Over the past decade there has been a deeper acknowledgment that the Bible suggests that children have a more significant role to play in bringing about the kingdom of God. “Children’s spirituality is the child’s development of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, within the context of a community of believers that fosters that relationship, as well as the child’s understanding of—and response to—that relationship” [1]. There are a number of new programs and resources which challenge existing paradigms of children’s ministry and provide a framework for working with children both inside and outside the four walls of the church. The aim of these resources is to provide a holistic approach which involves children who are marginalised in society such as the poor, oppressed, abused and exploited as well as church kids [2].

Child Theology is a way of engaging with the Bible and undertaking theology that takes as its foundation the example of Jesus when he called and put a child in the midst of him and the disciples. The significance of the child in the discussion amongst Jesus and his disciples has been overlooked and ignored in the development and understanding of biblical and theological studies. This is also true for society where a child’s place and opinion often count for little in the shaping of a community. It is tragic that we have failed to grasp and consider why Jesus invited and points to the child as illustration of aspects of the Kingdom including greatness and forgiveness.

Child theology is “an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology—historical, biblical and systematic—in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples” [3]. Child Theology’s focus is that in Matthew 18 Jesus did not place a child in the presence of disciples as an object or thing, but as a living and practical example of understand what the Kingdom of God or heaven looks like.

Child theology summons us to take notice of children in whatever communities or situations we face and to consider how we represent Christ as his ambassadors. Children are as essential and an important part of the fabric and culture of a community. Most of the time their contribution and opinions are ignored as we adults believe we know best. Yet as the last few Old El Paso advertisements illustrate, often children see the world through a different lens and have simple and practical ideas that might not occur to adults.
BIBLICAL STORIES

As child theology has progressed it has continually challenged the traditional understanding of scripture which leaves children out. In many passages and stories children have been unnoticed, and the important role they play ignored. In many stories the children play the role of bringing about change. For example Mary, David and Jeremiah all were children or adolescent, and yet played a significant role in God’s redemptive plan, “God has always had [a] heart for children. And he has always had a high regard for the capacity of children to understand the faith, and viewed them as willing and gifted instruments for revitalisation and renewal” [2].

One particular example that places a heavy emphasis on children is the story of Samuel where God does not speak to the priest Eli directly but instead through the child Samuel. Jesus himself is another example, when he was twelve Jesus discussed, debated, learned and engaged with teachers and Pharisees at the temple courts in Jerusalem. Jesus as an adult in Matthew 18 welcomes a child into the conversation about greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven. As White says, “Jesus freely and deliberately chooses a little child as a way of challenging and illuminating the disciples... Given all the other possible types of people Jesus could have chosen to place in their midst as examples, the author see children as, among other things, a source of hope” [4].

CHILD THEOLOGY MOVEMENT

The Child Theology Movement is devoted to fostering and facilitating, “Reform of all theological reflection and enquiry ‘with a child in the midst’ and [ensuring] that theology of this kind informs every aspect of the church’s life and mission, including that which relates to children” [3]. The Child Theology Movement also has other attributes such as being open and broader, not only focused on children’s issues; and being aware of not going from one extreme of undervaluing children to placing too much value which could become idolatry. The Child Theology Movement in Australia began with a consultation in 2007 which led to a small group of Children & Families practitioners who decided to gather together to discuss how the Child Theology Movement would proceed in Australia. They have made a number of recommendations including, “Develop and implement a state-based strategy for engagement with theological colleges [and also a strategy] within each denomination for discerning and applying the insights derived from a “child in the midst” approach to its life and mission” [3]. Another proposal is to “Develop a methodology involving consultation and collaboration that facilitates engagement with Child Theology at different levels of ministry” [3]. The mission of The Salvation Army would be greatly enriched by adopting some of the insights of Child Theology, both in the mission to children, and as mission partners with the Army.

MOVING FORWARD

Churches are realising that children have “far more spiritual potential than what church had realised. Many children and young people are no longer coming to church only to be entertained. Rather, given an opportunity and a challenge, they come to worship, contribute and be equipped for the ministry. Children are no longer seen as primarily the ‘mission field’ but as effective agents of mission” [2].

As church leaders who teach young children it is not our role simply to “impart truth or [give information], so much as to create the context in which the students by active exploration [are] able to discover truths and process information for themselves” [5].

Church is not only a place where the church community gathers on occasions to sing, pray, witness a message and worship. Church is not something that is confined to a time, place and space and only where worship can take place. It is important for children to see the whole life as worship. Congregations should be encouraged to see that the priesthood of all believers applies in all contexts, and so children are as much capable of ministry and mission as adults are. Age appropriate avenues for children to do ministry and mission should be woven into everyday corps life.

NOTES