**Script for ITWG Video March/April 2023**

It’s a source of deep joy to be part of this process.

And so good to anticipate meeting with dear friends across the continents.

In an ideal world, we would be sitting in a circle, and I would greet you with the words, “I come with an empty basket”…

And then: “the way we do things is as important as what we do; the way we say things is as important as what we say”. These are words familiar to those who have been part of CTM consultations since 2001.

In convening this gathering, the trustees of CTM are seeking to encourage and facilitate conversation committed to Child Theology.

You have *The Theological Log* as a resource. Just one thing to stress about the journey described. It is a single thread, a fragile and largely undistinguished one, in a global tapestry. In our time there has been a sea change or tectonic shift in understandings of children. Now that they are seen and respected as actors and agents, with universally agreed rights, followers of Jesus have been exploring what difference all this makes to do theology, church and mission. How does “child-attentive” theology (thanks to DJ Konz for this helpful term!) differ to what has been on offer before?

I guess we have all been blessed by the writings and insights of many, most of whom we have not met personally. Just two examples that have been a blessing and challenge to me: David Jensen and his disarmingly honest contribution, *Graced Vulnerability,* and Kristin Herzog’s prophetically challenging, *Children and Our Global Future*. In what follows you will see that we hope that this process will open communication and conversation with them, and countless others, who have been an inspiration along the way.

That said, you have been alerted to five questions have been selected or distilled from the two hundred that kick-started the process known as Child Theology and many others from around the world since. (In fact you were sent four, but there were five originally!) That means we can at least count them on a single hand! Let’s hope that they help to stimulate our conversation, not least by provoking others.

1. **The first is about Process (as distinct from Content).** You can see from the map on the website, that there have been gatherings or consultations across the world involving hundreds of people. Although we have been blessed by Marcia Bunge’s presence as a trustee of CTM, we have rarely engaged with the many other writers and editors attentive to children in a Christian context (such as David Jensen or Kristin Herzog). Sustained conversation has been rare. It may surprise you to know that there are no members of CTM committed to furthering Child Theology.

Reflecting on the process to date there are several distinctive features, and some remarkable discoveries. Let me select three. (a) The movement has consciously eschewed imperial or colonial ambitions, seeking to redress centuries of western dominance. (b) The circles comprising women and men, lay and clerical, practitioners, and academics, have sometimes created moving letters addressed to the church worldwide. Letters are of course a primary vehicle of NT theology. But they still await replies. (c) In South Africa a theological experiment emerged, as if by spontaneous combustion. It was triggered by the openness of two of the members of the circle: a former child prostitute, and a former child soldier.

How might such aspects of the process be shared?

1. **The second question is about Content: doctrine and applied theology.** Child Theology in its most inclusive sense offers obvious and direct challenge and enrichment to fundamental aspects of Christian doctrine including Christology, anthropology, the Kingdom of God, sin, sacraments, and church. All theology is contextual and so those who are part of this conversation will be wrestling with particular aspects of one or more of these, in different cultural, religious, political, social and denomination settings.

While working on the Log, I had to jettison much of the narrative to prevent it becoming unruly and cumbersome. One such piece of baggage was a suggestion by Dr Sunny Tan, a former trustee of CTM and Academic Dean of MBTS in Malaysia. He suggested that CT might be a catalyst for indigenous theologies in places such as Cambodia or Vietnam. When I expressed incredulity on account of our combined ignorance of such places and cultures, he said that this was just the point.

To sit on the ground in a circle, vulnerable, and with an empty basket, as fellow followers of Jesus, was just how such processes should begin. Sadly, it rarely if ever happened like this. It was outsiders, denominations, missionaries, publishers, and seminaries that took over…It’s a thought that lingers. Jim Houston’s comment in his recent book, *Introducing Child Theology* is perhaps a variation on this theme.

Can we find ways of exploring Scripture and doctrine in context, and working together and with others to explore their implications for life and practice?

1. **The third question takes us back to the source of CTM**. As I said, it literally began with hundreds of questions. I have them here in this envelope and keep them readily to hand. They were from practitioners who were troubled and bruised by what their engagement with children had exposed them to. Some questions had the feel of those psalms giving expression to deep cries of anguish and bewilderment at injustice, and God’s seeming reluctance in bringing justice to bear in His world. CT can never be content to operate as an historical or academic process. It demands that real children and real life are brought into the heart of all theological discourse.

What are these questions today where you are living? How similar are they to those raised in 2001? And what do we do about them?

1. **The fourth question is about dissemination or seed sowing.** As I mentioned in my opening thoughts, there have been many excellent books and collections and articles written on Child Theology over recent decades. I have tried to get as many as possible on my shelves. But how do we engage in conversation? CTM expended a good deal of time and energy working on a plan to establish a “community of scholars” from Africa and Asia who would travel around the world seeking to meet and learn alongside such people, spreading the seed as they travelled, but the proposal did not get off the ground. We are currently preparing two collections of papers and articles to be published electronically, as another way of going about this.

Haddon and I know from personal experience that there have been critics of the model of CT that we have been exploring, but that they have relied almost exclusively on a CTM booklet and other writings. Images and symbols that were helpful and alive earlier on, no longer resonate or seem appropriate. None of these writers has engaged with *Entry Point*. Available in Kindle it remains the most focused attempt by those associated with CTM to see how followers of Jesus might do and live theology stimulated by the words and actions of Jesus. Yet a conversation is yet to begin.

Is this the time to set it in motion?

1. **The fifth question is about what has been called “Child Liberation Theology”.** (It seems to have escaped mention on your invitation to this event.) People have often asked how CT relates to and differs from contextual theologies such as those labelled liberation, feminist, black and the like. It implicitly questions whether and how children should be involved in the process. We have wrestled with this from the beginning and tried various ways of doing so. There is some heat being generated, but not a lot of light! And as you have probably guessed by now, little sustained conversation.

How do we go about this with those for whom it is a pressing, practical of Christian theology, church, and mission?

This may be a good place to bring this introduction to a close, so that the real conversation can begin. As we share with one another, it would be wise to bear in mind that Jesus interrupted a theological conversation by calling and placing a child in the midst of those who were arguing. In doing so he sought to reshape fundamentally their basic assumptions. As his followers, what we are engaging in, is a reflection or echo of this. Without any special pleading therefore, Child Theology requires careful attention if it to be attentive to Jesus as well as children.

Whatever our status, ethnicity or gender, we all children, or were. We entered the world as children. God entered the world as a child. We can only enter the Kingdom of God if we become as the little children.

CT began among those committed to bringing and realising Good News among and for children worldwide. Those of us who have been part of the process have been doing this in our lives*. Entry Point* is dedicated to a child who was present at the very first CTM consultation in Penang. And yet, the Kingdom of God is not partisan, setting one group in competition with another. It cannot be for children at the expense of any other group, or vice-versa.

So, CT in the name of Jesus, and in the service of the Kingdom of God, will be good news not just for children, but for all people. It brings the potential of new light thrown on Scripture, doctrine, church, and mission.

If so, how can we ensure that such light, even if it is not at this time set on a hill, is at the very least not hidden under a bushel?

Keith White

15th March 2023