

# **A Church Where Children Are Welcome: A New Paradigm for Children's Ministry in Africa**

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## **Abstract**

Children have always been part of the church in Africa and in various ways children have been accommodated in the ministry of the church. Two approaches or “paradigms” in incorporating children in the church are compared. The first is termed the “educational” paradigm. Sunday School is concisely discussed as an example of one of the most common “educational” approaches prevailing in African churches, with reference to the origins and historic contribution of the Sundays School Movement. The “educational” paradigm is evaluated and certain pitfalls pointed out.

A second approach to incorporate children in the ministry of the church is termed the “hospitality” paradigm. With reference to four principles flowing from this paradigm, Relational, Intergenerational, Narrative and Missional, it is argued that a paradigm of hospitality can be of greater value in the church's ministry to, with, by and on behalf of children inside the church as well as in the community.

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It is finally argued that theological seminaries have the responsibility to prepare candidates for a holistic, child-inclusive, hospitable church ministry.

## **1. Case study – A Sunday Morning in Kinshasa**

*The big suburban church in Kinshasa has a famous Sunday School. The church invested in the infrastructure, erecting an all-purpose education centre that also serves as a kindergarten and general training centre during the week. The Sunday School is well organised, with committed and disciplined teachers assigned to various tasks according to a detailed roster. Children are divided into classes according to age, starting at about 4 years, running through to 14 years of age. Although some of the classes are big, up to 50 children in one room, the teachers (moniteurs) are allocated two or three to a class, which helps with the general order.*

*The teachers are well prepared. They use an international curriculum with neat student books and teacher's manuals and children are assessed regularly, with an annual examination leading to a certificate for the faithful and a final 'graduation' when the children turn 15.*

*Sunday meetings follow a regular schedule: The children are dropped off by their parents, many of whom leave to attend the main worship service in the worship centre. Before being dispatched to their classes, children and teachers meet together in a plenary for announcements and special arrangements, lead by the Sunday School superintendant. In an orderly fashion children then move to their classes. As the children enter the room, they are assigned to their seats by an assistant teacher, filling up the desks from the front. The assistant teacher wears a sash embroidered with the word 'Silence!' and carries a pointing stick. He normally performs the roll call, checks the student's books and awards merits or demerits according to punctuality,*

*assignments and general behaviour. During the class he will move around, helping the teacher by maintaining order.*

*The teacher begins the day's lesson by writing the number and title of the lesson on the blackboard, allowing the children to copy it in their exercise books. She then recaps the previous Sunday's lesson, appointing children to recite the memory verse, sometimes handing out a short test. Depending on the level of the class and the curriculum, the lesson of the day will either focus on a story from the Bible, with a moral lesson attached, or dogma, with a moral lesson attached. Normally a memory verse will be drilled in, primarily by repetition. Singing and visual aids play a bigger role in the junior class groups.*

*The lesson closes with a prayer (often by a child as punishment for misbehaviour in class) and the children are sent home with a memory verse as assignment.*

*Parents from all over the city like to send their children to this particular Sunday School, because of the smooth operation, the above average facilities, the discipline, the programmes and material and the fact that French is used as language of tuition (improving the language proficiency of especially the preschoolers).*

*The church leaders are mystified by the gap in church attendance of the age group 15-25 years. They consider investing in a better sound system to draw more teenagers to church.*

## **2. A matter of paradigms: The “Education” Paradigm<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of comparison education is defined in its narrower sense as the “discipline that is concerned with methods of teaching and learning in schools or school-like environments as opposed to various nonformal and informal means of socialization.”.education. Dictionary.com. © Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.. Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/education> (accessed: May 02, 2012).

## 2.1 A short history of an “education” paradigm - Sunday School

On a Sunday morning in 1780 an English newspaper editor by the name of Robert Raikes (1735-1811) gathered a group of ‘ragamuffin’ children of chimney sweeps together in a home across the local prison in Sooty Alley, Gloucester for a lesson in reading and spelling. This is traditionally considered as the birth of the Sunday School Movement. Others, notably the Reverend Thomas Stock and the playwright Hanna More, joined in and helped to expand the work. Within 20 years the number of children – and adults – involved in Sunday Schools grew to 200,000<sup>4</sup> and the Sunday School Movement rapidly grew to become an influential global phenomenon.

Two things are worth noting concerning the Sunday School Movement:

1) It was not the first time Christians responded to the need for education. Even during the time of Raikes other similar schools were running in Britain and elsewhere, aimed at providing education to those who for some reason did not have access to the existing educational systems.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, it could be said that Raikes built on a tradition that went back to the very beginnings of the church and before. In 64 AD, noticing the plight of children who grow up without fathers and therefore are denied the opportunity for education, the high priest of Jerusalem, Yehoshua ben Gamla, established a system of elementary schools in every community, where children began studying at age six or seven.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Renae Satterley. The Sunday School Library Collection, “Historical Background: The Sunday School Movement” <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/sunday/hist1.htm> 2005 (accessed 2 May 2012)

<sup>5</sup> Gillian Sutherland. “Education” in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950 Volume 3: Social Agencies and Institutions*, ed. F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1990), 126

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz . Masechet Bava Batra- 21a-27b (2009) [http://www.ou.org/shabbat\\_shalom/article/masechet\\_bava\\_batra\\_21a27b/](http://www.ou.org/shabbat_shalom/article/masechet_bava_batra_21a27b/) (assessed 2 May 2012)

The church followed suit. While the role of the parents in educating their own children remained the first concern<sup>7</sup>, the church recognised her own responsibility in filling the gaps where parents either were absent or incompetent in fulfilling their educational duty. As Wilfrid Ryan et aliter states: “No document could be more explicit than the Decree of the Third Council of Lateran (1179): ‘That every cathedral church have a teacher (*magistrum*) who is to teach poor scholars and others, and that no one receive a fee for permission to teach’ (Mansi, XXII, 234)”.<sup>8</sup>

From the onset the church of the reformation responded to the same need. The Church of Scotland, for example, set out a programme for spiritual reform in January 1561 setting the principle of “a school teacher for every parish church and free education for the poor”<sup>9</sup>, provided for by an Act of the Parliament of Scotland, passed in 1633, which introduced a tax to pay for this programme<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “In the first centuries great stress was laid on the importance of home education, and this task was committed in a special manner to Christian mothers”. – Ryan, Wilfrid, Philippe Perrier, Michael Maher, Andrew Murphy, William Turner, and James Burns. "Schools." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 13. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13554b.htm>>. (accessed 2 May 2012)

<sup>8</sup> Wilfrid Ryan "Schools."

<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Timeline of young people's rights in the United Kingdom," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Timeline\\_of\\_young\\_people%27s\\_rights\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom&oldid=462733396](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Timeline_of_young_people%27s_rights_in_the_United_Kingdom&oldid=462733396) (accessed May 2, 2012)

<sup>10</sup> Records of the Parliament of Scotland. <http://www.rps.ac.uk/trans/1633/6/20> (accessed May 2, 2012).

What was different in Raikes' case was that his movement started outside the official church, and although many local parishes gave their support, it took a considerable time for the official church to accept the Sunday School Movement as a legitimate partner.<sup>11</sup>

2) The Sunday School movement had a definite social aim. "Sunday school founders were less concerned about the recipients' religious indoctrination than about the growing numbers of working children who seemed to be slipping through the cracks in the educational system"<sup>12</sup>.

Sunday School was about more than reading, writing and arithmetic, however. It was seen as a tool to social reform. Raikes and others were deeply concerned about the moral decay amongst the worker class citizens of England and saw the key to a better society in educating the young. "If the child could learn morals and establish good ethical foundations at this early age then society as a whole would be better tomorrow."<sup>13</sup> Values such as self-discipline, industry, thrift, improvement, egalitarianism and communalism were seen as 'respectable' and parents of the workers class wished to see these developing in their children. This was one reason for the popularity and rapid growth of the Sunday Schools.<sup>14</sup> The Sunday School Movement also helped to

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<sup>11</sup> "In 1907 the World Sunday School Association was formed which in 1947 changed its name into World Council of Christian Education (WCCE) which was integrated into WCC only in 1972". Dietrich Werner. "The Church and The Child – Some Ecumenical Perspectives" Presentation at Now-and-Next Conference, Nairobi, 2011

<sup>12</sup> Anne M Boylan. *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880*. Yale University Press (1990), 6

<sup>13</sup> Darren W Thomas. "The Role, History, And Decline Of The Sunday School", in *An Analysis Of Sunday School Factors Leading To Effective Assimilation In selected Baptist Churches In Georgia* (2005), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Laqueur, T. W. *Religion and Respectability. Sunday schools and working class culture*, New Haven: Yale University Press. (1976), 44

combat the cultural vacuum created by the industrial revolution. According to Saterley: the Sunday School also became “an important hub of social interaction for a class of children and parents who were rapidly moving away from small, close-knit, rural communities to large, over-populated, urban centres”.<sup>15</sup> Sunday School brought members of the working class together for a variety of social activities, including arts and crafts, sports and bazaars.

Although it was not regarded as the first priority, Sunday School inevitably had an evangelistic slant, too. Thomas points out that it was less pronounced in the beginning “It was the intent of its founders to place a Bible in the hands of the children in hopes that, as they learned to read and write, the words they were learning would lead to life transformation”<sup>16</sup> but as time progressed evangelism as the focus of Sunday School grew in importance. “Within the next 100 years the evangelical Sunday School became the primary outreach arm of the church.”<sup>17</sup>

Several factors contributed to this shift, including the reformation of public education in Britain, the spreading of the Sunday School movement to nations where different socio-economic conditions prevailed and the rise of great revival and missions movements with their emphasis on taking the gospel to the nations.

Recent decades saw another development, which, according to Thomas, is primarily instrumental in the plateauing and even decline of the Sunday School movement and its

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<sup>15</sup> Renae Satterley. The Sunday School Library Collection, “Historical Background: The Sunday School Movement” <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/sunday/hist1.htm> 2005 (assessed 2 May 2012)

<sup>16</sup> Thomas. “The Role”, 4

<sup>17</sup> Thomas, “The Role”, 4

ability to assimilate new members into the church. “It has only been within the past few decades that the emphasis on evangelism shifted to an emphasis on discipleship and fellowship.”<sup>18</sup>

Where the early Sunday Schools were outward-focussing, initially on social issues in the society and thereafter on the spiritual needs of a lost world, the modern Sunday School turned to serving the insider. Space does not allow an investigation into the reasons for this shift, but there seems to be a link between the focus of a church’s children’s ministry and the growth of the church. This will be discussed later.

## **2.2 Sunday School in Africa**

Christian education in Africa goes back to the very first century. According to tradition the apostle Mark planted the first African church in Alexandria, Egypt, thereby beginning a vital phase in the theological establishment of the Christian faith, in which North African church fathers such as Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, Origen, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria played leading roles. It is clear from their own histories that education played a major role in their formation and that they encouraged education for all – not only adults, but children, too.

From Alexandria Christianity spread to other African regions: Maghreb (North West Africa), Nuba (Sudan), Ethiopia (Abyssinia). The Ethiopian church, in fact, has an interesting origin, which all started with Christian education: Two Christian boys from Tyre, Frumentius and Edesius, was on a voyage on the Red Sea with their uncle when the ship was attacked and all but the two brothers were killed. They were captured and sold as slaves to the king of Aksum in Ethiopia, who was so impressed with their

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas, “The Role”, 5

education and Christian lifestyle that he put them into responsible positions and eventually freed them. After the king's death they were appointed by the queen to educate her children, amongst whom the heir Ezana. The brothers introduced the gospel to the crown prince and his people and Ezana became the first Christian monarch of Ethiopia. He installed Frumentius as the first bishop or 'Abune' of the Ethiopian Church (333 AD, merely two decades after Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan legalizing Christian worship in the Roman Empire!)<sup>19</sup>

It took more than a millennium before Sub-Saharan Africa was introduced to Christianity on a significant scale. Although some church planting was done by Catholics in Western Africa and Protestants in Southern Africa since the sixteenth century, it was David Livingstone's 1840 trip into Africa that set the table for the so-called 'scramble for Africa', with missionaries preceding, accompanying and following colonizing armies. The missionaries not only planted churches, but also established hospitals and schools. From the very start Sunday School was an integral part of the strategy as a tool for evangelism and faith formation. With the secularisation of education in Africa and the lessening of the church's influence in schools, Sunday School has become the primary (in some cases the only) place where the church actively meets children.

### **2.3 Implications of the "educational" paradigm - social exclusion**

Space does not permit a fair appraisal of the Sunday School Movement in all its facets. There is ample evidence of the tremendous value that the movement had in the growth of the church and the establishment of a better society. "When it comes to reaching

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<sup>19</sup> Ott, Michael. "Edesius and Frumentius." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909. <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05281b.htm>>. (accessed May 3 2012)

people and effectively assimilating them into the life of the church the Sunday School ministry still remains one of the most effective tools some 200 years after its beginnings.”<sup>20</sup> Thom Rainer writes: “Sunday School has been among the key methodologies of the past two centuries to train adults and youth in the depths of the Bible.”<sup>21</sup> An article for BBC News states: “The social impact of the schools in Victorian times was anything but conservative and establishmentarian. Women were given a rare opportunity for public office, and they exercised major influence as teachers; the male superintendents often built a power base in the school hall and went on to become political leaders.”<sup>22</sup> The positive impact of Sunday School can neither be restricted to its early years or to the society of Victorian Britain. Generations of church leaders all over the world can trace their spiritual roots to a Sunday School class and a devoted teacher somewhere in their childhood. This is as true in Africa as in any other part of the world. Having said this, there are also serious concerns about the Sunday School, in particular as it often functions in the current church in Africa. With reference to the case study from Kinshasa above, some of these concerns will be raised.

The first concern relates to the linguistics surrounding Sunday School: “school”, “teachers”, “classes”, “lessons”, “curricula”, “certificates” – terminology copied from the field of education and carrying a particular set of values. With the terminology comes a paradigm that has been referred to earlier as “educational”, in the sense of “concerned

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas, *The Role*, 1

<sup>21</sup> Thom S Rainer. *The Bridger Generation*, B&H Publishing Group (1999), 187

<sup>22</sup> BBC NEWS: “How Sunday school shaped Britain”: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7484282.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7484282.stm), (accessed 2 May 2012)

with methods of teaching and learning in schools or school-like environments”.

Considering the original purpose of the Sunday School in its eighteenth century British context, this makes sense. Raikes' Sunday School was *supposed* to be “educational”! He purposefully copied the terminology from the field of education, because he desired the marginalized to share in the whole experience and the benefits of official education. What has happened since then, however, is that the context and therefore the goal of Sunday School has changed completely. Instead of providing primary education to children in a society who are excluding them from the educational system, Sunday School has become the primary tool for faith transmission to children inside the church. What has not changed is the educational paradigm. The Sunday School in Kinshasa is a carbon copy of a standard public school in the same city. The style, the strategy, even the classes are based on the public school matrix. The children hardly notice any difference.

In the Sunday School in Kinshasa the Bible became a text book equal to the mathematic or science text books in the public schools. Learning the Scriptures, church history or dogma became arduous brain work with little relevance to life. The moral lessons are repetitions of what the children constantly hear at home or school and often do little more than adding to the children's guilt and confusion. Sunday School examinations are feared or loathed by the biggest section of children and respect for the teachers, in particular the disciplinarian assistants, is often superficial. (Maybe the Sunday School in Kinshasa is even worse than the original schools of Robert Raikes and Hanna More. Raikes is described as 'cheery, talkative, flamboyant and warm-hearted' while More is quoted to say that it was possible to get the best out of children if

their affections 'were engaged by kindness'.<sup>23</sup>) The antagonism seems to increase with each progressive year until the “students” merely endure and wait for the freedom of the final “graduation” from Sunday School. It is hardly surprising that many “disappear” from church until they have their own children of Sunday School going age!

The danger of the “educational” paradigm is that faith becomes a subject and the transfer of faith is attempted by a transfer of knowledge, with a (sometimes vague) hope that this knowledge will lead to life transformation. In principle and in practice faith formation is reduced to an intellectual exercise that easily becomes separated from everyday practical Christian living. The result is a fragmented life where spiritual growth becomes a temporary, isolated process determined by a one hour information download once a week, measured by performance in cognitive examinations and rewarded with certificates and graduations. With this type of “educational” foundation it is difficult to bring adult church members to an integrated life of faith and commitment to God and his Kingdom. Richard Osmer remarks: “Where do we stand after one hundred years of experiential, discovery-oriented Protestant religious education focussing on children’s self-expression and development? These children have grown into adults who know little Bible and theology, have acquired few practices of Christian discipleship, and are accustomed to a low commitment Christianity centering on personal needs. The educational ministry alone has not brought us to this point, but it has done its part.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Mark K. Smith. “Robert Raikes and Sunday Schools”, August 30, 2000. <http://www.infed.org/walking/wa-raikes.htm> (assessed May 2 2012)

<sup>24</sup> Richard R. Osmer, “The Christian education of children in the protestant tradition”. *Theology Today* 56(4) (2000): 516

A second concern raised by the Kinshasa case study relates to the position of the children in the church. The strategy of the church is to separate the generations into homogenous units, 'after their kind': toddlers with toddlers, children with children, adolescents with adolescents, adults with adults. The purpose is noble – to respect the needs of each generation by giving them the opportunity to be ministered to in their own paradigm, language and style. The result is, however, a form of 'generational fragmentation' that runs through the whole church. And inevitably, despite the goodwill of the adults, the children are bearing most of the consequences. They are separated from their parents and siblings without their consent. They are posted to the building 'outside' (fortunately comfortable enough, which is more than can be said of most Sunday School venues in Africa). They have to adapt to the needs of the adults. If they happen to wander into the 'adult worship service' they are ignored and, unless they can adhere to the adult rules, they are basically unwelcome. Neither are they welcome in the meetings of other age groups. The fragmentation extends into the rest of the church life, too. Midweek meetings are segregated, often even separating men and women. The sad fact is that not only the children are marginalized, but that many people feel excluded on different levels – sometimes even the pastor.

A third concern is less conspicuous in the case study, but very real: the walls of separation do not only run inside the church, but also around the church. Not only are the children of church members largely excluded from the rest of the church, but even more so are children outside the church excluded from what is happening inside. The church leaders will deny this and point to their open door policy and their zeal for the lost. The problem is that they have blind spots regarding some of the meta-

communication of the church. By insisting on French as the language of tuition in their Sunday School, for example, they have gained the favour of some parents, but they have unwittingly shut the door on a large number of children from less privileged backgrounds who avoid situations where they cannot express themselves in their mother tongue. The Sunday School books, the exams (with the accompanying ridicule of the one who fails), the pretty Sunday dresses, the huge offerings, the nice buildings, the fancy cars parked outside... all proclaim: this is *not* for the meek and poor and sick and uneducated. This is not for children.

This church in Kinshasa is not struggling. On the contrary, it is regarded as a progressive, vibrant congregation with vision and energy. The church is growing, with new members joining every week. Members identify with the church and like to call it their spiritual 'home' where they feel included. The question is: Who are *excluded* and why? And: Does the Sunday School in its current form with its "educational paradigm" offer enough to address this social exclusion? Or are there other ways?

### **3. An alternative paradigm: "Hospitality"**

#### **3.1 Case study: A Friday Evening in the Boland<sup>25</sup>**

*Portia is a six year old orphan living with her uncle Klaas and aunt Susan and four cousins in a small shack on the farm where her uncle is employed. It is Friday evening and she is walking with her foster family to a neighbouring farm. As they enter the house from the cold winter rain, their host, a single mother with three children, welcomes them with a round of hugs and a warm mug of soup. Others start to arrive, and within a short while the little home is packed with a boisterous mixture of people. There is Marilyn,*

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<sup>25</sup> A rural grape farming region in the Western Cape province of South Africa.

*head of the local clinic, with her mason husband and two children. Sophy brought her aging father and mother, her brother's teenager daughters and a handful of children. Sarah has not conquered her addiction to alcohol yet, but she accompanies her two talented children and her sister. Aunt Alice brought her grandson. His father is in jail and his mother serves in Cape Town as a domestic servant. Uncle Danster is a widower and always ready with a joke. He is celebrating his first year of sobriety tonight and enjoys the remarks drawn by his flamboyant new hat.*

*The group always meets on a Friday evening. They always follow the same ritual – first the welcoming hugs followed by a simple meal of soup and bread. Then some crazy game in which all can participate. Then a round of sharing: everyone tells of an incident in the past week. It takes some time, but all are attentive and show their appreciation or sympathy according to the story. Tonight Uncle Danster is the star and Portia runs over to give him a kiss. She remembers what he was like on a Friday evening before he gave up alcohol. Someone starts a song, leading in the next phase of the meeting. The songs of praise and worship flow into a time of prayer. As usual, each child is allowed to select an adult as prayer partner for the evening and they pray honest, caring prayers for each other. Then uncle Klaas gives the Bible to Portia and ask her to read from John 13. An interesting discussion ensues in which all participate, trying to find the meaning of Jesus' words (uncle Klaas helps where needed) and looking for practical applications in their own farming and living contexts. The evening normally ends with a decision based on the text: as an expression of their faith and love the group will perform some acts of kindness in the community the coming week. Tonight is different, though. Beneath all the joy there has been some sadness, too. The group is about to divide to form two*

*groups. They have been planning this for a long time. The houses are too small, others are eager to join and there are more that need to be invited. Uncle Klaas calls for two basins with water and two towels. He takes two candles and hands one to Sophy. She will be the leader of the new group. Together they light the candles after which uncle Klaas kneels down to wash Sophy's feet, just as Jesus did in the text they read. After he finished, Sophy takes her basin and the two proceed to wash all the feet in the room. Portia cannot stop her tears, being deeply aware of the respect that these two noble grownups are showing to her and the others.*

*The evening comes to an end with the usual commitment, song and benediction. With a hug and a hearty farewell they disperse. The cold and rain cannot dampen Portia's joy as they walk back; she knows she is at home, she is part of a family far bigger than she could ever have imagined and she is loved, and this is all that matters.*

*And besides, in two days time it will be Sunday and will she be seeing all of them again in church!*

### **3.2 Key aspects of hospitality**

Hospitality is a principal theme in both the Old and New Testaments. In his doctoral thesis<sup>26</sup> Jan Grobbelaar points out that Jesus desired hospitality towards children in a very real sense. Referring to Mat 18:5 he explains: "Receive" means to show hospitality towards them' (my translation)<sup>27</sup>. Children are of immense importance to God and our attitude towards them becomes a measure of our understanding of and submission to the values of the Kingdom. In Jesus' own words – to welcome a child in the name of

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<sup>26</sup> Jan Grobbelaar. *'n Ondersoek na die Bediening van Laerskoolkinders in en deur die Gemeente as Intergenerasionele Ruimte (University of Stellenbosch, 2008)*

<sup>27</sup> Original: "Ontvang" beteken om gasvryheid teenoor hulle te bewys' - Jan Grobbelaar, *'n Ondersoek* (2008): 350

Jesus is to welcome Jesus. Social inclusion of children (as representatives of the socially excluded) becomes an act of spiritual dimensions. It becomes a Kingdom-act. In the same way social *exclusion* of children is an act with spiritual consequences, too. “It is better for you to drown” is Jesus’ frightening warning (Mat 18:6). It is rather disturbing to note that the disciples were either very quick in forgetting this warning or slow in understanding its implications. In the very next chapter of the gospel (Mat 19:13-15) it is recorded how Jesus had to demonstrate the real meaning of hospitality in a concrete way by welcoming, touching, comforting and blessing children who were deemed ‘unwelcome’ by his followers. The challenge to the church is to take this warning seriously and to revalue its ministry with children in terms of the word “Welcome!”

Hospitality has many facets. In ancient Greece three basic rules applied to hospitality (*philoxenias*):<sup>28</sup> (1) The respect from host to guest. The host must be hospitable to the guest and provide them with food and drink, a bath and protection. The host must lend a (sympathetic) ear to the stories of the guest and refrain from asking questions until the guest has stated his/her needs. (2) The respect from guest to host. The guest must be courteous to their host and not be dishonest or burdensome. (3) The parting gift (*xenion*, ξεινήιον) from host to guest. The parting gift is to show the host's honour at receiving the guest. Sometimes gifts are given on arrival or exchanged at departure.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Xenia (Greek)," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Xenia\\_\(Greek\)&oldid=490123014](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Xenia_(Greek)&oldid=490123014) (accessed May 3, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Christos 1: "Greek life as depicted in Homer's Epic: The Odyssey" (2004) <http://www.ancientgreece.com/essay/v/greek-life-as-depicted-in-homers-epic-the-odyssey/> (accessed May 3 2012)

Similar rules applied in other ancient cultures. The story in Genesis 18 of Abraham receiving the three strangers is a striking example of typical ancient Middle-Eastern hospitality. The Good News Bible translates it beautifully: "You have honored me by coming to my home, so let me serve you." (Gen 18:5). The twist in this story is of course that the Guest is the one giving the parting gift!

The concept of honour and respect is an integral part of hospitality. When Jesus applied the concept of hospitality to children, he alluded to the same principle: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones". (Matt 18:10). In the case study above Portia experienced this kind of hospitality in the small group of believers. Unwittingly the group applied the 'rules of hospitality' with tremendous effect. (1) Portia was received and accepted without conditions. She was served with food and drink and she enjoyed the protection and attention of the whole group. (2) She returned the respect by participating, by sharing honestly and by serving with what she had. (3) She received the blessing of prayer, love and the benediction of Christ on departure. For her Jesus is real and relevant. Faith is real and relevant. The community of believers is real and relevant.

Inclusion of children in the ministry of the church calls for a strategy that goes far beyond the traditional Sunday School approach. Four principles come to mind when thinking of hospitality towards children in the church and these four will be briefly discussed: Hospitable children's ministry is relational, intergenerational, narrative and missional.

### **3.2.1 Relational**

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,’ and ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.” (Matt 22:37-40)

With these words Jesus summarized the essence of our being – it is all about relationships. We are because we relate. This is what it means to be in the image of God, because, as Philip Butin pointed out, “God is essentially relational”<sup>30</sup> God is the original relational Being. He is the Creator of community. The Triune God *is* community. Miroslav Volf refers to the “communion of the divine persons”<sup>31</sup>. Created in his image, we share his relationality. We find our identity not in independent solitude, but in relations - with God, with others and with our environment. The church is the primary context where this image of God should be expressed: “God intends the divine *koinonia* to be reflected in human *koinonia*.”<sup>32</sup> Volf agrees: “As Christians, however, human beings cannot live apart from fellowship with other Christians.”<sup>33</sup>

This is vital in our understanding of our ministry with children. Instead of socially excluding them, we need to relate to them. Instead of treating them as objects or

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<sup>30</sup> Philip W. Butin *The Trinity*. Louisville: Geneva Press (2001), 90

<sup>31</sup> Miroslav Volf. *After our likeness*. Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing Company. (1998) 204

<sup>32</sup> Butin, *Trinity*, 90

<sup>33</sup> Volf, *After our Likeness*, 206

passive recipients of our activities, they are to be treated as partners in the community, as participants in the fellowship of believers.

Relationships are built on communication and effective communication implies understanding of each other's actions, words and intentions. We use language in its fullest sense<sup>34</sup> for communication. When people discover a common language between them, they connect and a relation is formed.

Connecting to children requires an understanding of their preferred modes of communication. While children use speech to communicate as soon as they can master it, Gary Landreth, renowned play therapist, made an important observation when he stated: "Play is the child's language and toys are his words"<sup>35</sup> Children of all ages use different forms of play to interact with each other and the world. They express their emotions and thoughts in concrete ways and toys become the visible manifestations of these concepts. Children find it easy to assign meaning to lifeless objects and can use time and space in a creative way to communicate.

To enter into the world of children requires the ability to speak the language of 'play'. It requires freedom from adult preoccupations and reservations and a willingness to really humble yourself and become like a child. Social convention and cultural norms often make this difficult for adults. Adults are made to believe that they have outgrown childhood and that it is shameful to return to its habits and behaviour. This notions

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<sup>34</sup> "any set or system of such symbols as used in a more or less uniform fashion by a number of people, who are thus enabled to communicate intelligibly with one another". language. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/language> (accessed: May 03, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Gary Landreth. *Play Therapy*. Accelerated Development (1991)

needs to be challenged, however. Jesus certainly did not see childhood as a shameful, worthless stage in the life of a human. The early church understood what Jesus meant. According to Martha Stortz the church father Augustine of Hippo found children fascinating. “He did not portray them as miniature adults. Rather, Augustine portrayed adults as grown-up children – only more complex.”<sup>36</sup> To enter a child’s world is the most natural thing to do, because we have never really left that world. We have merely traded “nuts and balls and birds” for “money and estates and servants”.<sup>37</sup>

The leaders of Portia’s spiritual family did not forget what it means to speak the language of children. For their own pleasure and that of the children they included games in their weekly program involving touch, eye contact and laughter and this greatly contributed to the relationships of trust and understanding between adults and children. It seems a far cry from the relationships in the Sunday School in Kinshasa. Play is not the only mode of communicating and connecting with children. Stories, music, humour, touch, protection, encouragement - in short, activities reaching out to the hearts of children, showing respect and fulfilling their needs - all are expressions of love that strengthens relationships and enhances growth. Hospitality speaks the language of love.

### **3.2.2 Intergenerational**

“Faith is caught, not taught” - Anonymous

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<sup>36</sup> Martha E Stortz: “Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent? Augustine on childhood”, in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J Bunge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001), 101

<sup>37</sup> Augustine, *Confessions 1.19*, translated by Henry Chadwick, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 40

One of the most challenging trends in the modern church is what we saw in the story of the Kinshasa Sunday School – the trend to specialise to the minutest details. In the context of this article this specialisation is seen in the way children and adults are categorised, separated and interacted with in highly specialised ways. First Graders are not treated in the same way as Second Graders. It is argued that toddlers and teenagers have (almost) nothing in common and therefore cannot share a fulfilling time of fellowship. It is indeed true that their needs, interests, communication modes and styles, levels of understanding and reasoning differ vastly. Teenagers, as do toddlers and pre-teens and young adults, find it easier and more interesting to interact with their peers. There should be enough room for this and enough sensitivity from adults dealing with different age groups to adapt to the needs and levels of each group and individual. Having said this, the absolute specialisation has had some very unfortunate spinoffs. Some of these have been mentioned above, such as the fragmentation in the church and the lives of children. Children are passive and subordinate rather than active participants, depriving them of a sense of purpose and involvement. Children miss out on the formative value of spending time with different generations. Scottie May et aliter warn: “If children belong only to a Sunday school class or midweek club, the church’s formative influence in that child’s life is limited. Unfortunately, in many churches today almost all activities for children and teenagers are with their peers and the few adults who lead the programs.”<sup>38</sup> The opportunities for faith transmission become alarmingly few. The dictum quoted above: “Faith is caught, not taught” tries to capture this idea. As a person ‘catches’ flu (is infected with flu), faith is transmitted from person to person by

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<sup>38</sup> Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse, Linda Cannell. *Children Matter: Celebrating their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. 2005): 139

close proximity over an extended time. Faith is 'contagious', it cannot be "taught" (in an educational mode).

The children are not the only ones to lose out in a segregated church, however. Adults need the children as much as the children need them. Jesus' instruction to 'welcome the little ones' held a blessing not only for the 'guests', but even more so for the 'hosts', because it would be an opportunity to receive Jesus!

As an alternative to segregated church ministries, an intergenerational model is promoted which emphasizes relationships between age groups and encourages mixed-age activities. It is more than sharing the same space. "[I]ntergenerationalism goes deeper than various age groups of people simply being together. It insists on a definite interaction, relationship and conversation between the three or four generations present. It carries strong concern for 'bridging' generations into acceptance, belonging, communication and conversation that provides maximum potential for the interflow of personal faith."<sup>39</sup>

In intergenerational ministry all generations learn from each other, ministered to each other and grow together. In the 'Boland farm' case study Portia's spontaneous congratulation of Uncle Danster was as valuable as Uncle Klaas' washing of her feet. The intergenerational extended spiritual family in the case study had all the benefits of a true learning community who were discovering the fullness of living in Christ together. They were pilgrims on a journey to Christian maturity.

What is important to notice is that the Boland farm 'family' was a deliberate activity stemming from a culture in the local church which they were part of. The same values

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<sup>39</sup> Eddy Prest. *Walking and worshipping together*. (Pinelands: TFL Publishing 1999): 1

that were present in the house meeting applied to the Sunday worship meetings and other church activities. It was an expression of what Claydon et aliter proposed: “It would need to be a whole-church commitment because it’s not about programmes or about church numbers. It’s about creating a church climate where adults and young people learn to love each other, share their life experiences, serve each other and help each other to discover more about following Jesus.”<sup>40</sup> The fact that it was deliberate and well structured did not mean that it was manipulative or results driven. The structure gave security and shape to the meetings while values such as honesty and respect provided direction and life.

To be fair: in the local church in the Boland farm story there were separate meetings for interest groups, too. They had a women’s ministry, youth and children’s clubs, a sobriety society and others which catered for specific needs and ran special projects. The church leaders, however, were clear on the true nature of their church and continuously sought ways to bring generations together in house meetings, in the worship services, weekend camps, outreaches and outings. They encouraged open communication and gave the different generations opportunities to express themselves publicly. The result was that the different generations came to understand and value each other better, helping to shape the church into a close-knit spiritual family.

### **3.2.3 Narrative**

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<sup>40</sup> David Claydon (ed). “*Evangelization of children*”. Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 47. [Online]. Available from: <<http://www.lausanne.org/Brix?pageID=12890>> (Accessed May2 2012): 24

“My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth with a parable; I will teach you lessons from the past – things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us.” – Asaph (Ps 78:1-3)

“Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable” - Matt 13:34

“With these stories and ten thousand others fortify his hearing, as thou dost offer him also examples drawn from his home.” – John Chrysostom (347-407 AD)<sup>41</sup>

Children – and adults – love stories. Maybe it is because we are created in the image of a ‘storytelling’ God. In the words of Elie Wiesel: “God made humankind because God loves stories.”<sup>42</sup> Probably because we are (unconsciously) aware that we *are* stories, we find it fascinating to be spectators of the stories of others, whether factual or fictitious.

We identify with or distance ourselves from the emotions and actions of the characters in stories, assess them according to our own value systems, scrutinise their choices and try to find meaning in their lives. In effect it is a search for truth and often unknowingly, we weigh up the options offered in stories as options for our own lives.

Storytelling can be seen as a special form of play, where the mind is ‘at play’ even when the body is inactive. Stories create a world of imagination and therefore a world less threatening for a child or adult who struggles to face the harsh reality of his own world.

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<sup>41</sup> John Chrysostom. “An Address On Vainglory And The Right Way For Parents To Bring Up Their Children” Translation by Max I. W. Laistner in *Christianity And Pagan Culture In The Later Roman Empire* (Cornell University Press 1951): 52

<sup>42</sup> Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/religion/post/2009/07/68495696/1> (accessed May 2 2012)

“The remarkable thing is that because of this distance between the world of stories and the real world, the child can come closer to his true emotional world when listening to stories. Therefore stories have the power to change his world of feelings and beliefs. Because he can identify with the heroes in the stories, he can start living a new life in his imagination, from where it can be transferred to his real life.”<sup>43</sup>

The importance of the narrative in the church’s ministry with children cannot be stressed enough. It should operate on all levels – telling stories for the pure joy of it, as people in all cultures have been doing since the dawn of man; teaching through parables, in the way Jesus did; telling the stories of God and his people to instil faith and obedience, as Asaph did; telling stories to shape habits, as Chrysostomos did. Narrative goes beyond mere ‘storytelling’, however. Narrative means a way of life, where the individual and group understand their identity *as stories*. A church that starts to live as ‘a story God is telling’ or people who allow God to ‘tell their stories’ are on a journey full of possibilities. Narrative children’s ministry means allowing children to live inside the stories that God is telling, to hear and see and copy and borrow from others’ stories and to become storytellers in their own right.

In the ‘Boland farm family’ Portia had full access to a variety of stories: seeing and hearing the people-stories around her with all their tragedies and triumphs, listening to the stories of old told by the grandparents, learning from her peers and being allowed to share her own stories. She lived inside the story told by the group and found meaning and direction in the Story of God as told in the Bible.

### **3.2.4 Missional**

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<sup>43</sup> Dirk Coetsee. “*Walking with Wounded Children*” Unpublished training manual (White River: Petra College 2010): 148

“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” – Jesus Christ (John 20:21)

Over the centuries many individual church members heard and obeyed the command “Go!” We have seen how for many centuries the Sunday School Movement had a ‘missionary’ character, driven by people who saw it as their calling to reach out into the world of suffering and spiritually lost children with the good news of love and peace. We also heard the lament from Thomas and others that there has been a decline in the impact of Sunday Schools since they started to shift towards “an emphasis on discipleship and fellowship.”<sup>44</sup>

The answer to this decline, however, is not in reviving the Sunday School movement to its former glory. The answer is in the church discovering its original calling and purpose. The answer is in becoming a missional church.

Missional (from the Latin *missio*, ‘sending’) means that the church has the character of ‘being sent out by God’ into the world to bring good news. It is God’s initiative, however; God is going out and sending at the same time. In going, the church merely follows. “Mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus, wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas, “The Role”, 5

<sup>45</sup> David Bosch. *Transforming Mission* (Orbis Books 1991): 519

Participation in this calling of the church implies at least three dimensions of action<sup>46</sup> which is formulated here as applied to children<sup>47</sup>:

- That congregations will participate in preaching the knowledge of the Gospel to all children, while the adults with their children will remain a learning-community of Jesus;
- That the everyday lives of all church members will be characterised by an attentive seeing of all children, and a gracious love that will reach out to all children, especially children in need, for example traumatized children that suffer as a result of social exclusion, poor children, street children, child labourers, child prostitutes, children that are sexually abused, child soldiers, orphans, HIV affected and infected children; and
- That church members will stand up and be advocates for fairness, justice and righteousness, for peace and reconciliation for the sake of children, not only in the church but also in society and public life.

Missional children's ministry is not only mission to children, but also mission *with, by* and *on behalf* of children. In Olson's words: "children's ministry in four ways: ministry to children, with children, by children, for children."<sup>48</sup> This is crucial and can change the whole concept of not only children's ministry, but also our understanding of the

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<sup>46</sup> Coenie W Burger. *Gemeentes in die kragveld van die Gees. Oor die unieke identiteit, taak en bediening van die kerk van Christus*. (Stellenbosch: BUVTON, 1999): 83-84,

<sup>47</sup> Jan Grobbelaar. "Towards a church where children are welcome: equipping theological students and congregational leaders to lead the way". Unpublished paper (Nairobi: Child Development Symposium 2011): 9

<sup>48</sup> Diane C. Olson, *Out of the basement. A holistic approach to children's ministry*. (Nashville: Discipleship Resources. 2001): 63

missional church. The slogan of the Lausanne Movement “The whole Church taking the whole gospel to the whole world’ very much includes children as part of the whole church, part of the whole gospel and part of the whole world.

Portia in the “Boland farm family” was quite aware of her own position in the ‘missional church’. She enthusiastically participated in outreaches, service in the community and prayer for the world and was not only well equipped (from accompanying the experienced elders) but also eager to share the good news with her peers and others in the community. Witnessing for her was not an activity, but a life style she shared with her church.

#### **4. Application in church ministry – the eightfold ministry of the church**

“...those enrolled by genealogy, males from three years old and upward--all who entered the house of the LORD as the duty of each day required--for their service according to their offices, by their divisions.” – 2 Cron 31:16 (English Standard Version)

“While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites – men women and children – gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.” – Ezra 10:1

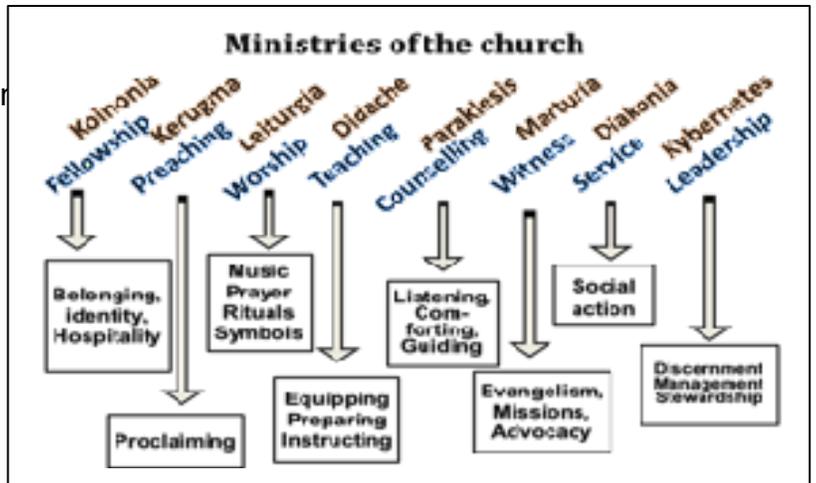
“All of them, including wives and children, accompanied us out of the city and there on the beach we knelt to pray” – Acts 21:5

The services or ministries of the church have been described in different ways. With reference to the Reformed theological tradition Malan Nel distinguishes the following eight ministries:<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Malan Nel. *Jeugbediening. 'n Inklusiewe gemeentelike benadering.* (Pretoria: Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing. 1998): 84

- *Koinonia* (Fellowship);
- *Kerugma* (Preaching/Proclamation)
- *Leitourgia* (Worship);
- *Didache* (Teaching);
- *Paraklesis* (Pastoral Care);
- *Marturia* (Witness);
- *Diakonia* (Service/compassion);
- *Kybernetes* (Leadership and administration)



In the “educational paradigm” children will find a place somewhere in the ministry of Didache, with either segregated participation or total exclusion from most of the other ministries. In the “hospitality paradigm” children are welcomed as full recipients and participants in *all* the ministries. In the Old Testament and the early church this was normal practice, as the quoted texts above and others suggest.

A church that is serious about hospitality will humbly assess and creatively reshape each of the 8 ministries so as to include children (and, of course, other marginalised). In the ‘Boland farm’ case study some of this has already been demonstrated. With wisdom the worship services of a church can become deeply inclusive events and the general ministry expanded:

*Koinonia* – fellowship in all the church meetings, including the main worship service, can be expressed and experienced in sincere and respectful acknowledgement of each other. Purposeful rituals including touch, eye contact, compassion and caring can become integral parts of every worship service. Intergenerational koinonia can become the keystone to the life of the church.

*Kerugma* –preaching/proclamation needs to be revalued in terms of inclusiveness. It is possible to ‘preach’ in such a way that even a child can understand, without compromising on the theological depth or radical appeal of the Word. Child-friendly preaching, however, is far more than a ‘children’s sermon’ once in a while. A narrative approach to proclamation is one example of proper inclusive *kerugma*.

*Leitourgia* – the remarkable words in 2 Cron 31:16 suggest that boys of three years old already were deemed fit for temple service. In the rich liturgy of the temple it was not difficult to find a meaningful role for a ‘preschooler’, and with creative wisdom the same can be done in the modern church. In this respect the ‘young’ churches, with their focus on the spoken word, has much to learn from the ‘old’ churches, Orthodox, Roman and early Protestant, with their greater understanding of the role of senses and experiences. Children have a place in public prayer (Acts 21:5), confession (Ezra 10:1), worship (Ps 8:2), music (Ps 148:12) - in all aspects of liturgy.

*Didache* – instructing can go far beyond ‘educating’, as has been explained in detail above. In terms of Eph 4:12 *didache* becomes ‘equipping of the saints’, preparation for ministry. Children have proven over and again their readiness to be equipped for *active service*, not only for examinations.

*Paraklesis* – it is a sad fact that childhood hurts and traumas lead to suffering that often prolongs deep into adult life. What is also true is that dealing with the wounds at a young age often has greater effect than counselling or therapy at a later age.

Unfortunately few churches are geared to address childhood trauma and few pastors are equipped for child or family counselling.

*Marturia* – in the early church, where witness and martyrdom were two sides of the same coin, children fully participated in ‘marturia’. John Foxe, in his classic (although controversial) 1563 work *Acts and Monuments*, popularly abridged as *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, describes many incidents of children dying for their faith.<sup>50</sup> This is true for the persecuted church of today in many countries. However, even where children are not subjected to physical persecution, they often show a readiness to participate in witnessing, whatever the cost.

*Diakonia* – despite the highly visible advocacy efforts of UNICEF and other global agents for children, churches still seem to be slow or reluctant to react to the plight of the little ones in distress. Where they do become involved, it often is ‘from a distance’ by means of financial sponsorships or donations. Too often children are seen as objects (recipients) but not participants in Christian/humanitarian aid. An inclusive diaconal church can have a lasting impact on the society, as well as on its own members.

*Kybernetes* – Leadership, planning and budgeting are highly exclusive in many churches. One, or a few at the top, makes the decisions. Exclusivity is often reflected in the budget of a church (an Egyptian church confessed that less than 5% of their funds were allocated to ministry dealing with children making up more than 50% of the members). Inclusive churches are discovering the richness of including children and other marginalised in decision making processes, planning and budgeting.

## **5. Implications for the theological formation of leaders for church ministry in Africa**

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<sup>50</sup> William B Forbush (ed). *Fox’s Book of Martyrs* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Publishing House 1967)

In their theological formation, candidates are normally exposed to a combination of the sub-disciplines Exegetical theology or Bibliology (Old Testament and New Testament), Historical theology, Systematic or Dogmatic theology, and Practical theology, with any number of subdivisions. (Institutions will use different terms or different combinations according to their traditions or particular contexts). Some of these are foundational, such as the exegetical and systematic sub-disciplines while other are applied, such as practical theology. The sad fact is that children are almost without exception mentioned in only one corner of a sub-sub-division within Practical theology, namely 'Christian Education' or 'Catechesis', relating to the church ministry referred to as Didache. The author is convinced that children's issues have a place in *all* the major sub-disciplines and, with a growing number of theologians globally<sup>51</sup>, believe children's issues should be included in all fields of theological training.

If an inclusive 'hospitality' paradigm is sought in a local church or denomination, it will require certain competencies in the leaders. Competencies include both attitudes and skills, for example:

1. Humility, so clearly pointed out by Jesus in Matt 18 and other places and perhaps the most important attitude in an inclusive ministry. Hospitality and pride are not compatible. Theological institutions will have to actively model and cultivate humility as basis for church leadership.
2. With humility goes servanthood, a willingness to listen, transparency, warmth, unconditional acceptance, adaptability, teachability and respect for all, especially the marginalised - in short, the attitudes of Christ. A theological seminary with these as

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<sup>51</sup> For example, the Child Theology Movement - <http://www.childtheology.org/new/>

integral values will be able to produce servant leaders who will lead serving churches.

3. Candidates will have to learn relationality as a way of life, with all the skills attached. They have to discover the Trinitarian roots of their existence as relational beings and learn how to relate to God, to others, to themselves and to the environment. They have to practice listening skills and learn how to communicate to people on different levels. They have to learn how to 'enter the worlds' of children and the marginalised, to speak the language of 'play' and to connect with others. They have to understand expressions of love and how to stimulate inclusivity.
4. Candidates will have to learn facilitation skills. Facilitation is at the heart of most of a minister's activities and can either contribute to growth or lead to frustration. To successfully lead different types of intergenerational meetings, for example, is a complex skill, but it can be acquired. Theological seminaries that send out candidates without these skills are doing them a great disservice.
5. Candidates have to learn the fine art of inclusive preaching and inclusive liturgy. Narrative preaching, based on sound theology, is a skill that can be taught, but also a choice that comes from the heart, as do other forms of inclusive preaching.
6. Child and family counselling have become vital needs in today's society. It is essential that pastoral care givers should have at least basic competencies in these areas. With pastoral care goes diakonia, the church's social responsibility towards the needy, including children. Theological seminaries have to sharpen the awareness of candidates and teach them how to organise and network for a holistic ministry that will bring hope to children in the community.

7. Didache, or Christian education, needs to be reinterpreted and incorporated in the full life of the church. Theological seminaries should teach candidates to critically assess prevailing paradigms and practices, but also give positive guidance in developing new ways to 'teach the children' (and adults, of course). Candidates have to learn the real meaning of faith transference and have to be equipped in creating opportunities for generations to grow together in faith, while maintaining sensitivity to the special needs of individuals, developmental stage groups and special interest group.

Theological seminaries have the responsibility to cultivate these and related competencies. While any inclusion of children's issues in theological training will be welcomed, there is a real danger that they will be dealt with in terms of old 'exclusive' paradigms and that candidates will not be prepared for a new way of being church. In the end it is an ecclesiological question: What is the church? What is a hospitable, inclusive, contextual church? What is a church where children are welcome? What kind of leader is needed for such a church? And how will they be equipped to lead?

## **6. Conclusion**

While the "educational paradigm" had its place in the history of the church and brought knowledge and hope to many generations all over the world, it did not wholly serve the church in the long run. A new paradigm is needed, based on a deeper understanding of the Triune God, of the missional church and of children as full participants in the Kingdom of God. A paradigm of hospitality could open creative new ways to include the excluded.

This might be the time for the church in Africa to rediscover what John Calvin realised centuries ago: “children are as vital to the ongoing life of the covenant community as elders, pastors, and deacons. Children do not grow into participation in the worship, service, and life of the community, but partake of it and contribute to it from the first day of their lives.”<sup>52</sup>

The question is not whether children’s ministry should be included as a module in ministerial training in Africa any more. The question is: how will children be integrated in all aspects of theological formation?

It is the responsibilities of theological seminaries in Africa and beyond to raise up a new generation of church leaders who will be committed and equipped to welcome the little ones in the name of Jesus. By doing this, Jesus will be welcomed, too.

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<sup>52</sup> David Hadley Jensen. *Graced vulnerability: a theology of childhood*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press. 2005):105-106

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