

Spiritual transformation: Reaching and equipping Sub-Saharan African children

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Whenever a person engages with a child, the engagement is not neutral – it is 'for better or for worse'. A fair question would be why Christians must reach and equip Africa's children for spiritual transformation. By giving a missional perspective in an attempt to answer the question, this article wants to contribute to the development of an African child and youth theology. In the first part of the article, a specific understanding of theology and how it is practised, is described. Understanding and reaching children are put within a specific theological and missiological understanding also of the local faith community. From a missiological perspective the second part of the article makes use of Christian anthropology to understand Africa's children's context and how the local faith community can equip them spiritually. The third part deals with the concept of spiritual transformation as a process, and the role of the local faith community within this process.

Geestelike transformasie: Bereiking en toerusting van kinders in Sub-Sahara Afrika.

Indien 'n persoon by 'n kind betrokke raak, is hierdie betrokkenheid nooit 'n neutrale gebeurtenis nie. Daarom is dit billik om te vra hoekom Christene na kinders in Afrika moet uitreik vir geestelike transformasie? In 'n poging om die vraag te beantwoord, verskaf die artikel 'n missiologiese perspektief in 'n poging om 'n bydrae tot die ontwikkeling van 'n Afrika kinder- en jeugteologie te lewer. Die eerste gedeelte van die artikel beskryf die verstaan van teologie en hoe dit bedryf word. Die verstaan van, en uitreik na kinders in die Afrikakonteks, asook die plaaslike geloofsgemeenskap word binne hierdie spesifieke missionale teologiese verstaan beskryf. In die tweede gedeelte van die artikel word daar vanuit die missiologiese perspektief gebruik gemaak van 'n Christelike antropologiese perspektief om die konteks van Afrikakinders te verstaan, asook die manier van geestelike toerusting deur die plaaslike geloofsgemeenskap. Die derde gedeelte van die artikel bespreek geestelike transformasie as 'n proses, asook die rol van die plaaslike geloofsgemeenskap in hierdie proses.

Introduction

Whenever a person engages with a child,¹ the engagement is not neutral – it is 'for better or for worse'. This is not different within the Christian faith community in Africa.² Africa's children are diverse and belong to all the different classes, races, cultures, sexes, nationalities and religions that are found on the continent. In light of this, the article may be viewed as a generic article.³ The question may be asked why Africa's children need spiritual transformation.⁴ It must not be answered in light of what is going wrong, but of what could be done in a better or different way. What value will be added to their lives? Will it be true to state that many of the youth in Africa experience a lot of missed opportunities and have a lot of unused potential? If true, the consequences are that they do not live their lives to full capacity. Another reason for spiritual transformation might be that, in spite of 'real problems' such as poverty and insufficient schooling, many of the youth are 'victims' of their own unexploited potential because of a traditional African worldview,⁵ which they are expected to honour.

1. In this article, 'child' will refer to people between the ages of 4–14 years of age. 'Youth' will be used as a broader term that will include all young people from 4–35 years of age.

2. In this article, 'Africa' refers to Sub-Saharan Africa.

3. Studying Africa, this article follows a homogenising system, where there is no room for in-depth discussion of the unique and complex religious system of each people (cf. Adogbo 2005:76)

4. This article is based on a paper delivered on request at the 4–14 Window in Kenya in June 2014. There is very little written on children from an African religious perspective. For example, in the book, *Children and Childhood in World Religions* (Browning & Bunge 2009), there is no mention of children in African religion.

5. The main function of African "religion" is to link the world of the dead with that of the living and thereby ensuring harmony within the community' (Denis 2004:180).

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It was only recently that the African Christian faith community started to develop an African child theology, which addresses the issues that affect Africa's children. This article aims to make a contribution towards the development of an African child theology.⁶ Barnett (2009:39–40) states that child theology is about theology: it is an adjectival theology, it is a process and it is wider than children's issues, because it provides new insights into central themes of Christian faith.

This article will be structured as follows: firstly, a theological, missiological perspective; secondly, an anthropological, socio-cultural perspective (cf. Dunn 1997:29–43); and thirdly, a description of spiritual transformation.

How to reach African children: A theological perspective

What is theology? An understanding

Theology can be described by the following five characteristics (cf. Erickson 2001:16):

1. Theology is biblical – it is primarily God's Word that constitutes the content of theology. Wright (2006) describes the Bible as a missional book. In this regard, child theology entails reading the Bible as a revelation of God also written for children in Africa.
2. Theology is systematic – it tempts to draw together into one coherent whole of what the entire Scripture says on a given topic. In relation to the scope of the article, it may be asked: What does the Bible tell us about children? Nel (2000:9) warns that the Bible is no manual for how to carry out youth ministry, but indicates clearly that the Bible does contain theological insights about children and youth. God creates them, loves and cares for them. He also uses them to participate in his mission.
3. Theology is done in the context of human culture. The context of this article is the African culture(s). Within the African worldview on families, children are very important (Cochrane 2007:26–27). From a socio-economic view on Africa's children, they seem to be very vulnerable because of poverty, AIDS and other health issues, tribal and religious wars and other related issues such as education.
4. Theology is contemporary – it aims to restate timeless biblical truths in a form that is understandable to people who are living today. Related to Africa's children, it might be asked: How do the people of Africa understand the biblical truth of salvation and of being new creatures in Christ in the current pluralistic contexts of Africa? Is spiritual transformation necessary?
5. Theology is practical of transformational. Biblical doctrine is not only to inform people, but also to be applied in everyday life. What will the implication be of the biblical application doctrine on spiritual transformation? What kind of transformation is expected and why? Although theology is practical and transformational, it must be

remembered that the goal of spiritual transformation is not in the first place to 'solve' everything.

Hendriks (2004:24) talks about a fundamental shift in practising theology. The shift is from 'obediently analysing and systematising' our faith tradition usually done by theologians to 'participating obediently' in God's missional praxis from the local faith community.⁷ Wright (2006:21) indicates that an earlier understanding of theology was all about God, what he is like and what his actions entail, whilst mission was about people and what people do. Wright (2006) then concurs with Hendriks, clearly showing the relation between theology and mission in the following definition:

Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation. (p. 23)

This places the development and practice of theology in the midst of the local faith community. The shift in the understanding and practising of theology started around 1952 at the Willingen Mission Conference with the 'new' understanding of mission. In this 'new' understanding of mission, mission is not primarily an activity of the local faith community, but rather an attribute of God as an understanding of the *missio Dei*. Bosch (1991:390) describes *missio Dei* as mission placed in context of the Trinity doctrine; not in the first place of ecclesiology or soteriology. The close relationship between the *missio Dei* and mission as solidarity with the incarnated and crucified Christ is important. If theology is about God and God is a missional God, theology is by nature missional. Theology is then about the Trinitarian God who wants to be known by all creation. He therefore reaches out as Father by sending his Son, Jesus Christ; the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit send the church. If believers participate obediently in the *missio Dei*, the agent that needs to reach and equip African children for spiritual transformation⁸ must be the local faith community. This will only happen if the local faith community is understood as missional.

Bosch (1991:392) concludes with 'there is mission because God loves people,' and the church is privilege to participate actively and knowingly in this mission to make God known in the lives of those who experience and see his works every day, but does not recognise it. The basic presupposition of this article is that the identity of an individual as well as the identity of the church, is derived from God's very being (cf. Hendriks 2004:26). People are created in the image of God and the church is biblically described as the body of Christ.

6. Barnett (2009:41–42) makes a clear distinction between child theology and theologies of childhood, children's theologies, theologies for children, and children's spirituality. It is not within the scope of this article to go into these differences.

7. Although the local faith community is a broader term as church, it is used as a synonym for church to include the different faces and shapes of the church, for example not only the church as institution, but faithful volunteers working at Non Governmental Organisations, family and Christian based organisations.

8. Although there is reference to spiritual transformation throughout the article, it will be focused on in the last part of the article.

God reveals himself through humans as *imago Dei*. The 'general revelation' implies that the God of the Bible is a self-revealing God (Rm 1:19, 20).⁹ This passage, just as the rest of the Book of Romans, also reveals the need of all humans for salvation and (spiritual) transformation (Rm 12:1–2). The God of the Bible does not only reveal himself through people and the church, but also through nature (Ps 19:1–2). It is about this general revelation that Adeyemo (1997:11) states it clearly that there can be revelation without salvation, but no salvation without revelation. The following question is then asked (Adeyemo 1997:14): How much knowledge of the Trinitarian God as revealed in Scripture does the traditional people of Africa possess?

The God of the Bible reveals himself as a trinitarian God who is alive and different from the African understanding of a supreme being or any other god. Therefore, Christian theology is not only about God, the faith community and general revelation. It is also about specific revelation in Jesus Christ as the only Redeemer as well as discerning God's will at a specific time and place. Theology is about discerning between the gods and the spirits (1 Jn 4:1). For this discernment, the faith community needs the specific revelation of God through his Word, the Bible, and the incarnation of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ It is through the process of discernment that spiritual transformation takes place and believers are able to participate obediently in the *missio Dei* towards an anticipated future as eschatological reality. In this regard, theology becomes (trans)formative at all times and on all levels of society (cf. Hendriks 2004:27–34). The apostle Paul relates spiritual (trans)formation to the resurrection of Jesus Christ in three different ways: firstly, as a process of personal identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus; secondly, as the believer's submission to the all-encompassing reign of Jesus as Lord; and thirdly, the behaviour of believers from the perspective of the *parousia*, the future hope of the resurrection (cf. Thornhill 2012).

Africa's children: A theological perspective

The Bible describes and views children as a gift and blessing to their parents (Ps 127; 128), but it does not give us a one-sided picture of children. We read about children who are disobedient (the sons of Eli), lie to their parents (Jacob to Isaac), kill (Kain and Abel) and sell each other (Joseph is sold by his brothers) as well as a brother who sleeps

with his half-sister. We also read, though, about the way in which God involves and uses children and youth in his mission to make him known to people, for example Moses, David, Daniel and the slave daughter from Israel in Naaman's house. From the New Testament, we see that God, incarnated in Christ, regards children as much more important than the society of the day (Mt 18). In Acts 5 we find the youth participating in the church activities. In the household tables, the instructions in Ephesians 6:1–3 are not only to children on how to behave towards their parents, but in Ephesians 6:4 fathers (parents) are also instructed how to behave towards their children.¹¹

From a biblical perspective, it is clear that God, as the creator, is involved in a special way in the 'giving' of children (Ps 127; 139) to families.¹² From the very beginning (Gn 4), children are part of the God story and God's family. He includes them in his covenant, makes them part of his blessing – not only to their parents, but also to the nations (Gn 12:1–3). In the New Testament, it becomes clear that the church is the new covenant people of God, the children of Abraham (Rm 4). It is in this ecclesiological or somatic perspective of the faith community (Rm 12; 1 Cor 12) that children and youth grow spiritually and learn that they are part of a serving community of believers (Nel 2000:16–18). Responding towards the postmodern era, believers must reclaim the church as the living story of God's involvement with creation (Arthur 2007:29). Dunn (1997:64) describes the church as 'a greenhouse to nurture the young spiritual lives of children and youth'. The faith community as body of Christ is a community that changes continuously, as new members join and others leave as well as in the way that they grow in their faith. In this regard, change can only be understood pneumatologically (Nel 2000:20). It is especially this *agogic* perspective¹³ that welcomes children and youth who are physically changing dramatically and, in many instances, psychologically traumatically. Children do not only need a faith community; they also need a family to give them a hermeneutical *lebensraum* on biblical life. Looking especially at the Old Testament, it might be said that children learn about God's salvation by raising questions within the family (Ex 12; Dt 6). The important relationships and responsibilities within the family is described throughout Scripture (Ex 20; Dt 5; Eph 5; Col 3; 1 Pet 2) and it is the basic departure of the covenant. Therefore, if we want to reach the children of Africa, we also need to attend to the households in which they grow up. It is within the household that all the influences of society are absorbed, and where the adults and children are forced to deal with everyday realities such as food, water, poverty, AIDS and the absence of parents and children.

9. Structurally, Paul is setting the stage, showing that all have sinned and therefore need the righteousness of God. He puts this whole discussion within a cosmic framework of the general revelation. In Romans 1:18–32, he shows the sin of the gentiles and in 2:1–38, the sin of the Jews. 'Structurally significant for the development of the exposition in 1:18–32 is the threefold repetition of (*met*)*jellaksan* – to (ex)change in vv. 23, 25 and 26, matched by the threefold repetition of *paredidooken* – gave over in vv. 24, 26, and 28. These create a powerful sense of the vicious circle of human sin – failure to acknowledge God, leading to degenerate religion and behaviour, human pride reaping, the fruit of human depravity (vv. 24, 26–27) and general nastiness (vv. 29–31)' (Dunn 1988:53).

10. Spykman (1969:64) distinguishes five forms of God's Word: (1) his creative Word, which brought the world into existence; (2) his redeeming Word, spoken through the prophets; (3) his written Word, the Bible; (4) his Word incarnate, Jesus Christ; and (5) his Word of proclamation, in the preaching and teaching of the church' (Van der Walt 2008:15).

11. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss the complexities of the household and the sometimes double identities (see McDonald 2012 in this regard).

12. In this article, the concept of *family* is used as an inclusive concept and is defined by narratives. A family might thus be described as follows: 'Any group who refer to and experience themselves as a family must be regarded as a family.' Family then becomes a functional concept (cf. Muller 2009:11). Therefore household maybe used as a synonym for family.

13. Nel (2000:21) describe 'the congregation as a sphere of change'. He describes the 'constant change (conversion) to the reality already granted by God is the central *agogic* principle in Scripture'.

Reaching Africa's children where they live.

The best place to reach children is in and through the household. It is also here that the traditions of Africa are kept and told. It must be kept in mind that Africans have their own creation traditions, and a history and religion that go back thousands of years, long before Europeans entered this continent (cf. Adagbo 2005:79). As such:

religion is by far the richest and most tenacious part of the African heritage, integrated so much into different areas of life that most African languages do not even have a word for religion as such. (Abba 2005:139)

Muto (2011:93) states that 'humanity and Christianity are in need of a foundational theory for ongoing, in-depth spiritual formation'. It is the departure of this article that in-depth Christian spiritual (trans)formation may be nothing less than the church's participation in the *missio Dei*, making God known through prophetic dialogue with Africa (cf. Bevans & Schroeder 2011). It is God's mission to form and transform people (including children and youth) spiritually, so that they may know him. The *missio Dei* and prophetic dialogue focus on the attributes of God and free children and youth ministry from a focus only on soteriology and ecclesiology (cf. Bosch 1991:390). This missiological understanding transforms the outreach to Africa's children as participation in God's story, acting out of his unconditional love for and with people. Bearing this treasure of unconditional love for people will allow the church to befriend children. The church must 'engage them as guides, be taught by them' in her theological and missiological understanding, whilst she learns the language, proverbs and wisdom of the children and youth (cf. Bevans & Schroeder 2011:32). This unconditional love is best described in the relational terminology of the covenant, which is biblically closely linked to the household (cf. Wright 2006; Nel 2000:13; Balswick & Balswick 1989:22–26). When people were reached by the unconditional love of the covenant, they confessed it in the following shema: 'Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength' (Dt 6:4–5). In the New Testament, Jesus confirms this confession in the gospels. In a complicated pluralistic Africa,¹⁴ the church must reclaim its life story as a covenanted community, formed by people who are bound together in a distinctive bond with an obligation towards the one God and towards one another (Hirsch 2006:40). God's covenant relation is fulfilled when he reaches to humanity, sending his Son to set us free from all our sin as well as the fruit of sin, and disarming all powers and authorities triumphing over them by the cross (Col 2:14–15). In his Christian formation anthropology, Muto (2011:94) indicates the importance of the working of grace, which is clearly seen in the *missio Dei*, when the Father sends his Son, Jesus Christ, to die, for 'whoever believes in him shall not

14. It is too simplistic to talk about a homogeneous African worldview, as it is made up of African traditionalism, colonialism, modernism, postmodernism and even post-postmodernism.

perish, but have eternal life' (Jn 3:16). Ruling from the right hand of the Father, the Father and the Son sent the Spirit to empower the disciples to 'declare the wonders of God in our own tongues' (Ac 2:11). The way in which the shema was expressed in the New Testament and later movements was simply, 'Jesus is Lord!' (Hirsch 2006:24.) Being sent by the Father, the Son and the Spirit, it is with this confession ('Jesus is Lord') that the church reaches the world. When the church lives by the confession, 'Jesus is Lord', she has the privilege to participate in God's action to reach the children of Africa through prophetic dialogue. It must always be remembered that Jesus' Lordship is always more than our understanding of him and therefore the messenger also needs a teachable spirit. When discussing prophetic dialogue, Bevans and Schroeder (2011) use the image of entering into someone else's garden:

to appreciate another way of gardening, another way of arranging the flower beds or vegetable patches, another way of pruning and weeding. One can always learn from another gardener, and although one may want to give advice for growing roses or tomatoes, it is probably best that one waits until asked. (p. 33)

How to equip African children: An anthropology perspective

An understanding of anthropology?¹⁵

Christian anthropology¹⁶ wants to answer the question: What is a human being? In answering the question, Kelsy (2006:53) argues 'What human beings are as God's creatures is not simply their empirically discoverable *nature*, but their character as an ontologically contingent gift.' Generally anthropology can be described as the study of human beings and their ancestors through time and space, and in relation to physical character, environmental and social relations, and culture.¹⁷ It is important to look at a Christian anthropology of Africa's children, because the danger exists that the church can be more interested in the calling to transform Africa's children than in the children of Africa as 'ontological contingent gift'. This often leads to a reductive understanding of what constitutes 'relevant' anthropological scholarship in the African context – narrowing it down to 'issues' such as poverty, development and the AIDS pandemic (cf. Becker 2012:19). It is also true that, in light of 'political correctness', anthropologists (and, it may be added, some theologians) may not want to write on cultural sensitive issues.¹⁸

15. This section will only give attention to certain aspects of anthropology that is viewed as important within the context of the article.

16. For a discussion of Christian anthropology based on Genesis 1–3, please see Kelsy's discussion (2006:44–55) of Westermann and Von Rad's interpretations of these texts as well as the role of the Wisdom literature.

17. With this understanding of anthropology, it is clear that it is not in the scope of this article to give a thorough anthropological description of African children. This article will focus on some religious and cultural issues that are regarded as relevant to the topic.

18. 'Partly in response to this critique, and in their quest for social and political "relevance", South African anthropologists of the later apartheid years turned their back on anything suspiciously "cultural"; they had come to the conclusion that the category of "culture" was hopelessly tainted by apartheid ideology and discourse' (Becker 2012:19).

As a theologian, Erickson (2001:164–165) draws the attention to different views of humanity. His insights may help to understand the different situations in which many of Africa's children find themselves. One perspective is where humans are viewed as machines and disposables. The interest of the 'authority' is then focused on the strength, energy, abilities and skills that a person possesses. When the same outcomes can be reached by other means, there will be no hesitation to adopt such measures. Many child soldiers in Africa may be viewed from this perspective. Another perspective views humans primarily as members of the animal kingdom. The only difference between animals and humans is then one of degree. Many (African) children who are captured in prostitution and human trafficking may be viewed and treated from this perspective in which positive and negative reinforcements are the means of control. Another view by a broader segment of especially traditional societies is that humans are pawns of the universe. The view contains that 'humans are at the mercy of forces in the world which control their destiny, but have no real concern for them' (Erickson 2001:165). Many African children and adults who hold to African traditionalism may view themselves as pawns of the universe, especially the spiritual world (cf. Oduro *et al.* 2008:20; Nurnberger 2007; Gehman 1999):

African fears grow directly out of an African worldview. An African worldview offers a set of explanations for misfortune and illness: unseen spirits and powers threaten and destroy the fullness of life. (Oduro *et al.* 2008:21)

A Christian view on humanity (cf. Erickson 2001:165–166) is that people are all creatures of God, made in his image. Firstly, this implies that not one person is here by accident; everyone is here through a conscious, purposeful act of God. Secondly, the image of God, created within us, makes us different from animals. People are capable to respond to God as Creator and have a conscious, personal relationship with him. Migliore (2014:143) draws the attention to the fact that '... we are sinners who deny and distort our created being; and we are forgiven sinners, enabled by God's grace to begin life anew in faith'. Therefore, life is dynamic propelled forward.

Although there may be many differences between cultures, which are the study field of anthropology, the fact is that people, as human beings, are pretty much the same. All people have the same physical, social, psychological and spiritual needs irrespective of age, race or culture. It is also the biblical view that all people, including children and youth, are equal before God and need to be treated as such. It is in light of this understanding that we will give a religious, cultural perspective on African children.

African children: A contextual perspective

Sub-Saharan Africa is loaded with multiple diversities, ranging from different religions to different cultures and cutting through linguistic diversities and historical differences. Aware of all of this, it is the general take of this article that most of Africa's youth and children are still being

influenced by, and experiencing the deep-rooted African traditional believes to an extent. Ngong (2010:1) describes the African worldview as one where there is no firm distinction between the spiritual and physical world, as they are intricately intertwined. When one talks about reaching Africa's children, it must be seen in context. According to Nurnberger (2007:9) the children in West Africa must be understood within the traditional context of animism, where the emphasis is on personalised manifestations of power or spirits. In South and East Africa, children must be understood within the context of dynamism, where everything that exists harbours impersonal forces and where these forces drive everything that exists.¹⁹ The dynamistic power or forces are channelled in beneficial directions through rituals that are performed in public by authorised representatives of the community (Nurnberger 2007:22):

Dynamistic power does not proceed from the Supreme Being through deities, the genealogical sequence of the clan and on to animals, plants and objects. They all participate in a dynamistic power on their own account, yet in different measure. (Nurnberger 2007:24)

Crucial for an Africa child theology and spiritual transformation, is the attention Nurnberger (2007:22–24) draws to the importance of the community. Essential to his understanding of the community is the believe that dynamistic powers are located in material objects, natural processes, people, communities, roaming spirits, rituals, witches and others. Sociologically, the extended family, the clan, the chiefdom and the kingdom are all together the life force of the positive dynamistic power. The most essential deposit of power is located at the core of the community. As one approaches the periphery, the world becomes more dangerous. There are clear demarcations, which can be walls or fences (or be invisible), between the inside and the outside. These demarcations always have the force of ritual markings. There is no life outside the community and the dynamistic powers are used for either creating peace within the community or to drive someone out of the community. The protection of life is a communal task and the greatest danger lies in the possibility of extinction, which makes children very important. A person's entire life, though, is inherited from and therefore owed to one's parents. Therefore, in marriage, personal attraction is not always a decisive argument, because it is viewed as a linkage between clans, not individuals, and is often arranged by adults whilst partners are still young. Young people must marry and have children *for their clans*. Childlessness is viewed as a communal catastrophe more than a personal tragedy. Within the (extended) family, the role of every member is defined by age, gender and seniority, and no one is allowed to go beyond his or her particular spheres of competence. Children are viewed and treated as possessions and members of a community. With such a closely knit community, how can the local faith community equip children in Africa for spiritual transformation?

¹⁹This article focuses more within the context of dynamistic powers.

Equipping defined

Within the *missio Dei*, it is the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who equips people for spiritual transformation and their calling in this world (cf. Jn 3:1–21; 14:16, 26; 16:5–15; Ac 2; Rm 8:1–16; Eph 4:1–16). Ngong (2010:1) indicates that Pentecostal pneumatology is usually presented as the best way for understanding the Holy Spirit within the African context. Pentecostal pneumatology fits well in the African worldview, because the felt needs of the African people are usually portrayed as overcoming the ‘evil’ spirits that might threaten their life. Although only the traditional perspective on African youth is discussed, it is noted that African youth are seriously engaged in theology, even though they might not be conscious of it. Theology is rampant amongst all people, because we must choose everyday between the gods that reveal themselves to us through electronic media, gods of good times, money, beauty and others.

Following Dean’s argument (2001:29–30), Africa’s youth will not be equipped for spiritual transformation by an intuitive theology that ‘feels’ right, but lacks structure or a grand narrative to hold it together. Neither will they be equipped by an embedded theology, which is viewed as a religious story and inherited from a faith community, which is not critically examined. What is needed is a deliberate theology or pneumatology, which is understood as faith, seeking understanding. Deliberate theology says, ‘I believe, because ...’. In a deliberate theological understanding, the ‘why?’ question is answered in a rational way.

Seeing that children inquire about God (Dean 2001:31), the church must equip them with the grand narrative of the Bible, helping them to realise that the way in which God was involved in the lives of his people in the Bible, is the same way in which God is involved in their own lives today. The church will do even better if she equips the family to help children realise that they are part of the God story, including his covenant. On the other hand, youth, from adolescence, ‘inquire after God, seeking a relationship, a sacred trust, an anchor that remains steady in winds of change’ (Dean 2001:31). In this regard, the church must equip them with resources to discern God’s will for their lives within the faith community and the world. Equipping is a teaching and discipleship process creating ‘spiritual engagement’ opportunities with the goal of transformation. Learning takes place when knowledge about opportunities is increased. Equipping then enables youth to open new doors and throw off old chains in order to stretch their lives towards a new future. It is in this regard that the faith community, as hermeneutical *lebensraum* and *agogic* society, opens a window on the new future participation in the *missio Dei*. Ngong (2010:3) confirms this view when he suggests that it is not sufficient for Africa to speak of the presence of the Spirit only in terms of anti-rational or non-rational discourses, but that we will find the Spirit at work in rational discourses, referring to John 16:4b–15. The Spirit cannot be limited to the African worldview when he is in Africa. The Spirit must be known as the third Person of the Trinity and not only in

a functional way, which dominates African understanding. The trinitarian God must be trusted to unleash his Spirit in Africa in surprising ways through the wonderful gifts he gave to Africa in persons, culture, language, history, wisdom and many others; indeed, 1 Corinthians 1:4–9 is also true of Africa.

Spiritual transformation

Introduction

Given that Africa hosts one of the world’s youngest populations (70% of the population was younger than 30 years of age in 2010; International Year of Youth 2010–2011, 2010:1), children and youth should be at the centre of every theological, political and socio-economical discussion, taking in consideration their culture and worldviews. Children and youth are not the Africa of tomorrow; they are the Africa of today.

Within the African context, which is traditional, modern and postmodern, it might be true that one of the greatest defects of children and youth ministry is the absence of a sound theological foundation. In traditional societies like in Africa, with its fundamentalism in the African Traditional Religion (cf. Sakuba 2008), catechesis or Sunday school may be practiced as an authoritarian and often one-sided teaching (cf. Nel 2000:8–9). This might be the major or only subject for children and youth ministry, with the goal of church membership²⁰ and not spiritual transformation. It must thus be remembered that spiritual information is an activity of the Spirit himself and it must be taught and lived in dependence on the Spirit, because spiritual information is part of the formative process and not the end result. Being (trans)formed into the image of Christ is not only about receiving information (like in a textbook), but is also about discipleship, which is primarily formative. Spiritual (trans)formation is rather caught than taught. Spiritual information and formation are especially important in view of the growing secularism in Africa, and the fact that children have become part of the economy of Africa through human trafficking, tribal wars and slavery.

Secularism in Africa may be viewed as an alternative religion, which is increasingly shaping the fundamental characteristics of African societies, especially the lives of young people and children (cf. Van der Walt 2008:21). The struggle from a secularist postmodern view is primarily the loss of the communal story of all people, which is formulated in the Africa Ubuntu principle. Together with it, people experience the loss of the grand narrative as it is told in the Bible, and the biblical language is lost with the story. Arthur (2007:22–25) shows that the language, which we use to articulate theological ideas, got a new meaning in a postmodern era. For example, an ‘idol’ today is a ‘pop star’ that sings and no longer has the meaning of a false god, whilst in the sub-cultures of the youth, many singers have become false gods

20.If treated like this, catechesis becomes just another wall or fence to include or exclude people.

who are worshipped. A second struggle of postmodernism is the failure of imagination regarding both the claims and demands of the gospel, and the focus on the self. According to Arthur (2007), the main values of such a belief system are the following:

- (1) religion helps you to be a better person; (2) religion helps you to feel good about yourself; (3) God is there to help you when you need it, but otherwise makes no claims on your life, time, or resources. (p. 25)

In reaching the children of Africa for spiritual transformation, the church must reclaim her salvation story as part of the living grand narrative of God, looking for opportunities to 'nurture the imaginations of youth that they may have the "ears to hear" and the vision to live by the real-life gospel of Jesus Christ' (Arthur 2007:29). When an active imagination is not transformed by the gospel and guided by the Spirit, it is prone to sin.

Spiritual transformation

Spiritual transformation is the work of God; more specifically, it is the work of the third Person of the Trinity, namely the Holy Spirit. The church must confess that she has no power to transform people. Spiritual transformation with the purpose to glorify the living God as he reveals himself in the Bible, is the purpose of the *missio Dei* and the church has the privilege to participate in this mission. As participant, the church must have a clear theological vision and mission of its youth ministry. What is the role of the church in her participation in the *missio Dei* regarding spiritual formation and transformation? As argued above, the role of the church in spiritual transformation is a hermeneutical one and therefore, she needs spiritually healthy leaders. 'Doing God's work isn't as important as being God's person' (Fields 1998:36). Although relationships are very important, it cannot be the primary foundation of our youth ministry; the story of Jesus Christ is the primary foundation in spiritual (trans)formation. He gave his life in order for people to be transformed.

A single desire in reaching and equipping Africa's children is their spiritual transformation. Those seeking spiritual transformation may not forget that behind transformation are attitudes, culture and values (DeVries 2008:75). In Africa, spiritual transformation is not only the changing of a belief system, but also the leaving of a social structure. Spiritual transformation in the sense of conformed to the image of Christ means shaping one's life after his life. Thus, spiritual (trans)formation must not be confused with a formula in which methods of strategic programmes, designed by experts from afar, are adopted. 'Transformation doesn't happen primarily because specific tasks got accomplished or because of consistently excellent programs. Transformation becomes habitual for youth ministry when a unique climate of transformation is established' (DeVries 2008:77) and where the Spirit is at work. Transformation would involve learning, unlearning, relearning and new learning. These outcomes may manifest themselves in changes of cognitions,

feelings and behaviour. The climate for transformation can be compared to a greenhouse in which the climate is set for growth. It will be the ideal if this 'greenhouse' is the family, but in Africa, with its many disrupted families, it is mostly the role of the faith community as an extended family and *agogic* community that creates the climate for change. Such a 'greenhouse' effect is created when the faith community participates in the *missio Dei* obediently, discerning God's will together, listening to the Word and the children and youth as well as the world (in this instance Africa) (cf. Hendriks 2004:30–32). Equipping youth for spiritual transformation is a collaborative process between those who reach out and the receivers. It is not something that those who reach out 'do to' the children or youth; it is a prophetic dialogical process to create real transformation. The agenda of the children must be part of the agenda of the church. Within the context of care, Egan (1990) makes the following applicable remark:

Outcomes depend on the competence and motivation of the helper, on the competence and the motivation of the client, on the quality of their interactions, and often on a host of environmental factors over which neither helper nor client has control. (p. 11)

Real transformation happens when a person (child) addresses difficult situations in life as opportunities to live out his or her faith. Children and youth ministry, in many instances, lead to perceived transformation where a person (child) enjoys participating in church activities, but a new-founded faith does not play a role in real-life situations.

The goal of spiritual transformation is not to 'solve' everything. Spiritual transformation is effective to the degree that African children and youth, through spiritual interactions with the living God of the Bible, are in a better position to manage their life situations through participating in the use of spiritual resources and opportunities (the Bible and faith community) to live their lives more effectively.

Conclusion

Indeed the engagement with Africa's children will never be neutral. As in other continents, much of Christianity and the African worldview are demolished by the postmodern era and the electronic media. Mwiti and Dueck (2006:12) warn that 'community dis-memberment leaves vacuums that result in the loss of the values that usually root people and give them identity'. A good example is the acknowledgement and belief in some Africa traditions and values, for example in Ubuntu, but there are very few practical examples of Ubuntu in African communities today. This, whilst Christianity is, in some instances, accused of dis-membering of children from their families. Within this vulnerable context, the well-known African saying, 'I am because we are', may be transformed to the understanding that 'I am, because He (Trinitarian God) is'. The focus must move from people to the trinitarian God. It is the role of the church to re-member the dis-membered children and youth in Africa into their families and if needed into a new family (cf. Mwiti & Dueck 2006:13) through reaching and equipping them for spiritual transformation.

This article has shown that our theological understanding of reaching and equipping children in Africa for spiritual transformation must be embedded within the *missio Trinitatis Dei*. It has further argued that spiritual (trans) formation of children in Africa must focus on Christian anthropology where the child is viewed as creation of God. Spiritual transformation from a missiological and theological perspective is not in the first place to change circumstances (in most instances spiritual transformation and the change of circumstances go together), but to make God known and to discern his will within the circumstances. When God is known within circumstances, it gives new perspectives and people might have more opportunities to deal with the circumstances. It must be clear that reaching and equipping children and youth in Africa cannot be to 'solve' Africa's problems, it must be to make the trinitarian God known and to help them to realise that they are part of the God story.

From the above it is clear that, in the development of an Africa child theology, there is a need for more research on the context of Africa, especially regarding the functioning of children within the family (or without the family) in 2015 as well as research on the ecclesiological understanding and functioning of Africa. The most important research will be how to give the children of Africa a voice within theology as participants in the *missio Dei*.

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