

Images of Child, Church and God

This article was originally published in Crosslight (Uniting Church of Australia magazine).

Children are imaged in a number of complex and sometimes conflicting ways in our culture. Children are seen as trouble, sexualised, unruly, cringeworthy, messy, time consuming, revenue consuming. They are a niche market, a set of consumers to be exploited. Conversely they are also “special” and trophied as status symbols.

And tragically, they are the focus of our neuroses, frightening us as vulnerable and in need of legislative protection, for they expose our darkest corruptions and inclinations to abuse.

In our churches we misappropriate these images of children in some of our practices as well.

Even in churches, where we would look for the epicentre of the hospitality and gracious inclusiveness of God, children are often treated as a separate market or considered problematic. What are we going to do about the children? This is question is asked, with the assumption that they need something different, revealing an alienation, an ‘othering’ of children. Are children so enigmatic to us? Who are children in our midst as the body of Christ? Are there images that we might explore that are more helpful, more life giving, and more true than those offered by our culture of segmentation, alienation and exploitation.

Marcia Bunge has identified some alternative biblical visions of who children are, anthropologically, and theologically.¹

Children are gifts, expressions of God’s life giving and blessing.

Children are lights and prophetic agents, symbols of the kingdom among us.

Children are bearers of the Imago Dei, the image of God.

Children are moral agents and inheritors of a fallen world.

Children are marginalized, the image of the poor and vulnerable in the world

Children are developing persons, in need of guidance and care.

Marcia’s summary is not exhaustive, nor comprehensive, but it provokes some helpful restlessness and questions among us.

Marcia would be delighted if her list of six sent us to our scriptures hunting down examples that vindicate her claims, and that lead us to uncover even more theological images of children.

Her list also calls us to ask how children might be re-imagined in our communities.

¹ Marcia J. Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood,” *Journal of Religion* 86.4 (October 2006), 549-579. Various forms of Bunge’s thought can be found in a number of other sources, including on line at:

http://www.faithformationlearningexchange.net/uploads/5/2/4/6/5246709/biblical_and_theological_resources_for_raising_children_-_marcia_bunge.pdf

Leadership

Images of Child, Church and God continued...

Some of the reimagining that I think might be possible, includes:

A renovation of the formation of our clergy to consider ministry with children as more fundamental than ministry with adults. Adults can read and research for themselves. Why would we prioritise resourcing the already literacy-rich with our Ministry of the Word?

A commitment to vigorous and vigilant action in our public life to provide a healthy relational and intellectual life for our children, through the removal of inappropriate sexualisation of human image and relational models.

A confession that where we do not have children in our faith community, it is an indication that somewhere along the line, we have forsaken the other-oriented call of the gospel, that as grownups making decisions to form our practice we have not thought strongly enough beyond ourselves.



A repentance from the individualization of identity, especially spiritual identity, and a reconnection in ministry with family, in all its variations and permutations. On the whole, our so called church 'communities' are configured around the base unit of the individual human.

Children remind us that this vision of human is a falsity: we are unable to live individually, and our pretensions to do so distort and impoverish us. The call of the gospel is to relationship, community, to serving others. The gospel liberates us to live other-oriented lives in the primary and inaugurated template of the crucified Christ.

And so I would add to Marcia's list a further biblical image of the child: **the measure by which we assess our culture and community.**

Children in our midst, children in our faces and in our arms, children determining our structures, our decisions, our models of ministry and mission are a plumb line by which we may check our practice against the paradigms of the kingdom of God.