

The Church and The Child – Ecumenical Heritage and Perspectives For A Joint Commitment for The Future

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1. Evangelicals and Ecumenicals united in a common theological endeavor

On behalf of WCC we would congratulate this theological conference on new perspectives of the missiological and ecclesiological significance of children for taking up an extremely relevant and important theme which belongs to the heart of the task of churches in the beginning 21st century. Children should be at the center of the churches concern for evangelism. Our attitude towards children is a test-case and indicator for our understanding of the Gospel and for authentic discipleship and integral Christian mission – these convictions are shared in WCC. Therefore it is good that this conference brings together Christian representative from a broad spectrum of churches, contexts and different organizations. We should move beyond traditional stereotypes in depicting ‘ecumenicals’ and ‘evangelicals’ as mutually exclusive. There are so many stereotypes which are outmoded in content and outdated in their function today. For instance it would be far from reality still to depict ‘ecumenicals’ as being more Kingdom-oriented and ‘evangelicals’ as more church-oriented in their theological approach. There is a long history of dialogue on the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the church in both traditions and many have learned that a Kingdom approach is necessary and helpful in order to protect any ecclesiology from becoming too self-centered or self-preoccupied, while at the same time a church-centered theological perspective is also very important and helpful in order to avoid a one-sided activist utopianism and loss of ecclesial identity. Thus to keep both in critical and complementary tension is the key task today. Vinay Samuel has reflected substantially on this understanding of the relation between the church and the Kingdom of God in the perspective of a missionary understanding of the church as he fears that in some circles of the evangelical movement there is as deficit of a proper and broad understanding of the church. While we affirm this basic intention and feel tempted to deepen this fundamental reflection on the relation between the church and the Kingdom of God which for decades has been one of the focal points of the work of the WCC related Faith and Order Commission (for instance in the important Faith and Order Study on “The Nature and Mission of the Church”²) in the context of this paper we want to refrain from a continuation of this debate in order not to get lost in very fundamental ecclesiological reflections. Instead we intend to provide a much more humble service by providing some short complementary reflections on the relevance of the debate on church, mission and children as a whole – as it unfolds itself

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² See Faith and Order Paper No. 198, http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wcc-main/documents/p2/FO2005_198_en.pdf

from ecumenical³ perspectives: The Church and The Child – Ecumenical Heritage and Perspectives For A Joint Commitment for The Future. That is the subject in this context and it is encouraging that this reflection is extremely relevant and happens both within Evangelical and Ecumenical circles.

2. Placing children in the midst - a constant transformation of values and hermeneutical perspectives

Churches from the very beginning of Christianity have understood themselves as agents and advocates of children reflecting their crucial role in the processes of transformation which belong to the essence of becoming disciples of Jesus Christ and witnessing for the Kingdom of God. Including children as a primary partners and target group in church ministries from ancient times in church history is a reflection of the reorientation on children which can be seen as a fundamental missiological priority principle as laid out in the famous statement of Jesus. Children are a fundamental missiological priority principle. This for centuries is affirmed in the famous story of Mark 9: 36 which narrates the encounter of Jesus and the children and affirmed his drawing of the children into the center of the church in his ministry as an indispensable mark of his own ministry: “and he took a child and put him in the midst of them and said whoever receives such child in my name, receives me and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me”. A constant reversal of values is indicated here. Vinay Samuel has rightly indicated that early church Christians differed in relationship to their children from the prevailing attitude of the cultures in which they lived. Jesus does not speak of the child’s transformation to adulthood and all the values and rule children have to adapt to in order to mature, on the contrary he speaks of the transformation of adults to the perspectives and values of childhood. This is a constant reminder to be transformed to the perspectives of the vulnerable, the weak, the gifts of spontaneity and sense of presence and unprotectedness which are lived out by children and point to attitudes relevant for the Kingdom of God. “The child, weak and helpless and the most insignificant member of the community, is brought to the center, so that adults can recognize the new order...To receive the kingdom of God as a child,...or to become as a child in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matth 18,1-5) does not mean that the child possesses certain subjective qualities, such as particular feelings or childlike experiences of a pure conscience, and that an adult should take on these qualities. The child is used as an example for a believing existence, because it is objectively weak and helpless and yet at the same time full of hope and trust, it takes the present time very seriously and yet at the same time awaits the future and is prepared to accept that the improbable can become reality. Not the child’s transformation to adulthood, but the adults’ transformation to childhood determines Jesus” words about the child.”⁴ Placing the children in the midst, this can be seen as an essential working dynamic within the churches’ mission. Remember that two

³ Knowing that the term “ecumenical” is not always positively connotated or easily understood in some evangelical circles it should be clarified that by the reference to “ecumenical” we refer to the organized ecumenical movement which grew out of the 1910 World Mission Conference in Edinburgh 1910 and has led to the formation of the WCC in 1948 which with its 348 member churches from all parts of the world aims at strengthening Christian unity, common mission and evangelism and common witness for justice and peace between and in all Christian churches. The term “ecumenical” does not connate any attempt to create one mono-lithic super-church and also by no means connotates the attempt to create a syncretism of all world-religions. For more information see: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/who-are-we.html>

⁴ Ulrich Becker, *The Child in Theology and Church*, p. 239

aspects are involved in this process of transformation: Jesus did not take just a picture of an idea of a child into the midst, but a concrete, physically present child. Thus the physical process of placing children in the midst and the mental process of getting converted to the perspectives of children are two aspects related to each other in the same process, the one not without the other. No mental transformation in the church without a physical process of transformation which is connected to actually placing children into the center. Both processes are interrelated within the life of Christian churches. This process demands for a continued reordering of our priorities in Christian mission, in church budgets, in the styles of worship and in the forms of ecumenism. Probably it is also a new kind of grassroots' ecumenism, of an ecumenism which is communicable with children which is implied here.

3. Historical reminder – Christian churches as pioneers of children's ministries

The very fact that Christian churches from earliest beginnings have put children into the center through such activities like infant baptism, children's catechism, children's communion, confirmation classes and institutions taking care for the nurture, guidance and welfare of children can be seen as a contrast towards the predominant trends in both antique societies as well as many societies today which tend(ed) to view children only as property of parents or their wards, as cheap work labor force or even as slaves for adult's pleasures, with children themselves having no rights on their own. Historically it should be remembered that churches and Christian mission organizations were often belonging to the first to take care of orphans, of destitute children, of poor and uneducated children and became pioneers in setting up institutions designed to answer to the special needs of children in contexts of widespread poverty, malnutrition and diseases.⁵ It was the transformation of churches in their attitude towards children which paved the way to a gradual transformation of attitudes towards children in society. The concern for children in mission history – examples are there also from recent Christian mission history in Asia and Africa – was a key to missionary advance and outreach. Others were impressed by Christian attitudes to children – the Christian attitude and concern for children served as incentive for getting to know what is behind the Christian faith. Therefore Christian churches also today should belong to the first institutions to stand up for the rights of children, to be in solidarity with children and to articulate critical perspectives on the plight and future of children in this world.

At the same time we also need to acknowledge that even within the church and its history two trends and streams of thought for long have been struggling and were in tension with each other (reflecting that in the church also current values and ideologies of societies left their mark): "For some people childhood is a state of imperfection which education must transform as quickly as possible into the state of adulthood, for others childhood has a value and dignity of its own which an educator is obliged to take into consideration if he is to succeed in producing mature human beings".⁶ The explicit acknowledgement and recognition of the child as a full human being and the emergence of a reflected form of Christian pedagogy and educational reform is a comparatively late stage in the history of Protestant Christianity. It would deserve a an interesting research chapter of its own to review why names like Comenius, Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Froebel and

⁵ Ulrich Becker, *The Child in Theology and Church*, *Ecumenical Review* Vol. 31, July 1979, p. 234ff

⁶ Werner Loch, *Die Verleugnung des Kindes in der evangelischen Paedagogik*, Essen 1964, cited in" Ulrich Becker, *The Child in Theology and Church*, p. 235

Montessori which are landmarks in the history of reform pedagogy come comparatively late in the history of the Protestant churches in Europe and there were also trends before which were summarized by historical experts as the “denial of the child” in protestant church tradition before reform pedagogy was emerging.

4. Sunday School Movements as one of the earliest sources and energies of the ecumenical movement

A second key historical insight which should not be forgotten in an international and multid denominational dialogue context is the fact that children’s ministries and the churches’ commitment to children was one of the first field for pioneering attempts of Christians from different denominations to work together across denominational boundaries. Commitment to children’s ministries was the most important energy forming and leading to the spirit of Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation in the 18th and 19th century in Britain and America: This becomes clear by studying the history of the so-called World Sunday School Movement. The Sunday School Movement began around 1780 in Britain and soon led to the formation of independent and interdenominational Societies for the Promotion of Christian Children’s Education and Sunday School Programmes all around the world (London Sunday School Union 1803, Anglican Sunday School Institute 1843, American Sunday School Union 1843, Erster Hamburger Sonntagsschulverein 1821 etc).⁷ Robert Raikes was the founder of the first Sunday school in England which was established in 1780 for factory children in Gloucester. Raikes was passionately concerned with the need for prison reform and believed that prisons were full of people who had endured deprived childhoods. He believed that education, especially religious instruction, would enable children to avoid the pitfalls of poverty and crime in adult life. Children between the ages of five and fourteen were encouraged to attend, no matter what the state of their clothes. The Sunday school curriculum largely consisted of simple lessons in reading and spelling in preparation for reading the Bible, memorizing Scripture passages and hymns.⁸ Being motivated in the first phase to create better school conditions for destitute and illiterate children who were victims of the industrial revolution in Western Europe the Sunday School movement later stimulated both day school education for children as well as a more comprehensive Christian education in Sunday School classes. Realizing that what children need for their lives and souls is not sophisticated distinction between the complex dogmatic traditions of Christian denominational families, but essential spiritual food, real Christian fellowship, participatory worship and basic Christian education on Biblical principles and traditions it was already in the early 19th century that the Sunday School Movement had become a worldwide movement. In 1907 the World Sunday School Association was formed which in 1947 changed its name into World Council of Christian Education (WCCE) which was integrated into WCC only in 1972.⁹

5. Interrelation between Sunday School Work, Lay Participation and Evangelism

Historical evidence shows that there is a strong interrelation and interconnectedness between Sunday School work, lay participation and holistic evangelism and missionary commitment in Christian churches. Where there is a strong commitment to Children’s ministries and Sunday

⁷ Erwin Fahlbusch, Encyclopedia of Christianity, Vol. V, Art. Sunday School, p. 229ff, accessed in internet: http://books.google.ch/books?id=lZUBZlth2qgC&pg=PA230&lpg=PA230&dq=world+Sunday+School+Movement&source=bl&ots=RcFjK0XiHM&sig=iedb04sw9h2TkQrxbMQ8bqitSWU&hl=de&ei=Eh1uTYDxKY3lswa2xrHqDg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CHAQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=world%20Sunday%20School%20Movement&f=false

⁸ http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/discover_collections/history_nation/religion/sschools/index.html

⁹ See: Ulrich Becker, Art Children, in: Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement, 2nd edition, WCC Publications 2002, p. 168ff

School work there also is a strong support for mission and evangelism and often vice versa. Where commitment to Children's ministries and Sunday schools is dwindling also the support for mission and evangelism is moving backwards. It might be pointed out as an example that in West European Churches there was a strong upswing in Sunday School Movements and Children's Ministries in the years following the Second World War, a historical period which was marked by the increase in birth rate, a strong commitment of lay people's participation in the church and the reconstruction and reinforcement of church work after the catastrophe of the Second World War.¹⁰ In the last decades interest and commitment for Sunday School Work has declined in many Western churches, but still is strong in many Churches in the South due to declining birth rates, growing competition with media entertainment and processes of Dechristianization of patterns of family lives within urbanized centers of this world. It might be an important task of this emerging network for children's evangelization to look into the root causes of the strength or weakness of church related children ministries today: Which factors can strengthen and which can hinder joint commitment of Christian churches to Sunday School and Children's ministries in today's world?

6. Integration of the World's Sunday School Movement into the WCC in 1972

It is interesting to pose some critical questions around what happened to the common Christian concern for Children's ministries and Sunday School Movement in the past century. In the first World Sunday School Conference which took place in London in 1889 there still were some 845 delegates and in addition some 15 reports on children's ministries were read from different mission fields. Between 1889 and 1958 there were some 14 World Sunday School Convention Conferences each bringing together a major group of worldwide representatives of Sunday School Movements.¹¹ In 1971 during its last meeting in Lima, Peru, the World Council for Christian Education voted to become a member of WCC and – after its formal integration into WCC in 1972 - had some major impact in its programme on Education and Renewal in later years. But the only World Conference which took place since then was the 1980 World Conference of Sunday School in Evian, France, at the occasion of the 200 anniversary of the Sunday School. The financial crisis of WCC in the later 90ies and in the first decade of the 21st century did not allow to have any department of Christian education any more, the only programme which is left is the programme on Ecumenical Theological Education (ETE) which is rooted in the TEF history and the concern of the International Missionary Council for the Training of Missionaries and Ministerial Formation. It is therefore timely and more than appropriate that this conference reminds the ecumenical movement of this precious part of its own history and hopefully is envisaging promising new levels and forms of cooperation to nurture and enrich the churches' commitment to children's ministries and the Sunday School Movement which historically as well as missiologically cannot be dissociated from the very essence of the church being the sign of the Kingdom of God.

7. Initiatives for children's concerns shifting to political institutions after the 80ies

¹⁰ Erwin Fahlbusch, a.a.O. p. 230

¹¹ See Ulrich Becker and Perti Luumi, Sunday School – Ecumenical Engagement, in: Fahlbusch, p. 230f; see also: Gerald E. Knoff, The World Sunday School Movement – the story of a broadening mission, New York, Seabury Press 1979, 283 p., Johannes Thomas Hoernig, Mission und Einheit: Geschichte und Theologie der amerikanischen Sonntagsschulbewegung im 19. Jahrhundert unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer oekumenischen Relevanz und ihres Verhältnisses zur Erweckungsbewegung, Maulbronn, Verlag an der Klostertor, 1991

More detailed study on the involvement of WCC member churches in the rediscovery of a theology of childhood and the missiological relevance of children would be required to develop a more comprehensive picture of what exactly happened to children's concerns in the churches in the last decades. It is not that nothing has happened, as many member churches have been deeply involved in children's ministries and also in children's evangelism. The WCC published an International Report on the International Year of the Child which was declared by the UN for 1979 and reflected on Biblical Principles for Churches Ministries with Children¹², it jointly organized an international consultation with LWF on "Children as active partners in the congregation" in 1980, it undertook a major ecumenical inquiry into the status and reevaluated role of children with regard to the understanding of the Eucharist¹³, it invited children from all over the world for Bible Studies in Vancouver Assembly in 1983 and established an international forum on the dignity of children during the Harare Assembly in 1998. But the overall impression for the decades following the enormous processes of transformation in the 70ies and 80ies is that the major initiative for putting children's concerns and issues of children's living condition on the public discourse agenda was to some extent "lost" to secular and political bodies: In 1999 after a long process the United Nations member states signed and ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* which led to dramatic changes in a new awareness of children's situations, particularly of children who were victims of war, physical or sexual abuse and any other form of violence. Since then annually a "Report on the State of the World's Children" was published which contained a wealth of materials on economic, cultural and social plight and rights of children.¹⁴ Interestingly enough there was the occasion to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 20 November 2009, an occasion at which a Global World Day of Prayer and Action for Children was launched by UNICEF (in 2008) together with key representatives of faith based organizations.¹⁵ The World Day of Prayer and Action for Children brings together resources of faith-based organizations and focuses on basic rights of children in the area of education, health and social security.¹⁶ But apparently the united voices of Christian churches on issues of children, children's mission, children's rights in this world has become less visible and less heard in the general public and in the socio-political discourse in the past decades.

8. The unique added value of Christian faith and the need for a prophetic witness and public voice of Christian churches on concepts of children's development

If the church, as Vinay Samuel has rightly stated, is "a community in which one's love of God is best expressed and through which love of neighbor is best carried out...and is the best space for the child's moral nurture and development", then the common concern for children's ministries and a holistic concept for children's development needs to find a more common and explicit voice by all Christian churches today. As much of the debate on the state of children in today's world seems to be dominated or initiated only by secular values and secular concepts of well-being the key question is what is the unique added value which Christian faith can bring into the arena of the global discourse on the future and development of children. Vinay Samuel has pointed to an

¹² Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, WCC 1979

¹³ G. Mueller-Fahrenholz (ed.),...and Do Not hinder them: An Ecumenical Plea for the Admission of Children to the Eucharist, WCC 1982

¹⁴ <http://www.unicef.org/sowc/>

¹⁵ http://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/index_51802.html

¹⁶ <http://www.dayofprayerandaction.org/who-we-are/world-day-of-prayer>

important dimension which we would call the predominant reductionism of modern concepts of children's wellbeing which tend to be influenced by economist's world views: He had stated "In applying the concept of well being to children the models of well being focus on the physical, psychological, cognitive, social and economic dimensions. The moral and spiritual dimensions are pushed to the margins." If we analyze the extent to which children are viewed and perceived as market customers from the earliest stage onwards and are targeted by the most sophisticated technologies and psychologies of advertising, consumerist propaganda and sales promotion accompanied by all the subtleties of transforming them into obedient consumers of the products of modern entertainment and seduction industries there is reason enough to demand for the distinct voice of Christian churches to stand up for spiritual rights of the children. There is sufficient need to raise a common voice for the spiritual rights of children and children's development today. These spiritual rights of children are not spelled out in detail in the UN Convention of Children's Rights from 1999 although they are also not explicitly denied there: It needs to be stated explicitly that children have the right not be defined only and simply as future market entities, as economic beings, as future subjects of purchasing power. Children have spiritual rights which are beyond the fundamental rights as codified in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. The UN Convention rightly spells out the children's right for living, for wellbeing and development (art. 6 CRC), for having its own name, nationality, family relations and personal identity (art. 7 and 8 CRC), the right to express its own views freely in issues affecting the child (art 12 CRC) and the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (art 14 CRC). The UN Convention of the Rights of Children is a remarkable and unique universal standard for making state governments accountable for all what is within their capacity to support and enhance a comprehensive well-being of children. While affirming all what is stated in this UN Convention and giving praise to all those leaders, including many religious leaders, who worked for this Convention it should be the distinct role and unique added value of Christian churches to go beyond its current framework and also to speak up for the spiritual dimensions of holistic child development without which the widespread anthropological or economical reductionism in the understanding of children which is at work in many free market economies can soon determine policies and guiding principles of children's educational and developmental programmes in schools and society.

Children have the right to learn about God! Children have the right to get to know Christ! Children need spiritual resources, symbols and narratives which provide some spiritual rooting and provide an inner space for fundamental human expressions of hope, of love and of trust which cannot grow just within a purely materialistic or economic conceptualization of life and child development!¹⁷

"Man does not live from bread alone" this famous saying from Matth. 4,4 should regain special significance for the understanding of children's development and children's ministries, and it

¹⁷ In Art 30. The UNCRC touches on the right for a religious identity in the framework of minority rights without spelling out in content the basic rights of children for a spiritual dimension in their development: "In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language."

should equally be remembered that the original version of this Jewish saying continues in Dtn. 8,3: "But on every word that comes out of the mouth of the Lord." – emphasizing the relevance of a relational existence and the communicative element of listening to and hearing the word of God. Christian churches should not shy away but should learn to day to articulate a common and public voice on these rights of children for spiritual (and social and political) development and bring them into the discourse of the future of school education, media justice, steps towards achieving the MDGs, the role of the family and the social care systems for children.

9. Children, Church and Mission as core topic to be developed on the way towards the next WCC assembly

It might be appropriate for somebody speaking on behalf of the WCC Programme which relates to some 3000 theological schools and some 30-40 regional; associations of theological schools in World Christianity to close this short response with an urgent request: Even according to a superficial survey one cannot but state that in curriculum developments for theological education and ministerial formation in many churches there is widespread neglect of children's concerns, sometimes deliberate omission or ignorance over against this vital stream of discourse within World Christianity and on the whole an urgent need to keep up and to increase efforts for some common elements in a new curriculum on Children, Church and Mission. A new curriculum on child theology as it is called by some would need to cover the whole range of issues like 'Children in Jesus ministry, concepts of childhood in Ancient Antiquity and Early Christianity, children in the mission history of the church, children's evangelism, children's rights, children's counseling, protection of children against abuse and drug trafficking, children's liturgies and children's spirituality'. The face of many churches and the shape of worship occasions would probably change as soon as children would play the primary role in perceiving and designing the church in its ministries to the marginalized and the role of families, both fathers and mothers, to be reemphasized over against current trends to diminish the fundamental value of family life. The theme children, church and mission has a profound significance, a potential for new coalitions and a promise for more interdenominational or ecumenical cooperation and cross-fertilization which would be of benefit for all of us. If the newly formed coalition working on this theme would provide a foundational reference document on "Children, Church and Mission" to the forthcoming WCC Assembly in Busan, Korea in 2013, I am sure that this would be welcomed as well as a new resource book for institutions of theological education to teach courses inter-denominationally on issues of Children, Church and Mission.