



Listen to the child

What might we hear from our young voices if we listen theologically to what they are saying? I invite us to consider seriously our Baptist principle of a priesthood of all believers and listen to those often thought to not have a theological voice of their own, writes Sian Hancock

'Same storm, different boat'¹ has become a mantra during this pandemic in my trauma-informed work. There has been no escaping the national lockdown, the risk of Covid-19 and the subsequent stress of all that we've known - the rhythms of life that upheld society - being turned upside down. The extent of impact this Covid storm has had upon us individually and communally as households, churches and neighbourhoods will depend upon:

- » the 'boat' we're in - is yours an ocean liner, a houseboat, a sailing boat or maybe a kayak?
- » The size of the waves experienced - were you furloughed or did you have to continue working? Have you had to homeschool children? Perhaps you had symptoms or needed to shield. How aware were you of your own emotional reaction and that of those you love and care for?
- » Accessibility to the lifeboats/lighthouse or an ability to swim - what has kept you afloat?
- » The anchor that grounds us - what has been important to you throughout this turbulence and how has it sustained you?

¹ Dr Karen Treismann, *Safe Hands and Thinking Minds Psychological Services*.

The storm continues to blow and it may be that our boat has changed for better or worse but we're all having to dig deep within ourselves to be resilient in the face of such challenge and change. And this is true across the generations from the youngest to the eldest. During times of adversity we learn a lot about ourselves and the most fundamental question is that of our identity - who am I and what does it mean to be me?

I recall the story of the disciples caught in a storm on Lake Galilee and in their fear waking Jesus who, having rebuked the storm and restored calm, caused them to ask, 'who then is this...?' (Luke 8:23-25)². The paradox that God is everywhere, but God is also hidden and absent, is also true of children³. They are on the streets, in the schools, at the parks and sometimes among the gathered Church. Yet at times, they are hidden in the shadows and the wastelands of a neighbourhood; some are closeted away from a perceived dangerous and hostile world. They find alternatives to education and traditional groupings, expressing themselves in more creative, and sometimes unorthodox ways; others have no choice but to go where they are sent or segregated by well-meaning parents.

² Holy Bible NRSVA translation. www.biblegateway.com
³ Root, A 2009. 'God's Hiddenness, Absence and Doubt: The Theology of the Cross as Theological Direction for Youth Ministry'. *Journal of Youth and Theology* 8 Issue 1: page 62

Children choose their playgrounds, hideouts and leisure activities. In Victorian times we are told that children 'should be seen and not heard', present yet silenced as if they have nothing of substance or value worth listening to. This probably contributed to the popular idiom that a child 'needs a good talking to' but I want to subvert that and suggest that our children - in our homes, schools, neighbourhoods and churches - need a good listening to. I invite us to consider seriously our Baptist principle of a priesthood of all believers and to listen to the voice of children present yet still often thought to not have a theological voice of their own. What might we hear from these young voices if we listen theologically to what they are saying?

Listening is a spiritual discipline that involves patience. A setting aside of self to be present to the other. It requires observing the non-verbal/unspoken as well as the spoken word. The listening may reflect back what has been heard for clarification and confirmation. Listening is an intentional act and a gift that shows respect for the individual. Listening to a group within the Christian church that has rarely had the expectation of a theological voice is in itself a theological endeavour.

By giving space to hear a young person share their story or voice their thoughts, we are able to see the world from their perspective. This narrative model of personhood is how a sense of self is constructed through the storying of one's experiences.⁴ Children are meaning-makers, using their senses to construct understanding of the world they find themselves in. They watch and mimic those around them. They explore and experiment, problem-solve and use repetition to master and refine their skills. Giving talking space to tell one's own story affirms and nurtures their sense of significance. But as we listen it may take us to a new place, like the voice from the wilderness calling. It may challenge and unsettle the status quo, like the turning over of the tables in the temple. It may speak truth to power, like the parables seeking to redirect our attention back to God and God's kingdom.

The essence of the African proverb, 'we are all persons because of other persons' is often reflected in iconology where the Christ child gazes into the eyes of the mother, Mary. It reminds us of the Triune God, three in one. In sociological terms, psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner offers a system whereby the child is in the centre of outerlying concentric circles that move from the micro world of the child and their household, through their widening social network as they encounter school, clubs and groups including church, out into the influence

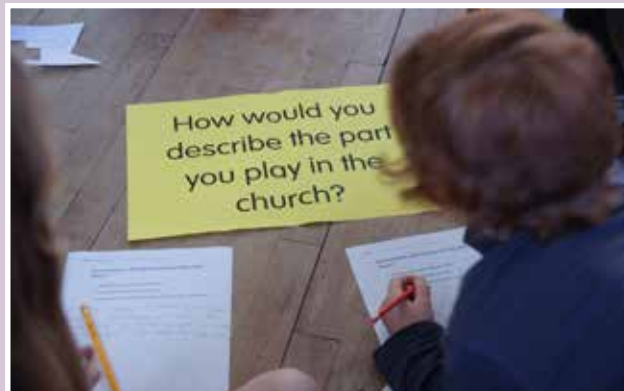
4 Savage, S 2004. 'Sculpting the Self' in *Ambiguous Evangelism*. Mayo, B; Savage, S; & Collins, S London: SPCK

of the indirect environment through local services and legislative policies; to the macrosystem of social and cultural values all surrounded by an outer circle representing the changes that occur with the dimension of time.⁵ We are social beings created for relationship by a God who seeks relationship with us.

Conversation builds relationship and understanding. At its best it fosters trust and a mutual blessing of respect.

In ancient times clay jars were common vessels to be found within households. They varied in size and purpose but were valuable carriers and containers for everyday items. The ancient world had a container model of understanding identity, the container being the body holding earthly, physical and spiritual matter. Children have often been seen to be empty vessels waiting to be filled by the all-knowing adult, but Paul writes of treasure that comes from God within clay jars (2 Cor 4:7). Perhaps these vessels aren't empty but already carry what is needed to enter the kingdom of God, treasure that comes from God, 'unless you become like a child...' (Matt 18:3). Are there insights to our sense of becoming in God which can only be glimpsed and understood through the journey of childhood spirituality? The mystery of childhood should not deter us from 'searching for what it tells us about the children we were, the children we are to nurture, and the children we must become.'⁶ How will we understand this unless we listen?

The storm continues - some days it seems like a cacophony that stirs and unsettles. Consider a child in your church and ask yourself what kind of boat they might be in? What type of waves of emotion are they encountering in these uncertain times? Ask them what's keeping them afloat or what do they need to help them. Invite them to tell you about their anchor holding them steady or at least grounded... 'if you have ears to hear, listen!'



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She edited *Re-thinking Children's Work in Churches* (2019) alongside Carolyn Edwards and Sally Nash



5 Bronfenbrenner, U 1979. *Ecological Systems Theory*. www.psychologynoteshq.com/bronfenbrenner-ecological-theory
 6 Pridmore, J 2017. *Playing with Icons*. Denver: The Center for the Theology of Childhood of the Godly Play Foundation.