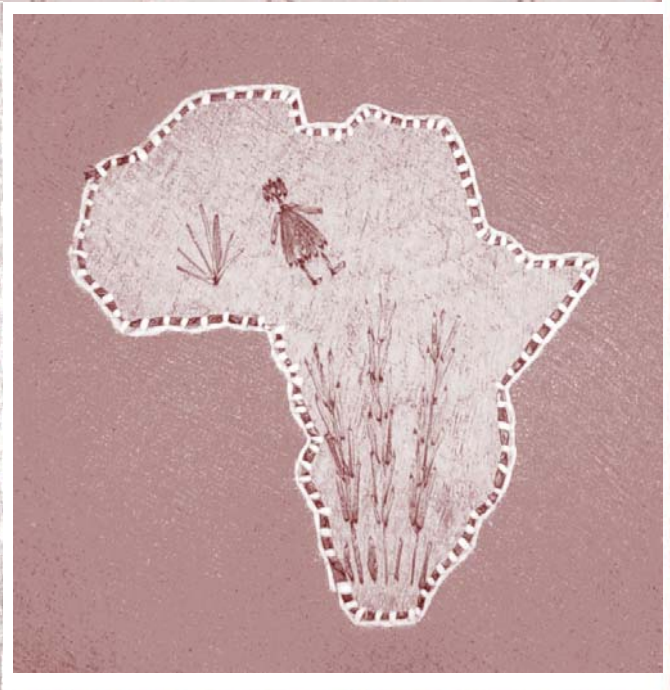
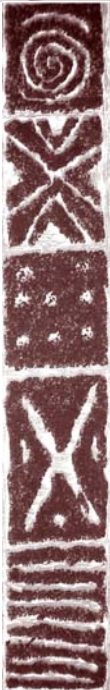


**CAPE TOWN CONSULTATION ON  
CHILD THEOLOGY**

25 — 27 February 2004

**Child  
Theology**  
MOVEMENT

*Jesus placed a little child among them.....*



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Registered in England, number: 494 3636  
Charity Registration number: 1106542  
Registered Office:  
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**Report of the  
Cape Town Consultation on Child Theology**

**25 – 27 February 2004**

**Editor: Dr John Collier**

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## Introduction

This small meeting of theologians and children's workers was the second such associated with the Child Theology Movement and the first in Africa. The first meeting had been held about 19 months earlier in Penang, Malaysia. The aim on both occasions was to explore the significance of Jesus' action, recorded in Matthew 18, when he introduced a child into one of the disciples' disputes. Though not often recognised as such, the dispute was about theology, to which discipline children are usually thought to have little to contribute. Hence, following Jesus' example, we are convinced of the value of combining 'professional' theologians with Christian children's workers in such a meeting.<sup>1</sup>

To date, the meetings have not been conferences with prepared papers, although a lot of preparation had taken place, but were more in the nature of open-ended conversations. This process was deliberate. We believe it is important to allow the insights of Child Theology to affect our process as well as our theology and activism because the means are as important as the ends. One of the important lessons of the Matthew 18 incident is that God is not only interested in bringing about his Kingdom on earth, but He is also profoundly concerned about the means by which this is achieved.

Through this process, we began to explore theology in general in the light of the issues facing children from our own experiences of childhood, whether through our own childhoods or from relationships with children in our family, church, work and wider society. Our hope is to continue doing this in a variety of cultural settings.

This meeting was shorter than that in Penang, only three days rather than five. Most of us were unknown to each other and many were new to the concept of Child Theology. Therefore, we are aware that this is unfinished work. This will become clear in the report. Yet this groundbreaking was worthwhile, we believe, leading to significant progress in identifying important issues that we intend to follow up in Africa and elsewhere.

## Day 1

We started each day with a Biblical meditation and prayer, to centre ourselves on God the source of our life and inspiration. The Bible is an important authority for Child Theology not just as a source and test of ideas but as a guide to our life, including the relationships and process that form in a meeting such as this. We did not have an assigned expositor to do this for us but one or another in the meeting volunteered the day before.

### Meditation

We turned our attention to Psalm 8, a hymn of praise to God the Creator. It starts and ends with the name of God and in between reaches up to the stars and down to newborn babies. Some time ago there was a popular song "I believe" which included the line: 'Every time I hear a newborn baby cry, I believe'. Children are especially prominent in verse 2 and it was this verse that Jesus quoted in the Temple precincts.<sup>2</sup> We may note three roles given to babes in this verse:

- Children are ordained by God; which begs the question: Ordained for what?
- Their pre-language cries can be considered praise; they have more important things to do than learn the alphabet!
- They have a special role in silencing the foe: they are agents not just objects

Are these three roles true whichever culture a child is born into? Whether Hindu, Islamic, or animist children?

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<sup>1</sup> We recognise that Christian children's workers are not children! As such we are not strictly following Jesus' example. However, in Penang, we were able to have a child with us for the duration, although he usually chose to be absent during the long discussions! We did have shared activities. Unfortunately, this was not possible in the Cape Town meeting. But as will be seen in this report, we brought children with us in our hearts and minds and made them present in our shared imagination.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 21:16

## Personal Introductions

### Haddon



I was brought up in a fiercely pietistic Baptist family (hence my Christian name!) and went to Cambridge where I studied church history. This allowed me to avoid the compulsory optimism prevalent in other branches of Christian theology. From there I went to Leeds University, increasingly concentrating on practical and systematic theology, developing interests in Barth and Bonhoeffer and forgiveness in politics. I retired six years ago but continued teaching part-time at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. In the last three years I have been working with Keith on Child Theology.

I am married to Hilary and together we have adopted three children. The youngest daughter has had serious trouble since adolescence, one outcome of which is that Hilary and I are now the primary caregivers to our grandson Nathaniel.

### Heidi and Gerry



We were invited because our daughter works with Keith in London and we live locally near Cape Town. We wonder if we have much to contribute but are hoping that Child Theology may be a means of self-transformation. We have been married 29 years and have two children. Gerry is a property developer and business man and Heide is a home maker and kingdom builder.



### Jeni

I work with the City Mission Foundation here in Cape Town and head the Child Abuse team. I am a social worker by professional training and am married with one son. I am a very practical person and am feeling quite apprehensive about being involved in an intellectual discussion.



### Isobel

I am currently the co-ordinator for the Viva Network Regional Centre in Uganda. From here the team encourages the development of networks of Christian groups working with 'children at risk' and encourage linking and sharing of information at Regional level. I have lived in different parts of Africa and worked as a teacher and as a Christian Education Officer. My background is in teaching. Two years ago, I adopted a Ugandan girl and this has had a profound impact on my life. I am learning so much from her.



### Daniel

I am originally from Nigeria but I have lived and worked in Kenya for 14 years. I started my working life as a cabinet maker and went from that into theology. (There's a good precedent for this career path!) I have been married 30 years and have several children.

For 5 yrs. I was the General Secretary in my home Church in Nigeria. Then, for over three years I was Executive Director of ACROSS in Sudan and later I served for nine years as Regional Secretary for Africa for the United Bible Societies. I became General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa in January 2003. I am also a Member of the International Leadership Team for the World Evangelical Alliance. I have authored two books: "The Extended Family: An African Christian Perspective," and "Making the Right Choices."



### Andrew

I have two daughters and two grandchildren. My wife and I are teachers but early on moved to work with children in the church. I joined the staff of Scripture Union in South Africa in 1969 and have always focussed on children's ministry. Currently I am the Regional Secretary of Scripture Union in Southern Africa, but I still maintain an active interest in ministering to children.



### Johannes

I grew up in the Western Cape as a pastor's son and eventually became a pastor myself. I was surprised to be called to be the Principal of Petra College. My speciality is Hebrew studies not children's mission, which is the particular focus of the college. Recently I have begun to wonder if the model of evangelism the college teaches is appropriate for Africa. I am interested in all aspects of what I call 'kidology' – the underlying philosophy of childhood; what are the preconceived ideas that influence us; the link between what we say and what we do about children; etc. I have been married for 21 years and we have four children

of our own.

### Lorenzo



I am the Director of the City Mission Foundation in Cape Town. We work with the urban poor, many of whom are children. The point of this ministry is summed up well by 1Sm 17:46 – so all the world may know that there is a God. One of the best parts of my day is the 20 minutes I have each day taking my two children to school. We have this time to ourselves to sing, to observe, to ask questions, to have a quiz. We have our own liturgy ritual: every day they recite 'Dad's rules'. These are: be happy; be confident; have fun; never give up. When we get to the school gate we look around and find someone to pray for before we

part.



### Shiferaw

I work for Compassion in Africa, based in Nairobi. I was born in poverty in Ethiopia. We scarcely had enough to eat. I was in grade eight when I got my first pair of shoes. But there was one thing our family didn't lack at all: love. We enjoyed an abundance of love. I have been married for 30 years and have three children. They are all grown up but one is mentally ill and we continue to take care of him. I want to know how we can put children in the centre of the church.

### Keith



I was born into a household of about 40. Included in this family are those who are unable to live with their biological families. Mill Grove, where I live, has been home to over 1,200 children since it was started by my grandfather in 1899. I am a lecturer at Spurgeon's College, and also preach and write. For the past five years my thinking has focussed on children and their place in the world from what we know of God's intentions. A lot of this reflection has been shaped by my experience of living in a Christian residential community in India and studying the life and work of Pandita Ramabai. I love games and playing, whether on the mountains, seas, the piano or the chess board.



### Yacoub

I was born in Stellenbosch here in South Africa. I have been married twenty years and have three daughters. I am a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church. This has been my work for 17 years. I also teach part-time at Petra college.

**Kasonga**

I was originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo. I work for the All Africa Council of Churches in Nairobi, where I am responsible for its youth work.

**Victor**

I am from Zimbabwe, where I am Principal of a Theological College. I am married with two daughters. My wife and I are from different tribes which can cause some difficulties! I am on study leave for two years and am pursuing a PhD here in Cape Town. I trained as a high school teacher and then went to work for Scripture Union before becoming a Presbyterian pastor.

**Funke**

I am from Nigeria and I am not married. But I did have a daughter. Later I gave my life to God and have been working in children's ministry for 15 years.

I am a Children's Minister with the Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria. I am National Secretary of the Children's Church Workers/Leaders and a member of the Viva Network Lagos Exploration Team. At present I am the Pioneering Coordinator of a Foursquare Gospel Children's Church in Okobaba, a Slum in Ebute Metta, Lagos, Nigeria.

**Carmen**

I am working here with the City Mission. I have worked with street children for six years. I am married and have no children. (Carmen was our local organizer without whom this consultation would not have been possible.)

**John**

I am a medical doctor but have mostly worked in management and research. I am now using these skills in support of projects that help those who are marginalised, poor or oppressed, mostly in the 'Third World'. I am also intermittently studying for an MTh in Applied Theology at Spurgeon's College in London. My three sons are all adults and live in three different continents.



## Session 1: Introduction to Child Theology

The three officers of the Child Theology Movement present at the meeting took the opportunity of the first session to explain Child Theology and set the consultation in context.

### A new theology?

Haddon Willmer

Child theology is the name we give to the work we are doing. As far as we know, no one has ever used the term before. We want to make it clear that we do not have a proprietary attitude to Child Theology (CT), as though it is our invention so that we can or should be defensive about what happens to it, as others take it up in their own way. What we hope to do is make a contribution to an open conversation.

CT is not an overall Christian theory of all activity around children. Nor is it just a reaction to the child unfriendliness of much of modern life. It also reacts to the massive secular and Christian child friendliness which are to be found in the world now, for example, as set out by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Gospel can be ignored or distorted not only in activities that are child-unfriendly. Child friendliness can take forms that have the same effects. Secular humanism can be concerned for children without God and the Gospel. To care for children, it's not just a matter of adding God into the programme. There can be Christian activism for children which obscures the Gospel because it is insufficiently theologically articulate.

Theology is thinking and talking (logos) about, from, towards and with God (theos). Not all religion involves theology. Even if the talk about Child Development, for example, uses religious language and categories but makes no mention of God, then it is not theology. CT takes the view that theology is important and should be worked at, even though talking about God can never substitute for God, and theology as talk is not a substitute for faith in action. CT has only a small corner in the totality of God's world, but in and from that corner it must let its light shine.

One approach to CT will become apparent in the book Keith and I are working on together. Let me outline it briefly. The pattern of the book is taken from some Gospel stories and sayings of Jesus in relation to children.

First, helped by Matthew 18, we aim to follow Jesus who *put a child in the middle of a theological argument!* The disciples thought the Kingdom of God was such that it was possible and proper to have a competition for greatness in it. Jesus does not merely attack the proud ambitions of the disciples by inviting them to become as children, but changes the language in order to speak more precisely about the transcendent difference of the Kingdom of God from the kingdoms of our earthly imagination and experience. In God's kingdom, the language of greatness ceases to be competitive. To enter the kingdom is enough – and even the great people on earth cannot take entering the kingdom for granted. In the book we aim to set the child in the middle of other theological issues, besides the nature of the Kingdom of God, and see what happens.

The second part of the book is about *receiving the child*. Jesus tells us that we cannot enter the Kingdom unless we become as children. Does this mean we are to attempt the impossible, in going back on our adulthood – the adulthood it seems God implants in every child by nature? Jesus does not expect adults in themselves to become children. They become as children when they receive the child, real children, so that they live with and for the child, so that they walk at the pace of the child. They become as a child, without ceasing to be adult, when they let the child they receive be a child. As they do this, they provide what the child needs as part of its child-ness: reception. This way of reading the Gospels is controversial, and will be disputed by many child-friendly theologians. Our book will not be wholly conventional and unprovocative.

The third section of the book will attend to child suffering: to the massive despising of little ones which is all around us. Jesus said they should not be despised because their angels always behold the Father's face. This is certainly a theological saying: it invites us to think that angels and God's face might be helpful and consoling to little ones who are despised. This challenges the widely held view that God is only of value to us if God-talk correlates with and symbolises effective justice and goodness on earth. What comfort is it that angels behold the Father's face? This is a basic issue, which all believers in God feel: Where is God when children suffer? And further, if comfort can be found in God's open face, who and where are the angels? Could, for example, the United Nations

Convention of the Rights of the Child be an angel, who represents the child to God and with the affirmation of God?

That is the book as we plan it at present, but it may change by the time it is completed. I hope this summary gives clues about what Child theology is as *theology*, achieved by setting the child in the middle of our thinking.

### **Where we come from and where we hope to go**

*Keith White*

For some years, Viva Network has organised international 'Cutting Edge' conferences for people working with children at risk. Having attended the first two of these and being on the programme committee, I became concerned about a lack of theological depth, in the midst of much splendid Christian activism on behalf of children. So I was given the task of giving a paper to address this issue at the third conference, held in the year 2000. I think this has been pre-circulated to you and so you have had an opportunity to reflect on my contribution at that time.

The result of the presentation was an outpouring of over two hundred questions, for God and for the Scriptures, arising out of the worldwide church's work with children. I was given the task, along with Ken Harder, of coming up with some responses. We decided to call together a small number of workers with children and theologians for a 'brainstorm' session in Penang in June 2002. Again, you have all seen the report of that meeting. It quickly became clear that this was a task with wide ramifications that could not be resolved in five days. So the task became a project and one meeting turned into a series of consultations, of which this is the second, and roundtables of which there have been two.

In the next three days we are hoping to introduce you to CT – more than that, to enthuse you with CT! We wish to do some practical theologising, drawing on particular African experience. At the end of the meeting we hope to have some concrete contributions for the future development of CT. For example, we are planning to return to Penang in June of this year for an International consultation to take things forward. We are looking for two persons from this meeting to take part in that meeting and we are looking for suggestions of topics that the meeting should address. We are also planning to report our discussions in written form with a view to spreading the insights of CT among those who would have liked to be with us but for various reasons were unable to be here.

### **What is the Child Theology Movement?**

*John Collier*

The Child Theology Movement (CTM) has been set up as a limited company, registered in London. This should not be taken to mean that we see this as a commercial enterprise! Rather, it is necessary so that we can be accountable, particularly in the handling of money. Thinking and talking may be free but getting to meetings requires money. In fact, most of if not all the activities that will advance CT have a financial cost. Through CTM, the leaders of the movement will be required to publish accounts. In addition, once the registration as a charitable organisation is completed in the UK, there will be additional controls and other benefits, such as favourable tax treatment.

The purpose of CTM is to promote Child Theology. This it intends to do by a variety of means, such as organizing meetings of various types and in sundry locations, and by encouraging publications, to stimulate new thinking in the church. CTM does not seek to 'own' Child Theology in some proprietary sense. Indeed, we see the lust for control, so widespread within and without the church, to be clearly antipathetic to the insights of CT. Some may be inspired by our publications but wish to plough their own furrow. However, our hope is that all may be done in fellowship and openness, even when there are different points of view.

The leaders of the Movement are directors of the company. We are in process of setting up an Advisory Board to which the directors will be accountable for the theological/Christian activities of CTM. Through this Advisory Board, which will probably meet every two years in association with the meeting in Penang, the objective is to ensure that CT remains relevant to the needs of the world's children and does not become captured by resource-rich interests.

CTM is conscious that it is not the only act in town. We are in partnership with the Viva Network programme "Understanding God's Heart for Children" and we seek similar engagement with

various groups working on issues of Children's Spirituality. We hope both to inform and to be challenged by these and other initiatives.

## Session 2: An African Conversation

In this session, following a brief introduction by Haddon, only participants from Africa spoke. Others listened. The idea was to brainstorm the issues concerning children in Africa. We were not looking for answers. It was agreed that Shiferaw be the co-ordinator of the session.

### Various

Daniel was concerned about the problem of street children all over Africa; in fact there are now whole street families who have never had any other home but the street. Why are they going onto the street? What can we do to stop it? It is not enough to help them on the streets. Among the Muslim community there is a belief that there should be beggars on the street to allow others to fulfil the religious duty of alms giving.

Funke was also concerned about child labour; child headed families and sexually exploited children.

Victor pointed out that there are many NGOs and programmes addressing these problems but there is a lack of theological basis for what they do. For example, how should Christians react when President Mbeki in South Africa says that the problem is not AIDS but poverty? What is our reaction to the disintegration of the traditional family in Africa? In earlier times, no-one could honestly say: "I have no-one to feed me." Every older person was your father or mother; each child was your own. To what extent has or should the church replace the traditional family?

In a recent meeting of Christian leaders in Pretoria, Johannes reported that one of the speakers blamed the collapse of family structures for the problem. "Normal" families no longer exist: in one area five years ago a survey revealed that less than 5% of parents were married. In the absence of parents, who shape children? Johannes thought that in most cases the key formative influences were gang leaders and radio DJs. In fact, the person who controls the music controls the development of the community.

Lorenzo picked up this point about family disintegration and pointed out that there is no social infrastructure to pick up the pieces. Christians tend to rely on divine intervention – for example if I lose my job or become sick. The notion of family in Africa is not just fragile, it is individualistic, isolationist and survivalist. Victor asked what it is that had undermined the family in Africa? In Zimbabwe, for example, one will not find a pornographic magazine. These are widely available in South Africa. Has this made a difference? Is the Gospel that is preached one that ignores African realities? Isobel drew attention to the huge crisis in parenting, particularly fatherhood. Many children are in care because of abandonment and/or abuse by fathers. There is much the church can do to counteract this.

In Kasonga's view, whatever CT is, it should help us reconstruct the family setting of the child. It must so transform our thinking that we can penetrate and transcend the situation of the child. In earlier times, we criticised the missionaries for sending their children away from the family to boarding schools. But what are we preparing our children for? Heidi agreed on the importance on affirming the importance of family, pointing out that this was a concern of Christ on the cross, pointing John to Mary as his mother.

Johannes was also concerned that there could be a risk that CT could inadvertently contribute to the problem of family breakdown, if it were too individualistic. Perhaps we should be discussing 'family theology', always seeing the child in the context of the family. He urged us to consider what we could do to restore dignity to God's institution of the family.

Kasonga was aware of situations in some areas where children were blamed for the family's continued poverty. They were accused of being sorcerers or witches and chased away from their homes. This was more often associated with 'New' churches.

Jeni was concerned at the rapid growth of child prostitution. How should the church respond to a child involved in this? She had the impression that because it is a difficult area, the church tends to ignore the problem.

Andrew drew attention to the general attitude in Africa to pre-pubertal children. Although Scripture Union is primarily a children's organisation, most of its work in Africa is with adolescents. Victor had also noticed this. He felt it was related to a failure of networking among para-church organisations. Work that starts with children is extended into older age groups without researching other possibilities.

Gerry brought a different note to the discussion, challenging the assumption that Jesus' priority was peace and safety for the body – see his statement in Mt 10:34. Moreover, in Mt 10:21 he presented a much starker picture of children and of family life. Later in that chapter,(10:40) he says that any who receive the disciples receive himself, much as he says about children in Mt 18:5.

Another issue for Johannes was the role of education. Traditionally, education was informal – the boys went with the men to learn men's things. Apart from the French colonies, it was the church that led the way instituting formal education. The main problem these days is the idea of value-free education.

Victor wanted us to attend to the whole issue of advocacy, education policy, health policy, and so on. Jeni reminded us that we live in a human rights culture. Most such constitutions and policies are developed from humanistic assumptions. Society is raising materialistic children, with an ever-widening gap between (materially) rich and poor. In this process, children often have their childhood stolen from them. Does the church have a role in revising policies that affect children? If the church does not allow some to specialise in CT, who will address these issues on behalf of children? Our response must come out of our passion for God. Although we must respect African traditional culture, we must not give it the pre-eminence that belongs to Christ.

Lorenzo reminded us of how one's world view shapes one's thinking. If the Kingdom of God is always advancing and I am an agent of that Kingdom, then I must always be asking myself: What is the Kingdom of God in this situation? Is it acceptable that a child goes to bed hungry? Our worldview must be shaped by Scripture and, as Victor said, the issue becomes: How do kingdom people respond? Who are the heroes of faith in Africa? We need to pay more attention to African 'saints' not always looking back to European models of faith.

Johannes referred to a paper in the pre-meeting reading that contrasted Puritan and Romantic ideas of the child. It would be important to focus on traditional African attitudes, in which children were usually thought of as neutral and vulnerable, with less value than adults. This is reflected in the culture. For example, a son may not be allowed to look the father in the eye or allowed to speak directly to the father. These attitudes may be taken into Christian ministry. A suffering child may also be viewed as an asset, for example to a family for begging or to an NGO for fund-raising. Young virgins are even seen as a cure for AIDS. As we develop these ideas, we need to beware of using CT merely to endorse our existing programmes.

Victor asked that we consider what it means to say that humankind is made in the image of God. Surely, even the worst criminal should not be treated like a dog.

At this point, we sang a hymn to refresh our minds and spirits. It is often thought of as a children's hymn and children are taught to sing it. Yet, it addresses 'little ones' in the third person. Perhaps it reminds us that we are all 'little ones' in God's sight and all vulnerable to harm. It affirms, and in singing it we affirmed, our spiritual continuity with children.

*Jesus loves me, this I know  
For the Bible tells me so.  
Little ones to Him belong  
They are weak but He is strong.*

Some years ago, Daniel recalled research that claimed that 80% of the adult character is formed by the age of three years. If this is so, how should it affect our theologising? Perhaps this is linked to the role of children in the social transformation of South Africa. Johannes reminded us of the militant stand taken by Soweto schoolchildren in 1976. The children were politicised and this still affects society. The change in world demographics means that South African children now represent a much larger proportion (before AIDS about 1 in 6) of all the world's children. Something that has not yet been mentioned is the age limit of childhood. There is a view that one is a child as long as one has a living parent!

## Children in Africa

What is it like to be a child in Africa? Participants shed some light on this by recounting their own and other stories. The subject of discussion was the traditional or authentic African ways of being children, especially in the African traditional religion and historical culture. However, most people in the consultation had no personal experience of that kind of upbringing and indeed did not seem to have seen it closely even though they had grown up in Africa as Africans. There are now clearly many ways of being African, some of which are urban and western in important ways, and so detached from some ancient African ways.

In some parts of Africa, there is (or was) a well known tradition of the 'Peace Child. Children would be exchanged between groups to stop warfare. It was not clear if this practice was sometimes effective or what would be an appropriate Christian response, although this was not discussed.

Shiferaw recalled that he was never allowed to eat with his parents. The adults ate first and this is still the practice in rural Ethiopia.

Kasonga recounted a myth from the Luba culture of central Congo which holds that if a young mother in her first pregnancy is greeted by an unknown child when out walking in the bush, the child she is carrying will be healthy and of the same sex. There is an idea that a child will always find its way back to its father because the ancestral spirits will guide it. There are also various categories of special children:

- Twins are held to have special powers, for example to cure pain in the throat
- A girl born after three boys (or vice versa)
- A child conceived without the mother stopping her periods (this child is called *ntumba*)
- Children born feet first
- The next child to be born after twins

Christians often react negatively to these ideas.

Victor reminded us that we should not talk as if there is one 'African Traditional Religion'. There is much diversity, even if there are common themes running through them. For example: all life is spiritual. The spirit/body dichotomy is a western import. Everything has a spiritual explanation and the African community includes the dead. One's relationships with ancestors may affect one's life now. We need to be aware of the various ceremonies associated with these ideas, to know why they are done and form a view whether or not Christians may participate. Too many are Christians during the day and consult the witch doctor at night. Child prostitution may be associated in Christian's minds with evil spirits.

In some tribes, a mother will tell her daughter not to show her teeth to men of another tribe. Sometimes, adult initiation requires killing a man from another tribe. When a child says something unexpectedly profound, it is assumed not to be the child speaking but the ancestors. The child may be treated as an adult because possessed by the 'Living Dead'. In the Eastern Cape a child prophesied the suicide of a whole clan. More positively, there was a revival which started through a little child praying.

At this point, we sang: *Praise the Lord, Hallelujah.*

Daniel returned to the issue of defining the age limit for 'child'. Jeni pointed out that although the law defines 18 as the age limit, there are children as young as 12 living adult lifestyles and with adult responsibilities. Often children are raising other children or they might already be working outside the home.

There are gender issues: the treatment and value given to boys and girls is often different but it differs greatly from tribe to tribe. Funke told us that in Nigeria girls may not be allowed to speak in the family and may not be educated. They do not share in the father's property and join their husband's group. There is a tribe in Ghana that would sacrifice the firstborn girl. Now it may not happen literally but it still happens mentally. Women are often not allowed to work because it is assumed that they would sleep around.

Shiferaw told us that in some parts of Ethiopia an uncircumcised woman is not acceptable as a wife. What does CT say about this situation?

In Zimbabwe, the practice of paying a bride price has become commercialised and prices have become greatly inflated. In African culture, unlike in India, the boy has to pay the price and the children belong to the husband and his family.

Johannes said that studies of African children have shown them to be advanced physically and emotionally. This might be attributed to greater physical contact with the mother and more play opportunities in the extended family.

In rural villages, children often play at night, especially at full moon, joining in special songs together. They may sit around the fire with the elders telling stories through which values are communicated. They are usually scary stories. Many are parables. For example: don't sit down at the crossroads or you will get boils. This is communicating that it is a dangerous place. Play is also mixed in with work – for example, fetching water usually involves a song and a dance. There is not the same concept of 'free time'.

## Summary

The meeting decided to focus on the following key themes arising from this discussion:

- Family reconstruction
- Attitudes to children
- Christianity, Humanism and African Traditional Religions
- Navigational tools and Social Infrastructure<sup>3</sup>

## Day 2

### Meditation

Daniel told us seven short stories that illustrate relationships between adults, children and God.

- A dishonest woman living in rural Africa was always borrowing and not repaying. One day a man came to collect what he was owed and the mother made her daughter answer the door and say that she had gone on a journey. She herself hid behind the door, not aware that her feet were showing. The man said "OK but tell that next time she goes out not to leave her feet behind."
- The visiting preacher was shaking hands at the church porch. The little child said, "When I grow up I will give you all my money. My dad says you're a poor preacher."
- A boy was playing on the roof of a house under construction and someone took the ladder away. A storm started and he cried for help. A visitor, large and strong, ran over and called on him to jump. But the child wouldn't. But when his Dad came up, weak and frail, the child jumped.
- In Acts 23 we read about the importance of the extended family. Paul's nephew overheard the plot to kill Paul, warned the authorities and so Paul was saved.
- In 2 K 5 we read the story of Naaman's servant girl. Why was she not vengeful? Her name is not given. Why do we so much want to defend our name?
- A little boy was learning to pray. So he recited the alphabet and then said Amen. He explained that God know how to spell and could form the right words.
- A plane was flying through terrible turbulence and all the passengers were getting into a state except one little boy. He explained that he knew he would be alright because his Father was the pilot.

At this point we sang: "He's got the whole world in his hands"

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<sup>3</sup> For clarification of this term, see the later discussion

### Session 3: Questions arising for Child Theology

After a preliminary discussion around the four key issues arising from session 2 (see above), we divided into four groups to analyse each issue at a greater depth. The small groups each discussed one subject and asked themselves what questions arise for CT and how CT might contribute answers or an approach to develop answers. Each group presented its findings to a plenary gathering. The following points summarize the feedback and represents the views of the small group at that time. They do not necessarily represent the final conclusion or even the preliminary positions of all the participants.

#### Family Reconstruction

- Recognise family breakdown: death; divorce; single parenthood; rejection of children by step-parents
- What is a family? We need to develop Biblical models. Other views? (Polygamy and long-term relationships without marriage.)
- Diversity in the African context: religion; cultures; ethnic groups
- What are the (good and bad) influences on family life?

This presents the church with numerous challenges:

- How can we best find the ancient African path and identify its merits?
- How do we restore the commandment to honour your father and mother?
- How do we restore the Father image in relation to God the father?
- Does the African tradition have anything to offer in the reconstruction of modern society which is destroying the life of the child?
- What are the merits of western society?
- How do we deal with the extended family in respect of the 'living dead'?
- What models of intervention do we have for HIV/AIDS?
- Do we have a practical model to help orphans?
- How can we best understand the mindset(s) and language(s) of the child?
- How can we help with integrated family development?
- What is our attitude to adoption?

#### Attitudes to Children

Our theology should help us articulate the mind given to us in Christ. The failure to teach Christian attitudes to children is part of a general failure to teach Christian values, e.g. attitude to work.

We need also to take into account the views of parents and grandparents who see the child as part of themselves.

- How do people think / feel about children before they meet the child?
- Attitudes / Pre-understanding – affecting Action with or towards children
- How do people in a culture complete the following sentences

Children are.....

Children like to.....

Children should .....

The child is part of .....

- The above is a very useful tool. It places a child in the centre. It makes us look at who we are as we look at the child and uncovers our preconceptions about the child. (Petra College are in the process of writing this up.)





infrastructure is cracking up or may have disappeared altogether. Lorenzo recounted how two boys (age 11 and 12 years) from his Bible class were shot by the police. The western Mission Organisation had no message to give and in fact his supervisor refused to attend the funeral, not wishing to become involved. Such situations raise many questions:

- Is there an African hermeneutical principle to interpret Scripture?
- What is our concept of mission? Does it include bringing God's redemptive message to all levels of society?
- What is the purpose of salvation? Does it extend beyond the personal?
- Who brings the message? Do the messengers need better vetting and training?
- Do we need to avoid the word 'tribal' (which is linked to ideas like 'savage' and 'primitive') and use instead something like 'historical culture'?
- How do people in the African context develop an identity? How do they become visible on the global stage?
- How do we help an African child develop a mental picture of themselves in relation to others?
- Can we look again at the concepts of congregation and parish? Is the city my parish? Is the church we've planted in Mozambique my parish?
- How do we preach the gospel in the midst of poverty? Can we avoid the traditional control of resources by Mission organisations?
- How do we replace the traditional religious support systems?

The group commenced an analysis of the above issues as follows:<sup>4</sup>

<b>Basic issue</b>	<b>Impact on children</b>	<b>Implications for CT</b>
The development of an African hermeneutic	Bible is not made relevant to culture (e.g. low view of children)	Theology that addresses the challenges to the African family
The concept of mission in Africa	At present a lack of focus on children	Help the church to put children in the centre and have a mission to and about children
The understanding of the implications and extent of salvation	Children ignored in pre-rational, pre-conversion stages of life and their plight ignored post-conversion; poor teaching and discipleship	Developing models of spirituality for young children
Qualifications & qualities of the messenger	Poor modelling and discipleship (the 'cream' often not assigned to work with children)	Inspire and equip the best messengers to work with children
Concepts of tribalism (-ve) and historical culture (+ve)	Negative stereotyping imposed on them and perpetuated by them	Develop a proper perspective of who children are in Christ and society

<sup>4</sup> The spaces in the table indicate opportunities for future work, to which the reader may wish to contribute!

Development & visibility of the African identity in global context	Invisible or seen only as victims	Identify the special identity and contribution of children in Christ
Mental picture of self and others	See themselves as lesser beings in comparison with other societies and cultures	
Concept of church in relation to mission and community		
Non-Christian attitudes to power and control		
Replacement of traditional religious support systems		
Segmented approach to faith and life		

#### Session 4: Do the churches in Africa need Child Theology?

As children form about half the population, the question was thought to be redundant! We decided that it is definitely needed. The participants attempted to define CT. These are some options:

- Growing in understanding of the words and works of Jesus in our walk with children. (Johannes)
- An effort that tries to bring out the centrality of children in the ministry of Jesus (Shiferaw)
- Building and equipping a child in the way and manner set down by the Lord (Funke)
- A discussion and understanding of our dealings with children as presented to us by our Lord and set out in the Holy Scriptures (Daniel)

Keith told how he had once preached on Mat. 18. In preparation he found that commentaries failed to recognise the importance of children in the narrative of this gospel. At the end of his sermon he realised that “unless you become like a child” was also for him. The words of Jesus brought to him a new understanding of children and the kingdom.

Haddon emphasised that CT is a journey and should be open to different understandings. CT is affirming the centrality of children. When Haddon first began to consider CT, he heard an analogy to liberation and feminist theology. Liberation theology would look at theology and discover that the poor or oppressed are neglected. Liberation theology then reverses that neglect by following God’s preferential option for the poor and seeing them as the hermeneutical key for all theology. CT takes the child as a hermeneutical key.

The notion of ‘Africa’ is too simplistic – there are 53 countries and many more tribes. We should not assume that they all have the same value systems.

Lorenzo and Shiferaw thought that there is a CT embedded in African culture but it is not effective in bringing the child into the centre. Children and children’s ministry are not given prominence, mainly through ignorance. For example, Victor pointed out how primary school teachers are paid less than secondary school teachers who are paid less than university lecturers, which could be taken to show that work with smaller children has lower status<sup>5</sup>. Shiferaw had surveyed colleges and seminaries in Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia but none of them gave courses on children’s ministries. Compassion has helped Daystar University in Nairobi to set up a Master’s course in Children’s Ministry.

<sup>5</sup> It could also indicate differences in the degree of training of teachers.

It is important to record the importance of mothers in the education and raising of children. Keith came to appreciate this through his study of the work of the Indian theologian Ramabai. If the mother is devalued, so are the children. There are three New Testament texts of mothers bringing children to Jesus for blessing. In the orthodox church in Ethiopia, mothers take their children to the priest for blessing and education. Perhaps CT becomes more explicit in mother/child relationships.

However, there are some instances of ministries by children:

- In Lorenzo's church, children may take the evening service. They lead, preach and choose the hymns. The youngest preacher was 13 years old. Since starting this, attendance has increased.
- Children can wave flags in worship
- Four times a year, the children are responsible for all the Sunday services
- Children may pray for the sick and the elderly, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

In summary, the view was that CT is present in Africa but not systematised. It is present as 'ministry to children' but not integrated conceptually or in practice. The focus of training is on 'how to'. Even in the best institutions, the textbooks are generally from outside Africa. There is a need to balance the evangelical emphasis on original sin.

## Day 3

### Meditation

We learn the most important things for life by the time we are five years old. Isobel taught us to sing a song in Zulu which means 'Your Kingdom Come'.

### Session 5: Doing Child Theology together – putting a child in the midst of a discussion of sin

This session was led by Haddon who invited us to start doing some theologising as we conversed together about an issue of sin that had been raised the previous day.

#### Step 1

The first step was for each one of us to identify our starting position in a discussion of sin. We could measure the learning in the seminar by being clear about the baseline from which we started. So the group started by each person writing down three phrases to indicate what they understood by sin. These were private statements: markers for our own use. This took about five minutes.

#### Step 2

The next step was by an act of deliberate imagination to place two children in the middle of our circle. We were invited to consider two children:

- A girl of 13 forced into prostitution
- A boy of 12 forced to be a soldier

#### Step 3

The third step was to share stories from African experiences, which would help to make these children more vividly present to us and help us to share insights about them. Many of the group had some story or experience, and some shared stories of just such situations from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Africa. From these stories, we were able to identify several themes:

- Adults who train and prepare children for evil
- Poverty – evil offers short cuts to riches
- The withdrawal of parental protection
- Children's desire to please allows them to be easily controlled by adults

We must avoid falling into the trap of blaming either social structures or particular personal biographies; the two always co-exist and interact in any given situation. So, economic necessity must be taken into account as well as pride and greed. Even in some desperate situations, there are often some children who resist evil and do not go astray.

Children respond to their immediate perceived needs. What they want is constantly changing according to the circumstances, peer pressure etc. In desperate situations, people respond with what they have for what they see to be the best outcome that ensures survival if possible. But this is not done in a vacuum. There are others struggling with us and we naturally form groups for survival, and children get into gangs.

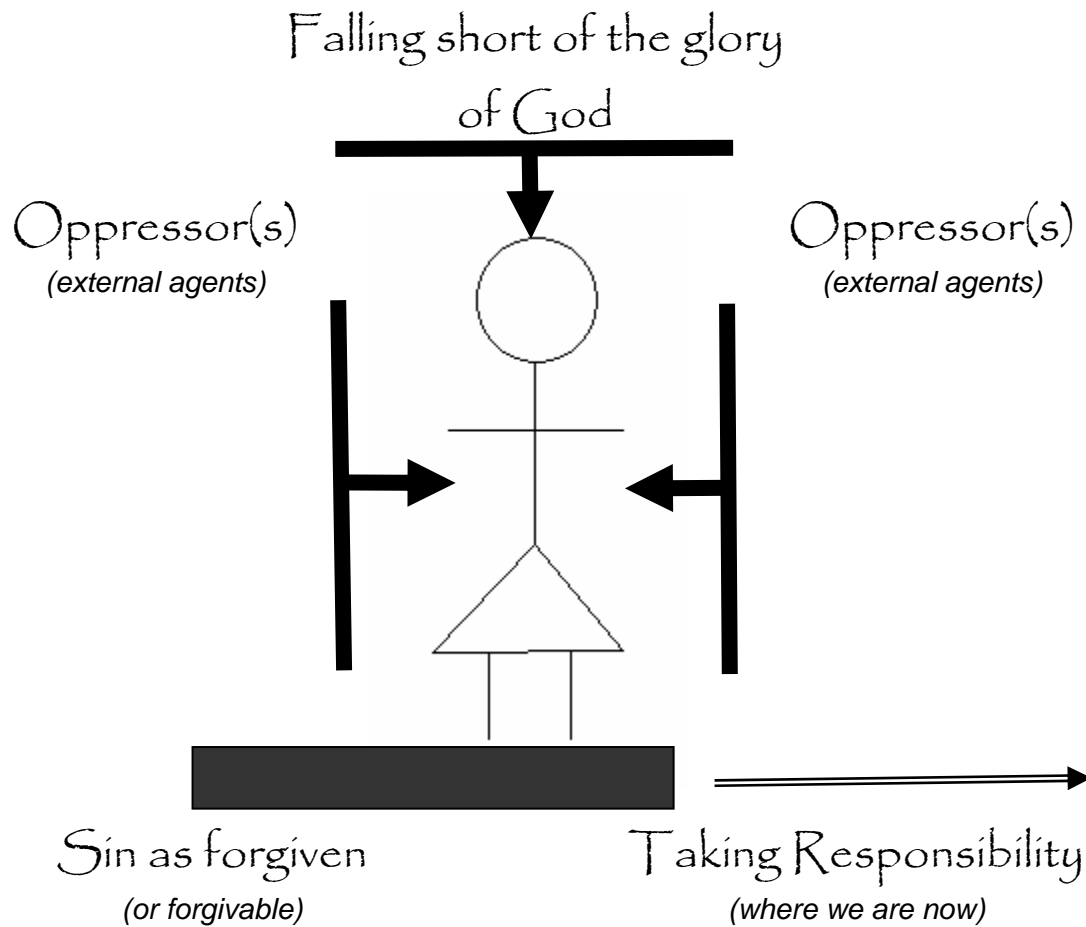
Maslow's hierarchy of need does not function in practice. All the time you see children who haven't eaten but who have cell phones.

This step took a considerable time, as people told detailed and painful stories.

**Step 4**

The fourth step was to ask explicitly how the doctrine of *sin* interprets these *children* for us and how these *children* speak to our thinking about *sin*. The theological process works in two directions: the Child interprets sin; sin interprets the child.

These questions were put to an open and freewheeling discussion, in which many issues were explored and disagreements aired. Not surprisingly, there was intense consideration of freewill and original sin, of social conditioning and moral responsibility.



Some discovered that the understanding of sin they held became problematic in the presence of these children, especially when sorrow and love committed us to hope for their welfare. So there had to be hard work and constructive new thinking in order to have a serious understanding of sin, but one which would not do cruel violence to the children or deny the Gospel of Jesus Christ for them.

With the assistance of a moderator, the discussion concluded (after more than two hours altogether) with a quadrilateral diagram (shown opposite). It indicates a child affected by four forces related to sin. No vote was taken and it is impossible to say what degree of consent it commanded. But it was a fruit of shared labour in spiritual and theological thinking and others might like to think along with it.

The child in the middle of our circle is seen as a sinner, falling short of the glory of God, but not primarily because of free decisions made by the child. They are sinners because of what others have done to them, or failed to do for them. They are sinners because of social and cultural conditions, which shape their living and thinking before they are able to make safe judgments of what is of true worth and what is the wise way to live. But can we call people sinners if they have not caused themselves to do wrong, to disobey God's law, or to be disloyal to him? What is sin if it is not a free individual decision?

If we take each of these forces that affect the child in turn:

### ***1. Falling short of the glory of God***

Romans 3.23: All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The child in prostitution, or in soldiering, fairly obviously falls short of the glory of God. Such humanity does not reflect the glory of the love and life and goodness of God. If the living human being is the glory of God, as Irenaeus said, then these children, already living in some degree in death, fall short of the glory of God. Sin here is a *condition* of being far from God and alienated from his life. Sin is to be recognised in the distorting and destroying of human being, and of anything else in God's creation. We are not to postpone taking it seriously as real sin until we can pin down its *cause*. The child as sinner, in a condition of falling short of the glory of God, not surprisingly both suffers and enacts sin.

### ***2. Oppressor***

A second side of the quadrilateral pressing on the child is the sin which makes the child its victim. This is sin that operates through various agents, sometimes individual persons, sometimes groups and organizations, sometimes more general influences (which of course use persons as their agents, even though they are not willed by those people). That a particular child is in prostitution or gun-bearing can be traced back to the sins of commission and omission by various people, organisations and value-systems. When social infra-structure breaks down, there is a large scale sin of omission, which spawns many disordered actions, sins of commission. The agencies of sin need to be recognised and named, analysed and resisted.

### ***3. Sin as forgiven***

The third side of the quadrilateral of forces pressing on the child as sinner is the grace of God in Jesus Christ. In this grace God contradicts sin in the most direct way: the falling short of the glory of God is countered by the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The darkness is countered by the light. Sin is seen to be sin here, not simply as the opposite of grace and goodness, but as its active enemy, sin seeking to block grace, to effect death and so stop grace renewing life. But sin is never to be seen if we merely look at sin, at what has gone wrong and is wrong. Sin can only be known in the light of the goodness and grace of God. Sin is known thanks to God's revelation, by which he contradicts sin, directly speaking against it. God does this not by saying how bad sin is; not by nagging; not by some divine equivalent of investigative journalism, searching out the dirt and giving it publicity over many pages. God contradicts sin, by making clear that it is sin. Sin cannot be seen in its own light, which is in truth, darkness. Sin is known only in the light of God, which has better things to do than put sin on display in some courtroom or museum of horrors. The light of God reveals the glory of God. God forgives sin. God condemns sin in the flesh. God ends the reign of sin and frees us from it, so that it does not have dominion. Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds. Jesus is Lord, not sin – anywhere. This is the Christian faith, the Christian proclamation. It is what Christians believe about all creation and for all creation. And for these children, and anyone else who is a sinner.

Sin is truly and accurately identified as sin only in the light of Jesus Christ – only therefore from the vantage point of its having already been contradicted, judged, borne away and overcome by God in Christ. Sin is most truly and fully seen for what it is from within the forgiveness of God. The forgiveness of God cannot be known by anyone simply for himself and his own sin. We are

forgiven as we forgive. We cannot truly see the sin of these children unless we look at them forgivingly. And that means not looking at them in the feeble uncertain helpfulness of merely human pity, but in the confidence that Jesus is Lord, and that God is God, who is for us all.

#### **4. Taking Responsibility**

And so we come to the fourth side of the quadrilateral. Only here may we come to the child and address her as a responsible person. She is responsible not because she is the cause of her condition, but because she may be called within the light of Christ to act responsibly and hopefully as the person she now is, regardless of how she got here; for she is not now being treated as the cause for what she has not caused. Nor is she being treated, depersonalised, as though she is a victimised substance, with no meaningful personal being and as though the language of sin is irrelevant to her. Instead, her personal dignity resides in her being open to the call to take hopeful responsibility from this point forward: the whole situation being seen within the light of the Lordship of Christ.

From this point forward, she is accompanied by people who see her and enter into the reality of her plight, but do not blame her for it and are not defeated by it. So she is called and strengthened to take responsibility for herself, in the reality of her situation, which is still painful and dangerous, and yet has a final horizon of invitation to hope in God. Responding to this invitation means living in truth about sin, not merely the truth of sin as the usurping power, but sin as disempowered by the forgiving God.

It may be noted that the four sides, the pressures on the child, are not all of the same kind. Their difference gives a shape and direction to the whole diagram. Sides 1 and 2 press negatively upon the child, they are depressing – just like sin. Sides 3 and 4 are uplifting and open up the way forward. They show God and human being together overcoming sin, in living towards the future.

This understanding of sin interprets the child. It is in tension with some traditional Christian teachings about sin, and it is so partly because ‘the child’ has been allowed to interpret sin. The picture here of the relation of the nature, the cause, and the responsibility for sin is the outcome of trying to respond sensitively and constructively to the reality of these children and others like them. If this is how it is for these children, we may suppose it is similar for all people.

In this discussion, we did not go on to deal with questions which certainly follow, for Evangelical Christians if not others. If this is how sin is interpreted in the presence of the children, what is the truth of atonement and salvation? What implications does it have for how we tell all children the good news of Jesus Christ and invite them to faith? What does conversion mean now?

## **Session 6: The Future of Child Theology for Africa**

### **Penang 2**

A meeting is to be held in Penang in late June /early July this year bringing together representatives of the growing network of theologians and others interested in Child Theology. Many, but not all will have been participants at meetings similar to this one. We discussed who might be able to attend this meeting from Africa. No final agreement was reached but the names of Daniel, Johannes and Victor were mentioned.

### **African Networks**

A number of existing African networks were mentioned and we thought it would be valuable to link into these if possible, rather than duplicate. Networks mentioned were:

- SATS            South Africa Theological Seminary - a distance learning initiative in which Petra College is involved
- EFOC            Evangelical Focus on Children; this is currently non-functional and is looking for a co-ordinator to take it forward; it is supported by AEA.
- Viva             An international network of Christian agencies working with children at risk
- Network
- AACC            All Africa Council of Churches
- CATI            Conference of African Theological Institutions

- Association of Third World Theologians (African Chapter)
- Circle of Concerned Women Theologians

### **African contacts**

It was suggested that CTM should prepare and distribute by email a list of current contacts and requesting other suggestions. We should also ask for relevant papers and books.

### **“Booklets” in Africa**

One of the suggestions that CTM is pursuing as an outcome for the Penang meeting is to commission a series of booklets on CT, modelled on the ‘Grove’ booklets associated with St John’s College, Nottingham. A number of issues are to be decided – for example, whether or not it would be a single series or whether there would be regional series; who would be a series editor, etc.

The meeting was asked to consider possible topics and authors relevant for Africa. The target readership is church leadership in a broad sense, including Christian organisations and NGOs. They should be academically respectable but accessible. Lorenzo mentioned that he is planning something that could be one such title, relating to the collapse of social infrastructure that we discussed earlier.

### **Tasks for Working groups**

CTM had hoped the meeting would agree to appoint a number of working groups to pursue some of these issues. There was a discussion but no definite outcome. Therefore the tasks would be taken forward with individuals interested in particular activities.

### **Future Development of CT in Africa**

This meeting was exploratory. We succeeded in raising important issues and outlining the relevance of CT in the African context. But much more needs to be done to realise its potential to change the church and society in Africa. There will be a discussion at the Penang meeting on general strategy which will affect this decision but it was generally agreed that we should convene another meeting.

Various options were discussed. In principle, it was accepted that the best strategy would be to work with one of the existing networks. For example, CTM could ‘piggy back’ on a meeting organised by Viva Network or could commission EFOC to organise a meeting on CT. Neither of these solutions is without its problems. More promising was a suggestion from Shiferaw that we convene a meeting of the principals from selected Theological colleges. Johannes agreed to be the co-ordinator for the Child Theology process in Africa for the next year.

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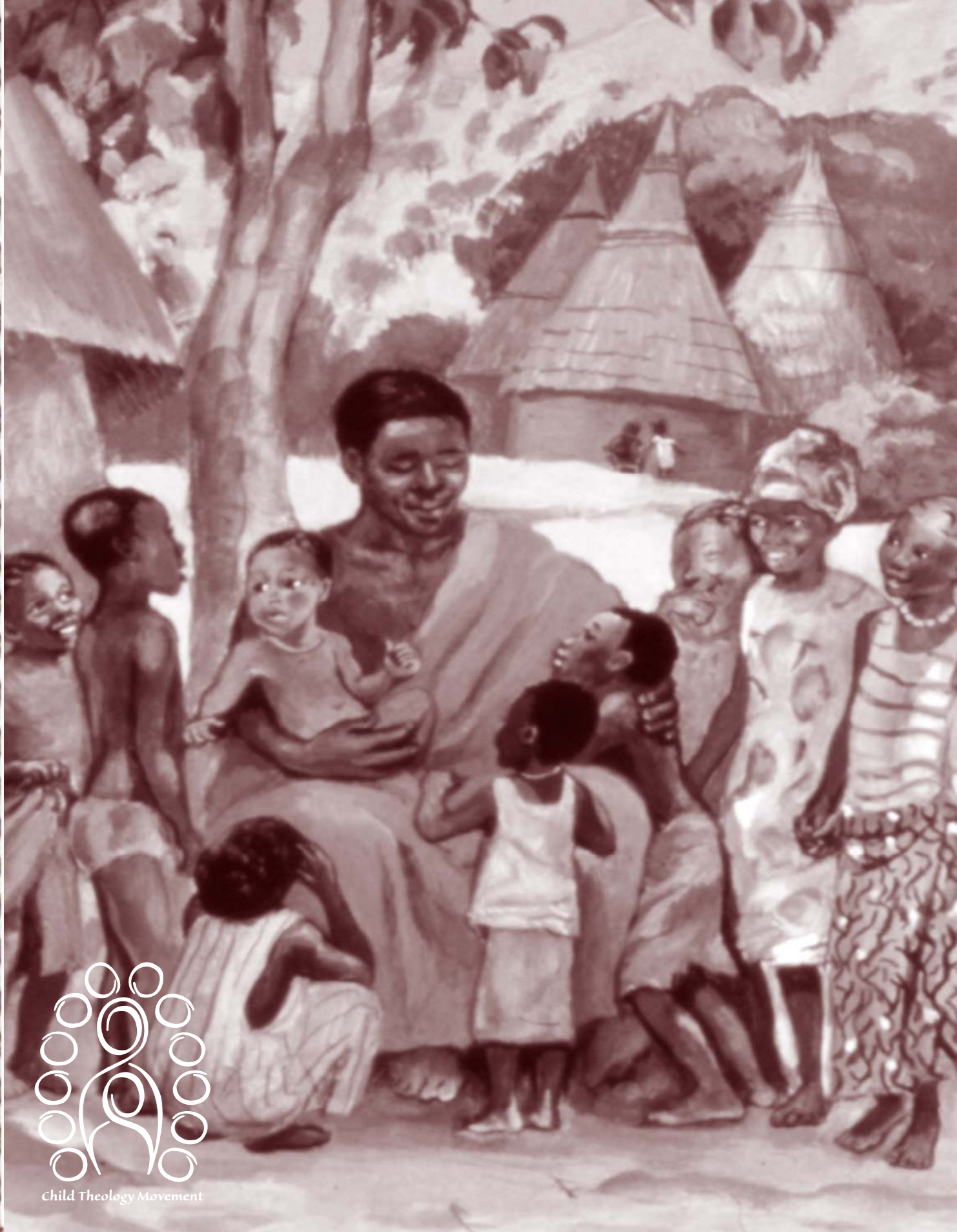
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# CAPE TOWN CONSULTATION ON CHILD THEOLOGY

25 — 27 February 2004



Child Theology Movement