 9.36-37).

47. Conversion first seen in children invites us to consider it as a faith experience that transforms us and changes constantly on the pathway of life. From the few references we have of Jesus' childhood, Luke makes particular mention when he tells us that "And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him" (Lk 2.40). A similar description was given in relation to John the Baptist (Lk 1.80).
48. Children grow integrally: physically, emotionally, socially, spiritually, and intellectually. Based on this experience, the church could exercise its evangelization in both settings. That is why they should be considered to be agents of change in society (Is. 11.6). In that sense, the disciple turns into an adventure for assistance and caring for faith. Pastoral work would dare to change the control patterns to "entertain" and "calm," by incorporating inclusion into community life and participation in leadership and the ministry to make them visible in the ministry of the Church. Likewise, we can think about the liturgy and services as spaces for children to participate in, as well as for including them in practices that are as central as administration and participation in the Lord's Supper.
49. The Church's pastoral work should opt for taking care of children's wellbeing. This implies a radical resistance and complaint against any practice that threatens a full life: violence, malnutrition, trafficking, mistreatment, exploitation, etc.
50. Evangelization "based on" children offers broader horizons than evangelization "for" children. It brings up new guidelines in the church for missionary actions with children, not just looking after their "souls," but committing to their words, actions, and integral wellbeing where the body has a privileged dimension that includes playing, laughing, dancing, feeling sensations, making gestures, spontaneity, making noise, faith, and parties.

### Churches that make themselves heard

51. Churches should be a prophetic voice for situations that involve children's risk and vulnerability, but not as an external element. Instead, it should start with the context of little children in the same community of faith and its context. From there, we believe that some pledges that the ecclesiastical communities are able to take on are the following:
- a. Children's situations should have a more important place in the times related to the community's preaching, teaching and liturgy.
  - b. Children should play a more leading role in diverse areas of the church, such as in teaching, in the ministries, and in the liturgical moments.
  - c. We should incorporate practices and dynamics that are generally applied to childhood in the interactions with the whole church and its membership to review those boundaries that so sharply divide the groups of the same age range. What is central here is the inclusion of an esthetic dimension (the use of images, the theater), of a participatory dialog within the community (the use of narrative, preaching and teaching that are built together and not transmitted in a single direction), and the inclusion of activities related to playing (games).
  - d. Work spaces should be opened up with social organizations (religious or not) that are committed to the vulnerable position of children in the neighborhoods and the church's communities.

**Challenges:  
transform  
and be  
transformed**





# Brave, valuable actions

52. The situation of children, adolescents, and youth in the Americas requires brave (prophetic) actions that are coordinated by the Christian churches, institutions, and organizations. Jesus' message calls us to act in two directions: to become involved with children in the processes that promote integral wellbeing and, in addition, to allow children to confront our models of an adult-centric life and to lead us on the paths to human transformation. This is a two-way transformation process: do more of what we have so far been doing for children, and allow children to do the great deal that they can do for our adult world. In other words, transform and be transformed.
53. The challenges for our churches, for Christians in particular, are many. Some of them have been enunciated with pastoral urgency in this document. The following is a brief synopsis of these challenges:

## A service-oriented, prophetic church

54. The Lord wants a Church that gives testimony to His love among the neediest people. As was stated in the first part of this document, children are not one of, they are the first of, these populations. But, in addition to poverty, the statistics on violence are well known (including gender violence against girls) and they should include abandonment, commercial sexual exploitation, limited access to education, health problems and HIV/Aids.

55. The role of the churches in civil society -- especially in political spaces, organizations and institutions that work with children -- is becoming increasingly well known. We see NGOs', municipalities, schools (private and public), civil organizations, etc., that seek ecclesiastical communities or faith-based organizations to develop projects, put together consulting groups, help in emergencies, prepare legislative proposals to the benefit of children, etc.
56. Therefore, a challenge does not consist of beginning something that we have not done up to this point. Instead, it consists of delving deeper into what we are doing, of learning from the best experiences and of checking how effective what we have done has been. It also consists of, in addition to its social sense, imbuing those actions with a political character and of taking on the role that our churches may fulfill in the field of having a public effect on children's rights. A ministry revolving around promoting and defending children's rights is still an unexplored field for many churches.
57. The challenges that we are facing with a view to more faithfully, more pertinently playing the service-based and prophetic role that the Lord has called us to fulfill in this period (Prov 31.8-9) have to do with raising a voice along with diverse social stakeholders committed to the position of children and adolescents. They are related to raising awareness about the situation in this social sector, the need to create more public policies, and the need to denounce situations, discourses and practices involving abuse and violence. Above all else, these challenges are about being an agent for change through pastoral assistance and taking care of the specific problems in our communities.

## Sensitive and learning church

58. We need to recognize that our churches know very little about children's world. This lack of knowledge is something we share with society in general. We talk about it and we think we have the final word, but, actually we have explored very little and have

a great deal to learn. Sometimes we think that they are inferior beings, that some are people on the way to "becoming people" or that they are small adults who still have not gained the knowledge or reached the conditions that they need to be real adults. In this perception of children, adults are better than the children are.

59. It bears mentioning here that there are negative effects that these perceptions have for our ministry to benefit children and also for the ministry that children should develop to benefit adults. Therefore, as this document points out, we need to transform how we have understood children's world up to this point. The ways in which we act toward this understanding and the place that we grant it in our social context depend on this understanding.
60. Inter-disciplinary dialog with the sciences related to education, psychology, anthropology, politics, theology, etc., is becoming urgent on this path to learning. We need to review, among other matters, our traditional ways of understanding children and our visions of infancy, the theological discourses that we have employed and the way we relate with children.
61. Jesus, for example, had an understanding of children that helps us understand how he respected and valued children and gave them a place in society and in the kingdom (Lk 10.21). He placed children as an example before the adult disciples (Mt 18.1-2; 19.13-14). He served them the same way he served people that followed Him. He used that as an example to show that they were also disciples, with no distinction from the rest (Mk 10.15-16).

## Inter-generational, inclusive church

62. Churches in general are made up of young people and adults. In addition, we also know that the mentality that governs our ecclesiastical culture and culture in general is adult-centric. In other words, we relate to each other, view society, and live spirituality the "way adults do."

63. This adult-centralism is translated into ecclesiastic practices that present adults as the model for how children should finish up and be complete as people who are waiting to “grow up.” Thus, the adult world is understood to be superior to a child’s world so asymmetric power relationships are developed between adults, who are considered to be superior, and children, who are considered to be inferior. This adult-centralism characterizes our culture and delimits many of our models for family life, for social organization, and for Christian spirituality.
64. Perhaps the above can help us understand the reasons why the voice of children is not listened to the same way as the authority of adults is perceived. In many cases, it is not even heard. How different we behave in comparison to God! Jesus unveiled even the face of God with children, validated their presence, listened to their words and designated them, as was said previously, as signposts of His Kingdom (Mt. 19.14).
65. The challenge is no less: the churches need to listen to the voice of children and they need to be allowed to play a leading role, subject to actions and the law, as an ecclesiastical and social practice that empowers them, includes them, and seeks a full life. The churches’ challenge is even to take into account the value of children and to validate their place in the church and in society in general.

### Tender, just church

66. The figures for violence against children are alarming. Faced with this lacerating reality, churches must play the role of defenders of children that, all the while

churches are fighting for their rights to protection, they live in such a way that they give testimony to protection, safety, and justice. We are making the protection that we are looking for out there (outside the churches), patent here (inside the churches; we can say the same thing about safety, tenderness, justice and full wellbeing). Churches can be safe places, places of loving protection and tender care for children, like the model bequeathed to us by our friend Jesus.

67. In that regard, the church should reflect on the relationship between diverse practices involving physical punishment for children -- which is legitimized by reductionist readings of the Bible text -- and the promotion of contexts involving abuse and violence. Faith-based communities are responsible for assuming the positive discipline and urging that punishment in any of its forms be left behind. It is important to emphasize here that having limits is necessary and is a right of children. This implies that parents need to be trained and guided to develop their own judgment, self-control capacity, self-esteem and autonomy so the way they behave in society is appropriate in the culture in which they live. Thus, positive discipline, based on respect for children, makes it possible to develop their potentials.
68. Proper treatment should be the distinctive trait of the churches’ ministry toward children: safe spaces where they participate freely, where they learn about God and experience his love in an environment of respect and value, where their rights are recognized, where their value is considered and where their contributions are taken into account as a God-given gift to transform everyone.

### A church that trains and protects

69. Part of the church’s mission is to train in faith. But this training is not limited to transmitting the doctrinal teachings that are commonly summarized in the confessional credos or in the declarations of faith. Instead, training encompasses education for daily life, for citizen responsibility, and for practicing the values of the kingdom of God. This is an education that is oriented toward training citizens in the kingdom of God that live their faith in solidarity and claim their rights with dignity.
70. An upbringing is a life-long task that begins in the closest circle, i.e., in most cases, in the family. And the church plays with families -- and with other people who care for children - a primordial educational role so they are healthy, healing, formative and just spaces for care and learning.<sup>7</sup>

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7 *Faith-based communities and organizations that develop programs and services and that have direct contact with people under 18 years of age, would do well to adopt a written policy to keep them protected. This is generally known as a policy to protect children and adolescents. This policy should help create a safe, positive environment and demonstrate that the Church or Organization seriously assumes its responsibility to take care of them. Unfortunately, surrounded by so many people who are genuinely interested in children, it should not be ignored that unscrupulous people with bad intentions (sexual abusers, or traffickers in boys, girls, and adolescents) are also known to join in. Therefore, resounding measures should be taken to increase the possibility of keeping these people out. WorldVision has published an informational booklet about this subject called: Churches and Organizations of Faith that Are Safe for Children and Adolescents. It may be seen here: <http://www.wvi.org/es/IglesiasSeguras>*