



What's So Special about Children?
A Reconsideration of the Use Made of Scriptures such as Matthew 18:1-5
in Advocating the Importance of Children for the Church¹

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‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’² Scriptures such as this have often been used by children’s advocates to advance the claim that Christian adults have much to learn from children. But why should that be? How would it work? This article is an attempt to explore such questions.

¹ This article is drawn from the author’s unpublished doctoral thesis *In the Light of a Child: Adults discerning the gift of being* (University of Chester, 2012). With regard to the doctoral research summarised in this article, the writer gratefully acknowledges the enthusiastic involvement of *Weavers* both young and old, and his interview participants; the advice of his doctoral supervisors, Professor Elaine Graham and Dr Rebecca Nye; and the financial support of the Governors of the St Christopher’s Educational Trust, and the Anglican Dioceses of Manchester and Wakefield.

² Matthew 18:3.

A question is raised

‘What’s so special about children?’ This may seem an odd question for a group of people to ask whose profession is to advocate the importance of children in the Church. Nonetheless, it was a question hanging in the air when a group of Church of England Diocesan Advisers for children’s ministry³, of which I was one, met to discuss their work. The particular subject for consideration was a much-quoted passage by John Pridmore:

Children are a gift to the Church. The Lord of the Church sets them in the midst of the Church, today as in Galilee, not as objects of benevolence, nor even as recipients of instruction, but in the last analysis as patterns of discipleship. ⁴

The passage, alluding to the scene in which Jesus places a child by his side at the centre of the adult disciples to settle a dispute about greatness in the kingdom of heaven⁵, has frequently been used to emphasise the value the Church should place on children, not as ‘the future’ but as a vital resource for the present. The usage had customarily been taken to imply that there are some special characteristics inherent in children from which adult Christians can learn in some way.

The purpose of the discussion among the advisers was to identify what these characteristics might be and how the Church might best profit from them. It seemed a simple task as there were many assumed characteristics of childhood that in our professional roles we commonly highlighted as worthy of emulation by adult Christians, for example: openness, honesty, inquisitiveness, creativity, playfulness, a sense of awe and wonder. However as we considered each characteristic, we had to face the fact that many adults display these characteristics too. In other words, they were not unique to children. Indeed, the very conduct of our discussion exemplified this problem. Children are commonly renowned for their ability to

³ The meeting took place in 2004 and comprised representatives of the dioceses in the Northern Province of the Church of England.

⁴ Contributed to: Consultative Group on Ministry Among Children (CGMC), *The Child in the Church* (London: British Council of Churches, 1976), 17.

⁵ Matthew 18: 1-5; Mark 9: 33-37; Luke 9: 46-48.

discover awkward questions and pursue them relentlessly. However, it was an adult who, by exemplifying these very characteristics, caused the advisers a tortured afternoon's debating: one of our colleagues refused to let go of the awkward question, 'What's so special about children?' and relentlessly demolished any attempt by other members of the group to maintain that any of the cherished 'characteristics of children' were in fact unique to them.

The question revisited

The advisers' meeting eventually had to progress to 'next business', but the unresolved issue of children's 'specialness' remained with me, and when some years later the opportunity to engage in an extended research project arose⁶ it was to this issue that I turned. The quotation from John Pridmore that had given rise to the advisers' debate was essentially about the effect of children on adults, and literature on this subject viewed from a faith perspective was sparse. Secular, semi-medicalised literature⁷, accounts of abuse⁸, and a wealth of fictional material⁹ gave detailed accounts of the effects of the adult/child interface, rooted in everyday experience, but theology spoke little, and when it did¹⁰ childhood was treated as a 'theological concept', producing 'theologies of childhood' rather than theological reflections on being with real children in specific situations. The more recent collection of essays *Through the Eyes of a Child*¹¹ broke new ground in giving more detailed adult responses to working with children in a

⁶ As the thesis element of a Professional Doctorate programme, undertaken at the University of Chester.

⁷ For example: Stern, D. N. and Bruschweiler-Stern, N. with Freeland, S. *The Birth of a Mother: How the motherhood experience changes you forever* (New York (USA): Basic Books, 1998).

⁸ For example: Pelzer, D. *A Child Called 'It'* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 1995).

⁹ From George Eliot's *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* (London: The Queensway Library, 1861) to Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* (London: Orion Books Ltd, 1998).

¹⁰ For example in Karl Rahner's essay 'Ideas for a Theology of Childhood', trans. D. Bourke, in *Theological Investigations Vol 8: Further theology of the spiritual life 2* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd and New York (USA): Herder and Herder, 1971) or Hans Urs von Balthasar's meditation *Unless You Become Like This Child*, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco (USA): Ignatius Press, [1988] 1991).

¹¹ Richards, A. and Privett, P. (eds). *Through the Eyes of a Child: New insights in theology from a child's perspective* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009).

Christian context, but far more frequently any references to the effect on adults experienced by those actually working with children in situations of Christian nurture were passing and generalised. To address to my own satisfaction the issue raised by the advisers' discussion required more extensive and specific data. As the professional context that gave rise to the issue was that of Christian adults interfacing regularly with children in a setting of faith nurture, such was the setting in which I proposed to research.

Being mindful of the way that professional assumptions about the uniqueness of children's characteristics had caused the problem behind the advisers' earlier discussion, I was wary of making assumptions about the effects that nurturing children in the Christian faith might have on adults and therefore framed a very broad research question: *what personal effects do adult Christians experience when they explore the Christian faith in company with children?*¹² I hoped that an analysis of the effects experienced by the adults would reveal the 'special' feature or features of children that had caused them.

Considering data

Working with children is an intensely practical business. Children's Ministry advisers customarily find that those involved in this work in a church context are more concerned with practical matters than with theory, and as an adviser I have found that my previous practical experience as a primary school teacher gives me more authority in the eyes of Children's Ministry workers than my theological training as an Anglican priest. This reflects my own experience in teaching when I gave more weight to education advisers who grounded their work in the realities of classroom practice rather than beginning from a theoretical perspective.

¹² For the purposes of the research 'adult' and 'child' were defined in accordance with the legal distinction applied in the professional context of children's ministry – that an adult is a person over the age of 18 and a child is a person younger than that age. The arbitrary nature of this distinction was seen to have a significant bearing on the issue of identifying 'unique' characteristics of childhood – see 'So What's So Special?' below.

Perhaps one of the reasons that historically there has been so little theological writing about children in general or the adult/child interface in particular¹³ is that little theological potential has been anticipated in paying attention to the everyday practical experience of child-rearing. However, the work of Bonnie Miller-McLemore¹⁴ has shown that applying the “experiential-inductive model” of Practical Theology¹⁵ to the adult/child interface can generate new insights on themes of theological significance. The three books¹⁶ that she has come to characterise as her “trilogy on mothers, children and parenting”¹⁷ give rise to reflections on such key Christian themes as self-sacrifice, justice, love, sin and forgiveness, thus demonstrating the theological potential of examining the daily experience of adults being with children¹⁸.

Both the practical nature of my professional context and the theological potential of reflection on experience noted above encouraged me to seek data that was experience based in order to explore my research question. And the need for a sense of personal assurance in the validity of my findings¹⁹, in order to maintain professional integrity when advising parishes on

¹³ A recent survey fails to identify significant contributions before the 19th century: Berryman, J. W. *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the way for Grace* (Harrisburg/New York (USA): Morehouse Publishing, 2009).

¹⁴ The final writer in the influential collection, edited by Marcia Bunge: *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids (USA): Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001).

¹⁵ Pattison, S and Lynch, G, “Pastoral and Practical Theology,” in *The Modern Theologians: an introduction to Christian theology since 1918* (3rd edition), ed. Ford, D. F. with Muers, R. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 409.

¹⁶ Miller-McLemore, B. J. *Also A Mother: Work and family as theological dilemma* (Nashville (USA): Abingdon Press, 1994); *Let The Children Come: Reimagining childhood from a Christian perspective* (San Francisco (USA): Jossey-Bass, 2003); *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for children as spiritual practice* (San Francisco (USA): Jossey-Bass, 2007).

¹⁷ Miller-McLemore, B. J. “Feminism, Children, and Mothering Three Books and Three Children Later”, *Journal of Childhood and Religion*. Volume 2 (1) (2011): 1.

¹⁸ Subsequent to the conclusion of my research, Veronica Zundel’s *Everything I Know About God I’ve Learned from Being a Parent* (Abingdon: Bible reading Fellowship, 2013) provided a less academic, but equally potent theological reflection on parenting that showed its potential for providing challenging insights on such topics as sin, judgement and forgiveness.

¹⁹ As well as being an Anglican priest I am a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and espouse the founder, George Fox’s insistence on grounding his beliefs in experience – see: Religious Society of Friends, *Quaker Faith and Practice* (London: Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995), 19.02.

their Children's Ministry work, led me to look to my own experience as my primary data source. Accordingly, with the agreement of the ministry team in the parish where I serve as an assistant priest, the Parochial Church Council, and the parents and children involved, I drew on my personal experience of working with a parish multi-generational nurture group over a two year period as my primary data source.

Methodology and methods

The work of Miller-McLemore has demonstrated the contribution that a study of the effect children have on adults can make to Practical Theology (see above) and it was in this discipline that I located my study. As such, my methodology was within the interpretative paradigm commonly associated with the discipline²⁰. The open nature of the research question indicated a qualitative approach and my concern to avoid presuppositions by starting with experience rather than a hypothesis commended grounded theory²¹. The personal nature of my primary data also suggested some of the practices of autoethnography²².

To draw on my own experience as an adult member within a multi-generational group led to the adoption of participant observation as a method²³ and my Quaker heritage²⁴ predisposed me to journaling the experience as a data collection technique²⁵. I also used creative writing²⁶ – a

²⁰ See Swinton, J. and Mowat, H. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 76.

²¹ See Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory procedures* (Newbury Park (USA)/London/ New Delhi (Ind): Sage, 1990), 25.

²² See Ellis, C. *The Ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography* (Walnut Creek (USA): Altamira Press, 2004).

²³ See Maykut, P. and Morehouse, R. *Beginning Qualitative Research: A philosophic and practical guide* (London: Falmer Press, 1994), 69-70.

²⁴ I have been associated with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) as an Attender and subsequently a Member for 30 years.

²⁵ Journaling was a method of theological reflection and communication adopted by early Friends, for example: Fox, G. *The Journal of George Fox*, Bicentenary edition (London: Friends Tract Association, 1891).

²⁶ I am a published writer of fiction.

practice associated with autoethnography²⁷ – both to provide an experience-like representation of my analysis of the journal, and as part of my subsequent theological reflection on the analysis. As there were three other adults involved in the multi-generational group, who were willing to act as co-researchers, I was able to use their reflections on their experience of being with the children in the group as a means of triangulation. These reflections were gathered by means of a recorded group interview in which I joined the other three adults in interactive discussion²⁸. The discussion was unstructured to allow the co-researchers to add their influence to the choice of issues²⁹.

The concentration on one multi-generational group imposed limitations on my study. However I attempted to broaden its scope by also conducting six in-depth interviews with adults who were involved in the nurture of children in a variety of settings. My own parish group membership was white, and mainly middle-class, while the church was rural, with a ‘middle of the road’ theology. My interview sample was ‘purposive’³⁰ and designed to draw on a more varied experience in terms of ethnicity, class, social setting and theology. It also enabled me to hear from a wider age range of adults working with young people of more diverse ages. The interviews included three with pairs of participants, so nine adults were involved. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the use of probe questions for clarification³¹

In presenting findings based on experience, it is important to ensure that this does not foster the assumption that an objective picture of ‘reality’ is being offered. My study accepted that it was analysing subjective sense-making in response to events, rather than the events themselves³². And as my study looked at experience within a religious context, it is also

²⁷ Ellis, *The Ethnographic I*, 169-180.

²⁸ Maykut and Morehouse, *Beginning Qualitative Research*, 103.

²⁹ May, T. *Social Research: Issues, methods and process* (2nd edition) (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1997), 112.

³⁰ Maykut and Morehouse, *Beginning Qualitative Research*, 45.

³¹ May, *Social Research*, 111.

³² See Collicutt, J. “Discernment and the Psychology of Perception,” in *The Open Secret: A new vision for Natural Theology*, McGrath, A. E. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 92.

necessary to clarify my approach to ‘religious’ experience. A direct experience of the transcendent, such as John Wesley’s heart ‘strangely warmed’, is often taken as the kind of phenomenon described by the phrase. However, Miller-McLemore’s examination of parenting as a ‘spiritual practice’³³ indicates that more mundane experience can be held to be religious if viewed from a religious perspective. It is this approach to ‘religious experience’ that my study adopted.

Ruard Ganzevoort has described the common ground of Practical Theology as “the hermeneutics of lived religion”³⁴ and this phrase provides a helpful indication of what my project aimed to do. In view of the perceived need to avoid assumptions, a broad view of what might constitute relevant experience in the adult/child interface was taken. The personal effects experienced by myself and the other the adults involved were taken as appropriate data and provided the ‘lived’ aspect of Ganzevoort’s phrase. ‘Religion’ is defined by Ganzevoort as “the relation with the sacred”, and it is in relating the personal effects recorded in my data with the divine or sacred that the experiences became ‘religious’. Ganzevoort saw ‘Hermeneutics’, in the context of the phrase quoted above, as the attempt to understand the human/divine encounter of “lived religion”. The interpretation of my findings represented such a hermeneutic: the search for illumination of our relationship with the divine through and examination of the particular human experience of adults being with children.

THE *WEAVERS* EXPERIENCE

Description of the multi-generational group

Weavers was the name chosen for itself by the parish multi-generational nurture group. The fact that the name was chosen by the group is significant, as it indicated the ethos I sought to

³³ Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos*.

³⁴ In his presidential address to the International Academy of Practical Theology: *Forks in the Road when Tracing the Sacred: Practical Theology as hermeneutics of lived religion*. (Chicago, 03.08.2009). http://www.ruardganzevoort.nl/pdf/2009_Presidential.pdf (accessed 08.05.11).

promote. The importance for *The Child Theology Movement* (CTM)³⁵ of placing a child at the centre of any theological discussion made their work a natural backdrop to my research, deriving as it did from the same scriptures that inspire the CTM approach³⁶; and in seeking to discern the effect of children on adults I was mindful of the claim made by CTM's Sunny Tan that it was important to encounter children "as they are"³⁷ for them to have their proper theological influence. Accordingly, I sought to establish the parish multi-generational group in such a way that adult influence would be minimal and the children could 'be themselves'. The four adults involved were seen as fellow members with the children³⁸ rather than leaders of the group, and as far as possible decisions were shared. The first shared decision was choosing the name, *Weavers*. The process of selection was itself a reflection of mutuality, since the name was suggested by a child, inspired by a visual image provided by one of the adults to introduce the concept of the group. This image was a wicker pyramid into which each member wove a strip of cloth to show their equal contributions in shaping future activities.

Topics for consideration during *Weavers* sessions were chosen by the group, and these were then worked on in sub-groups, each containing at least one adult³⁹. The sub-groups would explore an aspect of the topic and devise a way of presenting their reflections to the whole *Weavers* group at the following session. Meetings were roughly every fortnight so a month's programme would comprise a preparation meeting and then a presentation meeting. An informal, social feel to the *Weavers* was encouraged by the use of starter games and a mid-session snack break, the domestic venue of the vicarage, and the early evening timing – 6.00pm to 7.30pm on Sundays.

³⁵ See White, K. J. and Willmer, H. *An Introduction to Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2006).

³⁶ See note 3, above.

³⁷ Tan, S. *Child Theology for the Churches in Asia: An invitation* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2007), 13.

³⁸ Originally six, growing to ten in the second year of the research.

³⁹ To ensure that these smaller groups were also multi-generational.

The researcher's experience

As my intention was to generate rather than test theory, I analysed my journal of the *Weavers* experience using a version of the Constant Comparative Method⁴⁰ as an established inductive model associated with Grounded Theory⁴¹. The structure of my analysis⁴² provided a basis for the reflections on the experience that underpinned my ultimate findings.

The whole thrust of my research was to avoid assumptions, particularly the assumed effects of children on adults through the characteristics that are commonly attributed to them. The discussion of the Northern Advisers had shown that these characteristics were not specific to children, and so I was looking for something else. Accordingly, I had not sought intentionally to record insights in my journal derived from the active, creative, participatory activities the *Weavers* might have generated or examples of the young members' openness, honesty, curiosity, or manifestations of their sense of 'awe and wonder'. Instead I employed a 'rule of heart' that dictated I should record only those experiences that had a strong personal effect on me, rather than those that were merely 'interesting'. I employed a similar rule in developing a structure for my analysis. Rather than beginning with categories derived from common assumptions, I sought to allow categories to emerge from the feel of the material. The 'rule of heart' approach to journaling and to analysis produced surprises in each of these phases of the research.

A close examination of the journal produced two surprises in terms of its content. Firstly, there was little that was specifically Christian or even overtly spiritual. Instead the journal reflections were mainly about the experience of being with the children. Secondly, I was surprised by the level of personal material the journal contained. I kept a diary of the analysis and about a quarter of the way through the process I recorded the following:

⁴⁰ Derived from Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. *Naturalistic Enquiry* (Beverly Hills (USA): Sage, 1985) by Maykut and Morehouse, *Beginning Qualitative Research*, 134-144.

⁴¹ Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 62.

⁴² A hierarchy relating my analysis categories, following Gibbs, G. *Analysing Qualitative Data* (Thousand Oaks (USA)/London/New Delhi (Ind)/Singapore: Sage, 2007), 73-74.

After five days immersed in this [analysis] I am aware how much of the comments in the journal are shaped by who I am. I suppose that should be obvious – after all it's my journal.

A journal of personal responses will necessarily be personal in nature, but the phrase 'shaped by who I am' indicated a deeper correlation between my being and the recorded effects of being part of *Weavers*.

Developing an analysis structure also proved surprising. Although I had avoided assumptions about the characteristics of children in seeking evidence of how adults were affected by them, I had maintained an underlying assumption that the prime experience of being with children would be one that had the immediate feel of a learning encounter. Accordingly I assumed that 'learning' would be the 'core category' and began to work with subsidiary categories such as 'learning from and with children'. However, applying such a framework did not 'feel right' – the material did not 'live' when viewed in this way but was simply dead data, being arranged in patterns that made 'head sense' but did not reflect the feelings that had given rise to it.

However, another note in my diary of the analysis process indicates the emergence of a more promising way forward. As noted above, I had sought to establish an egalitarian ethos for the group to enable the adults to experience the company of children 'as they are'. But my diary records the recognition that this endeavour eventually became "a dominant theme of concern and reflection" and "part of the effect/learning, rather than a means of achieving it". Putting this insight together with the general recognition that deeply personal issues had shaped the journal I realised that questions about leadership and authority were long-term personal preoccupations. It was this area of concern that provided the first indication of an organisational principle that made 'heart sense' for me. My diary of the analysis process records:

the key, driving issue here is the relationship between adults and children, whether it be seen in terms of 'power & authority' ... or 'power & equality' or 'authority & equality' or 'what distinguishes an adult from a child?'

The analysis now naturally fell into two sections: those things that bring adults and children together, and those things that set them apart.

These categories did not naturally sit under a core category of ‘learning’ but instead they reflected the nature of the material that had proved to be most significant in the journal – my feelings about being a member of the group. My positive feelings corresponded with the things that drew adults and children together and my negative feelings with those that separated them. My feelings therefore became the core category of the analysis and it became evident that the ‘learning experience’ my research sought to identify must be found at a deeper level. The recognition that the journal was shaped by issues of long-term personal concern opened the possibility that reflection on the journal analysis might reveal areas of important self-examination. Perhaps it would be from this reflection that my significant ‘learning’ would emerge and the ‘personal effects’ that adult Christians experience when they explore the Christian faith in company which children might be indicated.

FROM DATA ANALYSIS TO THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Reflecting on the journal analysis

The initial finding, suggested by my own experience of *Weavers* – that the effects on adults of spending time with children are shaped by what the adults brings to the encounters – not only provides an alternative to the commonly held view that it is the *children’s* characteristics that are most significant in the interface; it also challenges the oversimplified assumption that there will be a common effect or set of effects experienced by all adults who work with children. However, on its own, the recognition that the effect of the adult/child interface is influenced by what the adult brings is not a surprising finding; nor does it offer an explanation for the powerful significance the gospels indicate Jesus gave to such encounters. The effect of attention to children, it is suggested, can fit an adult for the kingdom of heaven⁴³. This is a theological proposition and it was in a theological reflection on my initial finding that I sought a richer

⁴³ Matthew 18: 3 and 19: 14; Mark 10: 14, 15; Luke 18: 16, 17.

response to the question I had set myself – what is special about children, in the light of the value Jesus places on them for adult discipleship?

My use of journaling, and the use I sought to make of an experience as a theological resource recommended a ‘Living Human Document’ approach to my theological reflection⁴⁴. This ‘type’ of reflection includes creative writing within its practices, and as a published author of children’s and adult fiction I developed a reflective procedure that made use of imaginative narrative representations.

The personal issue underlying the feelings that had provided the framework for my data analysis had been my life-long antipathy towards authority. I therefore began by free-associating with this issue to collect instances in my life that resonated with it. These instances were then categorised and two groupings emerged – occasions on which I did not want to be ‘bossed around’ and occasions when I did not want others to receive such treatment. From these groups I produced two ‘composite’ imaginative narratives that brought together events that had really occurred in my life but not necessarily at the same time. To distance myself from the material, I wrote in the third person and gave my ‘character’ a pseudonym⁴⁵. I also wrote swiftly and without revision. I treated these narratives as fresh data, analysing them using literary techniques to further objectify them. A consideration of the figurative language, images, similes, metaphors, or striking choices of vocabulary suggested a series of ‘deep themes’ within my personal history that had influenced my experience of children in the *Weavers* group.

These themes provided material for my theological reflection, which was conducted using a ‘Wesley quadrilateral’ approach, involving perspectives from scripture, tradition, reason and experience. Following Warren, Murray and Best, however, I broadened ‘experience’ beyond a strictly Wesleyan reading to encompass “the affective way of engaging with an apprehending

⁴⁴ Graham, E., Walton, H. and Ward, F. *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM, 2005), 18-46; and Graham, E., Walton, H. and Ward, F. *Theological Reflection: Sources* (London: SCM, 2007), 51-88.

⁴⁵ Herr, K. and Anderson, G. *The Action Research Dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (Thousand Oaks (USA)/London/New Delhi (Ind): Sage, 2005), 60.

reality”⁴⁶. The reflection was conducted as a “critical conversation”⁴⁷ in which appropriately qualified friends were enlisted to supply written comments on my composite narratives from the perspectives of scripture, tradition and reason; the ‘deep themes’ I had identified representing the ‘voice’ of my own experience. I analysed the comments and ‘deep themes’ to identify the “difficult questions” they raised⁴⁸ then scripted an imagined conversation⁴⁹ between myself, the voice of theology and the voice of social comment in which some of the questions were addressed in the context of my ‘deep’ personal themes. The process was ‘summed up’ in personal prayer⁵⁰.

The reflective process outlined above revealed the origins of the positive and negative feelings that had provided a structure for my journal analysis. The feelings were generated by what I came to recognise as my long-standing ‘problem with authority’ – both exercising it and being subject to it; and making imaginative use of my life experience as a reflective tool enabled me to detect the roots of the ‘problem’ in my own childhood and adolescence. I unearthed forgotten feelings of pain, anger, frustration, and helplessness at the ‘givens’ of a situation that put me under the control and direction of those ‘set in authority’ over me in my early life. I also recognised how these feelings subsequently recurred when faced with the ‘givens’ of the adult situations in which I found myself in later life, when I was expected to take up positions of responsibility and exercise authority myself. Most obvious among examples of such situations were my becoming a junior school teacher, and becoming the father of two children.

My reflections enabled me to examine my personal pain regarding the issue of authority in the broader context of social considerations. The tensions I have always felt were thereby

⁴⁶ Warren, Murray and Best, as quoted in Graham et al. *Theological Reflection: Sources*, 19.

⁴⁷ Pattison, S. “Some Straw for the Bricks: A basic introduction to theological reflection,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. Woodward, J. and Pattison, S. (Oxford/ Malden (USA): Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 136.

⁴⁸ Pattison, “Some Straw for the Bricks,” 141.

⁴⁹ See Moon, J. A. *Learning Journals: A handbook for academics, students and professional development* (London: Kogan Page Ltd., [1999] 2002), 133.

⁵⁰ See Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Merton, cited in Graham et al. *Theological Reflection: Sources*, 53-56; 60-63.

identified as part of the tension between the requirements of social living and the desire of the individual for maximum freedom and autonomy – a tension that was felt very keenly by my generation, growing up in the 1960s. Thus far my analysis of the personal issues that had shaped my experience of the adult/child interface in the *Weavers* could be seen as psychological, social and political. It became theological through an exploration of the word ‘given’.

My diary of the journal analysis indicates the progress of this exploration. It began with a recognition that dividing my experience into positive and negative feelings should not lead to a simplistic rejection of the latter. As I searched for category titles to use in the negative strand dealing with the things that set adults and children apart, one that emerged was ‘the given-ness of the division’. My diary records further initial thoughts on this title:

... One particular line of thinking emerges from the emergence of ‘given-ness’ as a category: who did the giving? God gives all things, so this adult/child division and the relationships we build across it are God’s gift. God has given adults to children and children to adults as children & adults, as well as sister & brother humans ...

By using the phrase ‘a given of the human condition’ as an expression of a faith position rather than a figure of speech I moved from a secular exploration of experience to a religious interpretation of being⁵¹.

This religious interpretation, revealed by my interface with children, showed me ‘what I was made of’ not simply in the secular sense in which the phrase is commonly used, but also in relation to the faith position that a human being is ‘made’ by a creator God. The ‘givens’ of the human condition in general and of my life in particular constituted the ‘being’ that is God’s gift to me. The penetrating light of an interface with children was thus illuminating my created being. The process that had brought me to this stage in my reflections therefore indicated that the full ‘effect’ on adults of spending time with children took place in two stages: first the ‘experience’, shaped by the adult’s background; and second, theological reflection, also influenced by what the adult brings to the process.

⁵¹ To read the human story as part of God’s story and thus to draw theological reflection from reflection on the everyday lies at the heart of Michel Quoist’s *Prayers of Life*, trans. A. M. De Commaile and A. M. Forsythe (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, [1954] 1963) – a highly influential contributor to my Christian formation.

Widening the horizon

The cooperation of the other three adult *Weavers* in my research meant that I was able to refer to their experiences of the adult/child interface in the group to corroborate and further explore the insights gained from the analysis of my journal. If my initial findings were correct, then rather than a generally uniform response, I should find that my three colleagues had individualised experiences of the group and that these should be a reflection of the ‘being’ they had brought to the situation. My analysis of the recorded conversation that they shared with me, exploring our experiences of being part of *Weavers*, demonstrated that this was the case. I shared my analysis of the conversation with the adult *Weavers* in subsequent individual discussions, during which they validated the links I had made between their contributions and their individual characteristics, and provided further material to develop the links between their own ‘being’ and the way they had experienced the group. The analysis of the conversation also allowed me to identify overarching themes that influenced all our experiences of the adult/child interface.

My own contributions to the conversation reflected my concern with the ‘authority’ issue, a concern traceable in part to the 1960s – the era in which I experienced my formative years – thus supporting my journal analysis. I also explored the powerful affirmation to be found in positive relationships with children – a concern that has links with my childhood as an ‘only one’.

Lucy⁵² is the long-standing coordinator of the parish Junior Church and her enthusiasm for this work and her more developed relationship with the young *Weavers* shaped her contributions to the conversation, which centred on enjoying each other’s company.

James, the parish priest, was more concerned with the role of the young *Weavers* as catalysts for growth within the faith community, and was the only one of the adults to pursue scriptural and theological issues at length during the conversation. He also exhibited a tension between valuing the transgressive creativity of children, while being critical of disruptive behaviour – reflecting his own creativity as poet and liturgist, and his liking for clear leadership.

⁵² All *Weavers*’ names are pseudonyms.

Joyce placed a significant emphasis on relationships with the children, especially as individuals. She was concerned to see the positive in these relationships, while being anxious about children's occasional rudeness and disorder, and the responsibilities of adults to respond appropriately to this. Her positivity was a reflection of her general approach to people of any age, and her concern over rudeness could be traced to her own childhood experience in which she had never liked chaotic situations.

From the brief summary above it can be seen that key factors influencing the way that the four adults experienced being part of *Weavers* may be grouped under four thematic headings: our own childhoods; our subsequent life as adults; our experience of relationships; and our personal values. When analysing my interviews with nine other adults of contrasting ages and backgrounds who relate to children in a variety of nurture situations⁵³ a fifth thematic category emerged – 'attributes'. I used this term to indicate the personality and the age of the individual.

The following sections summarise evidence drawn from the interviews with the nine adults that indicates the ways in which the five themes of 'childhood', 'life', 'relationships', 'values' and 'attributes' can be seen as God's gifts, in the light of their influence on the adult/child interface.

Childhood

A consideration of the ways that individuals' own childhoods shaped the 'being' that, as adults, they brought to their interface with children – a being illuminated by that interface –

⁵³ Two grandparents in their 60s, often carers for their grandchildren, involved in a suburban United Reformed Church and its Junior Church.

An Anglican priest in her 40s, serving an urban parish, also a childminder, mother, and former Sunday School teacher.

Two grandparents, in their 70s who ran 'houseparty' weekends for their grandchildren exploring the Christian faith together.

A member of an Eden Network team, in his 20s, working with young people in a multi-cultural area of urban deprivation.

Two Sunday School teachers (female in her 40s and male in his 50s) from an inner city Pentecostal congregation of predominantly Caribbean heritage.

An RE Coordinator in her 50s in an urban Church of England school with 94% Muslim children.

revealed the complexities of God's gifting. Ken⁵⁴, a Pentecostal Sunday school teacher, had a mostly positive view of his later childhood. He spoke warmly of the special qualities of the transition period between primary and secondary school and he felt that the value he placed on this time of his own life helped him empathise with children of this age in Sunday School.

By contrast, Sandra – a childminder and Anglican priest – described a difficult childhood during which she had received “one or two very nasty good hidings because I was just being – a child.” Her response to this negative experience was to determine, even during her childhood, that should she have children of her own she “wouldn't hit them quite so much and make them feel unworthy.” In speaking of her adult interfaces with children as a mother, professional carer, and Christian minister, Sandra demonstrated that this determination, born of negative childhood experience, had shaped a positive set of adult relationships with children. This transformation suggested that even negative experience could come to be viewed as a gifting.

Life

Tim's approach to his work with young people as part of the Eden Network could be seen as the result of a challenging encounter between two strands of his life experience. He described his middle-class upbringing on a “nice estate” as “hugely privileged” and viewed the version of the Christian faith he had received as reflecting the values of this comfortable background. However, during his teens Tim became involved with projects in areas of urban deprivation, which eventually led to his work with the Eden Network⁵⁵, and the ‘culture clash’ between his earlier life and this experience of inner-city, multi-cultural living led to a reassessment of the faith in which he had grown up. His realisation that the faith of his early years was biased towards the successful and powerful, and that it was possible to distinguish between the essential and the cultural in a presentation of the Christian faith, shaped his approach to sharing that faith with the young people with whom he subsequently worked.

⁵⁴ All interview participants have been given pseudonyms.

⁵⁵ See <http://www.eden-network.org/> for details of the Eden Network.

Gill, a Christian RE Coordinator working in a majority Muslim primary school, also showed the influence of her earlier life experience in the way she later interfaced with children in a faith context. Gill began her teaching career as a secondary phase language teacher, and a foreign language specialist's respect and enthusiasm for other cultures can be discerned in her approach as RE Coordinator in a school with such a high Muslim population. Her openness to the influence of the faithful practices of her Muslim pupils and their families was marked and she valued discussions with them as part of her own Christian faith development.

Another influential aspect of life experience was revealed when John, a Christian grandparent in his 60s, reflected on his relaxed style of relating to children. He noted that he and his wife Maggie had started their family during the late 1960s, a time when society was adopting a more liberal view of the proper way that children and adults should relate; and he considered that this may have influenced his approach to nurture and the effects he had therefore experienced in being with children.

The above examples of reflection on the influence of life experiences in shaping the 'being' of an adult, arising from examinations of the adult/child interface, broaden the concept of gift. Viewed theologically, God's gift of being can be seen to include an individual's social setting, employment and even historical context.

Relationships

The light shed on an adult's 'being' by reflection on their experience of interfacing with children, frequently illuminates their relational nature. John's wife, Maggie, commenting on my analysis of her interview, noted that generally she was "not a relationship person". However, in the course of the interview she expressed pleasure in her relationships with children and the way they related to each other, suggesting that her relational reserve in adult contexts may have given her an extra sensitivity to promoting relationality in a context that involves children.

Edith had placed a high value on the hospitality she and the other adults involved accorded to her grandchildren at the faith exploration 'houseparties' she helped organise for them. This reflected her general sense of the importance of hospitality in relating to others – a

hospitality I experienced at first hand when visiting her house to conduct an interview, and later to discuss my analysis of it. On both occasions I was fed amply and well.

Edith's husband, Robert, was also involved in organising the 'houseparties'. For him, they were an expression of the intergenerational relationality that had been a key feature of his vision for the Church community for many years⁵⁶ and characterised his natural approach to an interface with young people, both inside and outside his family.

The work of Rebecca Nye has made 'Relational Consciousness' one of the key contemporary definitions of spirituality⁵⁷, particularly among those involved in Children's Ministry. This is an indication of the importance that the illumination of their relational nature, in the light of the adult/child interface, could have for the spiritual lives of adult Christians.

Values

The values that individuals had come to hold were also illuminated when discussing their experience of being with children in a context nurture and faith. Both John and Ken gave evidence of a long-standing interest in 'spare time' study in an attempt to understand the world and make meaning for their lives in it. For both of them, these enquiries involved both secular and religious topics.

Gill had characterised her theology as "liberal", while Patricia – 'Lead' in a Pentecostal Sunday School – expressed views from the other end of the theological spectrum. Both, however, approached their faith with a depth of knowledge arising from a childhood in a Christian minister's household. Robert, too, after a long professional career as a Scripture Union children's evangelist, had an extensive grounding in the Christian faith. Maggie, on the other hand, had only begun exploring the faith since starting a Sunday School for her grandchildren. For these adults, difference both in theological position and experience were shown to have an influence on the way they experienced their time with children.

⁵⁶ Robert quoted *Mend the Gap* – Gardner, J. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008) – as expressing the vision he had always had for the Church, and the obstacles to realising it.

⁵⁷ Hay, D. with Nye, R. *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount, 1998).

‘Meaning making’ of the kind demonstrated by John and Ken is, according to James Fowler, the essence of faith⁵⁸; and John Westerhoff’s popularisation of ‘styles of faith’⁵⁹ together with Nicola Slee’s usage of ‘faithing’ to describe the way individuals ‘do’ their faith⁶⁰ alert us to the way that differences in faith development or theological approach, such as those indicated above, produce different but equally valuable outcomes. An awareness of the values underlying their meaning making and religious faith positions could be a fruitful consequence of adults examining their experience of being with children.

Attributes

The importance of personality in an adult’s response to being with children was highlighted by the contrasts evident between individuals. Sandra described herself as, “the type of person who [is] ... always out to prove something” and this had resulted in her efforts not to replicate the negative experiences she had had in childhood. However, in discussing my analysis of her interview she contrasted her response to her childhood with the very different responses of the siblings who had shared it with her. The married couple, Edith and Robert – whom I interviewed together – provided another clear example of contrasting personalities responding in different ways. Edith saw herself as the more practical, requiring “a working model” of a project such as their ‘houseparties’ and so emphasised the planning and execution. Robert, however, describing himself as “a big picture person” and spoke more of the dream of multi-generational Church. The use of Meredith Belbin’s leadership roles as a way of recognising the different qualities individuals can bring to children’s ministry teams is an indication of the value to be found in recognising personality as ‘gift’⁶¹.

⁵⁸ Fowler, J. W. *Stages of Faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, [1981] 1995).

⁵⁹ Westerhoff III, J. H. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1976, revised and expanded 2000).

⁶⁰ Slee, N. *Women’s Faith Development: Patterns and processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2004).

⁶¹ See Consultative Group on Ministry Among Children (CGMC), *Core Skills for Children’s Work* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006), 40 and 44.

A particular age is clearly not a constant attribute of an individual, but at any given time a person's age can have a significant effect on their responses to situations. Several of my interview participants made this connection, linking their perspectives to their 'time of life'. Gill, in her 50s, spoke of the way that interfacing with Muslim children had contributed to the questioning phase in her own faith that she associated with her age. John, in his late 60s, discussed the role of the 'elder' in passing on insights to the young. And Robert and Edith, in their 70s, valued the way that interfacing with their grandchildren had made them feel wanted and useful at an age when society sometimes seemed to imply they were 'past their sell-by date'. These examples indicate that reflection on adult experiences of the interface with children can offer the potential for discerning the attributes of any age or stage of life as a God-given gift⁶².

The Gift of Being

The possibility of discerning God's gifting in the being we have become, and continue to become through our lives, is 'good news' as it promotes a positive view of experience. However, it is not always easy news. Patricia and Ken treasured their childhood experiences, but Ken went on to speak of the struggles involved in making the transition from childhood to adolescence; and clashing social and faith cultures had been influential for Tim and Gill. These examples are reminders that if the suggestion that the 'being' arising from human experiences is to be seen as God's gift, then the pain and negativity of life must be encompassed. It is hard to see pain, particularly gratuitous pain, as part of God's gift, but Sandra's story gives an indication of how human suffering might be included within a description of experience-shaped being as God's gift. The pain of her childhood experiences influenced her own more positive approaches to parenting, childcare, and advocacy for children, suggesting that the possibility of transformation might be God's gift in such circumstances.

⁶² The collection *Children of God: Towards a Theology of Childhood*, edited by Angela Shier-Jones (Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), takes this approach to the different 'phases' of childhood and adolescence – another example of the way in which attention to the importance of children can enrich our view of humanity in all its ages.

The use of the concept of ‘gift’ as a heuristic tool in the analysis of my data is enriched by a consideration of the expression ‘a gifted person’. This description is used of someone who has a ‘gift’ *for* something in particular. Without that addition, the meaning of the phrase is incomplete. In this context a ‘gift’ cannot, therefore, be properly understood unless its purpose is known. It follows, then, that to reveal the full theological significance of ‘the gift of being’, revealed to an adult by reflecting on their interface with children, the purpose of the gift must be considered. Reflections on an adult’s own ‘childhood’, ‘life’, ‘relationships’, and ‘attributes’ in the light of children’s company can help that adult discern ‘what they’re made of’, and a similar reflection on ‘values’ can help reveal what the adult has ‘made of it’; but to give full meaning to their being, an adult must ask how they can best ‘make use of’ these gifts. Such ‘meaning making’ returns us to Fowler’s description of faith⁶³; and to consider ‘meaning’ in terms of God’s purposes turns a consideration of ‘being’ from a study in anthropology, psychology or philosophy into a study in theology. The study of human experience becomes theological when theological questions are brought to it⁶⁴ and we must now consider the underlying theological question indicated by reflection on my findings.

To consider the ‘gift of being’ in relation to purpose, specifically God’s purposes, ensures that the self-examination I am suggesting in the light of the adult/child interface does not become self-centred. It also brings a point of unity to a study that has tended to indicate disparity in its conclusions. My response to the original research question concerning the effects on adults of spending time with children was to suggest that there is not a single effect, but rather a variety, relating to the life experiences of the adults concerned. However, the a unity can be found in the theological question, ‘How can the ‘beings’ revealed by reflecting of these disparate effects, be used to serve God’s purposes?’

Before offering a response to this question we must, of course, come to a view on what God’s purposes might be. Since the question arises from a study of situations designed to nurture

⁶³ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

⁶⁴ See Miller-McLemore, B. J. “Also a Pastoral Theologian: In Pursuit of Dynamic Theology (Or: Meditations from a Recalcitrant Heart)”, citing Hiltner and Tillich, *Pastoral Psychology*. 59 (2010): 816-817.

children in the Christian faith, we might adopt a definition derived from that context. If Christ's wish for humanity is regarded as full human flourishing⁶⁵ then it could be claimed that God's purposes are being served, in the context of Children's Ministry, if the 'being' of an adult is being used to foster the flourishing of a child. It might be possible to read the emphasis I have placed on adult self-analysis and reflection as indicting that its value lies in adult self-development, and indeed such a result may well be one result of an adult engaging in the process I have followed in reflecting on my experience of *Weavers*. However, a focus on the flourishing of the child prevents any suggestion that children's importance lies in the personal development adults can derive from them. Writing about baptized children taking their rightful place as "integral members" of the Christian community, Louis Weil points out that both children and community will thereby be changed. He notes "Each baptized person, adult or infant, brings into the community the particular gifts God gives to each one of us" and that "As the child grows and develops, those gifts are manifested, or even drawn forth from the person as they seek to serve"⁶⁶. It is unclear whether 'the person' indicates the developing child or the nurturing adult – an ambivalence that helpfully expresses the mutuality that may be achieved when an adult serves God's purposes by fostering the flourishing of a child: both adult and child may develop as a result.

SO WHAT'S SO SPECIAL?

Is this a special relationship?

The journal recording my own experience of being with children in a faith nurture group showed occasions when I had been struck by the children's open, trusting, lively and joyful responses to life and the faith based material we shared, and by their honesty, questioning, and unusual theological insights. However, these instances were neither as numerous nor as powerful as scripture, and Pridmore's seminal interpretation of it given at the beginning of this article,

⁶⁵ Life 'in all its fullness' (John 10: 10 – Good News and New English Bible versions).

⁶⁶ Weil, L. "Children and Liturgy: A Perspective," in *Children at Worship: Congregations in Bloom*, Fairless, C. (New York (USA): Church Publishing Inc., 2000), xi.

would lead one to expect. The approaches demonstrated by the children were already part of my own approach to faith and life before I became involved in children's ministry or the *Weavers* group; and they are approaches I find, professionally, in many Christian adults who work with children. This observation suggests the possibility that rather than children's characteristics influencing the adults, it may perhaps be that certain adults are drawn to work with children because they already do their faithing in a child-like way.

The analysis of my data and subsequent reflection took the focus away from the supposed characteristics of children as the locus of their 'specialness' for adults in the Christian community. Instead, it suggested that their 'specialness' for adult discipleship might be sought in the relationship between adults and children, and the adult self-examination this relationship could evoke – part of the journey to self-knowledge that can be linked with the journey to God⁶⁷ and the exploration of his purposes. However, the original question, arising from the meeting of diocesan children's ministry advisers, remained – 'What's so special about children?' If the focus has shifted to the adult/child relationship, then what is so special about that relationship, as distinct from any other form of human relationship?

Responsible adults

For Miller-McLemore, the relationship between a parent and a child is characterised by the responsibility of the former for the safety and development of the latter⁶⁸. The saying that 'it takes a village to raise a child'⁶⁹ reminds us that parenting can be a communal role, not restricted to biological parents; and Miller-McLemore herself later expanded her use of 'parenting' to embrace all who care for children and are changed by the experience⁷⁰. The kind of

⁶⁷ See Ford, M. *Wounded Prophet: A portrait of Henri. J. M. Nouwen* (New York (USA): Doubleday, 1999), 213.

⁶⁸ Miller-McLemore, *Let The Children Come*, 21.

⁶⁹ See White, K. J. *The Growth of Love: Understanding five essential elements of child development* (Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008).

⁷⁰ Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos*, xvii.

responsibility that Miller-McLemore explores might, therefore, be seen as a key to understanding the specialness of the adult/child relationship in general.

Both ‘safety’ and ‘development’ – identified by Miller-McLemore as important elements of parental, and therefore adult responsibility for children – imply vulnerability on the part of the child. The link between safety and vulnerability is clear. However, the development of children is also an area of potential danger, as Copsey indicates by highlighting the adult influences – such as broken trust, repression of curiosity, or denial of unconditional love – that can damage children’s spiritual development⁷¹. The analysis of my *Weavers* journal involved the use of the term ‘vulnerability’ as one of the initial category titles, and the *Weavers* conversation together with all six of my interviews included instances of adult concern over children’s vulnerability in relation to: material needs; violence and injury; negative influences; pastoral issues; and emotional, social, educational and spiritual development. Added to the instances arising from my small sample is the broad spectrum of dangers facing children globally, which David Jensen explores in his influential *Graced Vulnerability*⁷².

The fact that vulnerability was chosen as the subject of the first main chapter of *Through the Eyes of a Child*⁷³ – a collection commissioned to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the United Nations Year of the Child – emphasises the importance and distinctiveness of this aspect of the relationship between adults and children. However, it was also a characteristic of children identified by the Northern Advisers at their meeting, and like the other characteristics discussed on that occasion there is a question mark over its uniqueness in relation to children. People of all ages and in all circumstances are potentially vulnerable⁷⁴ and indeed vulnerability could be

⁷¹ Copsey, K. *From the Ground Up: Understanding the spiritual world of the child* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2005), 60-73.

⁷² Jensen, D. H. *Graced Vulnerability: A theology of childhood* (Cleveland (USA): The Pilgrim Press, 2005).

⁷³ Richards, A. “Nakedness and Vulnerability,” in *Through the Eyes of a Child*, ed. Richards and Privett, 21-43.

⁷⁴ Archbishops’ Council. *Promoting a Safe Church: Policy for safeguarding adults in the Church of England* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), 2.

regarded as an essential aspect of humanity⁷⁵. My search for a unique ‘specialness’ in children led me from the supposed characteristics of children, to a consideration of the relationship between adult and child; but in seeking a unique feature of that relationship the discussion returns to a characteristic of childhood that, like all the others, proves to be generally human rather than specific to children.

The assumption that lay behind my approach to this enquiry – namely that the ‘specialness’ of children would derive from something unique to them – is now called into question. A footnote at the beginning of this article holds the key to this issue. My research question concerned the effect of children on adults, and in the footnote I defined the distinction between child and adult as dependent on age, in line with national law and my professional usage. The legal and professional distinction is made in the context of determining responsibilities, and is therefore relevant to my conclusion regarding the importance of relationship between adults and children. However, the selection of a particular age as a boundary marker is arbitrary and is one of the cruder ways in which societies construct distinctions between adult and child, none of which – even the biological – is absolute and incontestable⁷⁶.

Since there is no unequivocal distinction to be made between adult and child it becomes clear that whatever ‘specialness’ we may attribute to children cannot derive from something unique to them. To acknowledge this, however, can be seen as a positive conclusion for children’s advocates in the Church since it supports the emphasis they place on the equality of status children should enjoy by virtue of their common humanity.

⁷⁵ Le Pichon, X. “The Sign of Contradiction,” in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L’Arche Communities from theology and the sciences*, ed. Reinders, H. S. (Grand Rapids (USA)/ Cambridge (UK): Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2010), 100.

⁷⁶ See Asbridge, N. “What is a Child?” in *Through the Eyes of a Child*, ed. Richards and Privett, 1-20; and Carter, M. *All God’s Children: An introduction to pastoral work with children* (London: SPCK, 2007), 3-5, 25, 80-81.

Care for the vulnerable

If the ‘specialness’ of children, as indicated by references to them attributed to Jesus in scripture, cannot be viewed in terms of uniqueness, perhaps it can be interpreted as concerning a ‘special value’. In this context, the recognition that children are not ‘a breed apart’ from the rest of humanity and that the adult/child relationship of responsibility is not entirely unique enhances rather than undermines their position. Any person of any age could become disabled and therefore especially vulnerable at any time, and yet disability is often seen by society as an issue of ‘them’ and ‘us’⁷⁷. The fact that children’s vulnerability proves not to be an alienating distinction, but a feature of their common humanity with adults might act as an encouragement to view relationships between the more and less vulnerable of any age as a natural part of human community. White claims that Jesus chose children as a “sign of the kingdom of heaven”, rather than any other marginalized group, since “every person either was or is a child”⁷⁸. Perhaps the ‘special value’ of children implied by this comment is that they are an ever present, embodied reminder of and invitation to relationship with human vulnerability, including our own.

As Brueggemann points out, the scriptural phrase ‘widows, orphans and aliens’ that constitutes “almost a mantra for the unprotected”⁷⁹ has at its heart a particularly vulnerable child. Caring for this ‘unprotected’ group is part of the calling of God’s people, and today as in the time of ancient Israel, perhaps a special value of children may lie in their ability to remind God’s people of their calling to care for the vulnerable in general. Speaking as a mother, Miller McLemore notes that care for one’s own children can encourage concern for all children⁸⁰, and her broadening of parenting to include, potentially, anyone who cares for children (see above)

⁷⁷ McCloughry, R. and Morris, W. *Making a World of Difference: Christian reflections on disability* (London: SPCK, 2002), 3.

⁷⁸ White, K. J. “ ‘He Placed a Little Child in the Midst’ ,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Bunge, M. J., Fretheim, T. E. and Gaventa, B. R. (Grand Rapids (USA)/Cambridge (UK): Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2008), 354, note 3.

⁷⁹ Brueggemann, W. “Vulnerable Children, Divine Passion and Human Obligation,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Bunge et al. 411ff.

⁸⁰ Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 158 and *Let the Children Come*, 169.

combined with Brueggemann's observations, suggest that children can have a 'special value' in enhancing the ability to "love your neighbour as yourself"⁸¹.

Viewed in this light, adult reflections on their 'being' as 'gift' in promoting the flourishing of children may ultimately lead to a consideration of how 'what they're made of' might serve God's purposes in caring for vulnerabilities in all God's people. The fact that children are not unique, may actually facilitate the association of their needs with the needs of humanity as a whole and so enhance their 'special value' to the Church in encouraging the fulfilment of a commandment that amounts to half the law and the prophets.

CONCLUSION

Limitations of the study

A study that uses the researcher's own experience as its principle data source has limitations regarding the generalisability of its results. However, those limitations can be reduced by making clear the expectations of the study. It was not the intention to suggest that the particulars of the researcher's experience could be generalised, but rather that the broader nature of that experience might have wider application. The use of the term 'transfer' rather than 'generalise' might be helpful here⁸². The findings of this study invite other adults involved with children in the Church to transfer its perspectives to their own situation and add to knowledge in this area by:

- looking for effects on adults of interfacing with children, other than those derived from the commonly assumed characteristics of children;
- recording their personal experience of the adult/child interface and analysing it, particularly in relation to their own 'being';
- reflecting theologically on that analysis, particularly in relation to the 'gift of being' and 'God's purposes'.

⁸¹ Matthew 22: 39; Mark 12: 31; Luke 10: 27.

⁸² See Herr and Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation*, 50.

Reflective practice in community

If a church is an all-age community, then the invitation to adults ‘involved with children’ mentioned above is an invitation to all adults in the community to reflect on their relationship with its children. Such reflections may already occur in unstructured ways, but this study offers a progression that could be used by any adult reflecting on their experience of interfacing with children to add rigor to their response and deep personal relevance to the results:

- identify a context in which you interface with children;
- record your responses to this interface;
- analyse your record to identify patterns and surface issues;
- recall events in your own life that resonate with these issues;
- identify personal themes from this pool of events;
- delve deeply into these themes;
- reflect on what you find and ask how these deep personal aspects of your being can become ‘gift’ in the service of the vulnerable.

My study was initially undertaken as an individual. However, by sharing my preliminary findings with the other adult *Weavers* and my interview participants, and inviting them to comment on them in relation to my analysis of their contributions, I began to make the personal enquiry communal. A church community is an interplay of the individual and the communal – the New Testament image of the Body of Christ⁸³ is a reminder that each member brings the particularity of their individual ‘being’ but that all serve a common body. A personal reflection on ‘being’ in relation to God’s purpose on behalf of individual members of a church community may help them better fulfil their role in the communal ‘Body’; but for individual members to engage in a form of reflection derived from my process in a communal setting could be of added benefit to the well-being of the all-age ‘Body of Christ’. Indeed, to first address such reflections in a communal context – perhaps as part of a review of a congregation’s vision for itself as a

⁸³ Romans 12: 4-8; 1 Corinthians 12: 4-31.

multi-generational community – might encourage individuals who are unused to structured personal reflection. It could also offer the anonymity of speaking in general terms of ‘the adults’ in the congregation and the possible origins of their responses to children rather than revealing personal reflections.

A communal reflection on the facets of adult ‘being’ that might underlie their responses to the interface with children would also offer the possibility of showcasing a number of reflective approaches. Those used in my study were of a literary nature, derived from my own background and aptitudes, but graphic and other non-literary material can also contribute to reflective processes⁸⁴. A range of options might help individuals find an approach that would work for them in private use. The Godly Play creative response time⁸⁵ provides a helpful model here in that it seeks to offer children a range of reflective possibilities in response to a story; it also progresses from communal reflection in the initial ‘wondering’ time of group oral response to questions through to personal reflection using individually chosen resources.

Implications for Children’s Ministry

Libby Brooks’ study of ‘growing up in modern Britain’⁸⁶ is a reminder that childhood is not an age of innocence, protected from supposed ‘adult’ issues of sex, gender, poverty, consumerism, fear, violence, mental illness, politics, racism and criminality. And my interview participant Tim, in his descriptions of inner-city ministry, gave graphic testimony to the fact that children and young people are very much part of the ‘real world’. Any approach to children’s ministry that avoids this reality by focusing on idealised ‘characteristics’ of childhood is bound to be inadequate; and those whose advocacy for the importance of children in the Church relies on such ‘characteristics’ run the risk of being dismissed as having a romanticised and over simplified view of children.

⁸⁴ See Moon, *Learning Journals*, 47.

⁸⁵ See Berryman, J. W. *Teaching Godly Play: How to mentor the spiritual development of children* (Denver (USA): Morehouse Educational Resources, 2009).

⁸⁶ Brooks, L. *The Story of Childhood: Growing up in modern Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

The change in emphasis proposed by this study away from presumed abstract ‘characteristics of childhood’ towards a consideration of the relationships between real children and real adults in the Church may offer a more complex and fruitful basis for championing the central role of children. By emphasising mindfulness of relationship between the generations, it could also assist in emphasising the importance of the all-age agenda outlined by Mounstephen and Martin⁸⁷, championed by Gardner⁸⁸, but still far from being addressed fully in the Church.

Both of the above implications derive from the importance the findings of this study place on the presence of children as a reflective resource for the whole Church – which, the Child Theology Movement would maintain, is how Jesus regarded the child he placed in the centre of his disciples⁸⁹. Those who give their time to Children’s Ministry in the Church often feel that they are not being properly ‘fed’ because they spend so little time in what is seen as the ‘main’ church, where they can listen to the sermon. Concern over this issue can lead to the development of rota systems that diminish the frequency of time an individual adult spends in the children’s group, to the detriment of continuity and relationship building. The findings of this study support a challenge to the assumption that adults are only, or even most significantly ‘fed’ when attending to a sermon, suggesting instead that by attending to children, as Jesus bade his first disciples do, adults can engage in significant theological reflection. Such an argument may not only encourage more sustained engagement with children on the part of those already engaged in this ministry but also render the work more attractive to the rest of the church community.

⁸⁷ Mounstephen, P. and Martin, K. *Body Beautiful? Recapturing a vision for all-age Church* (Cambridge: Grove, 2004).

⁸⁸ Gardner, *Mend the Gap*.

⁸⁹ See White and Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology*.

Implications for discipleship

Jesus bids his followers become like children to enter the kingdom⁹⁰. In the light of this study, that might be seen as acknowledging their human vulnerability. In a society that promotes the virtues of self-sufficiency, dependence and its associated vulnerability are devalued⁹¹. However, in writing about the divine compassion he had felt in the presence of an aged priest, Henri Nouwen suggested that the stark vulnerability he had shared during the encounter had summoned the compassion of God from his companion⁹². Perhaps in attending to the effect children have on them, adults can re-evaluate the place of vulnerability in their own lives – and by recognising each other’s vulnerabilities whatever our age, inspired by our caring response to children, it may be that we can summon from each other a glimmer of God’s love. In this way, perhaps, we may begin to enter into the light of the kingdom.

⁹⁰ Matthew 18: 3.

⁹¹ Carter, *All God’s Children*, 26

⁹² Ford, *Wounded Prophet*, 150.