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Erratum: Doing theology *with* children in a South African context: Children as collaborators in intergenerational ministry

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The Publisher regrets that the affiliation of Shantelle Weber and Stephan de Beer were incorrectly recorded during the final editing process of the article.

The correct affiliation of Shantelle Weber is:
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The Publisher apologises.

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Doing theology *with* children in a South African context: Children as collaborators in intergenerational ministry

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The vision of Child Theology Africa is to advance a child-friendly continent by doing theology with, for, about and through African children. In this article we would like to explore the voice, role and position of the child in church and society, as important and integral to authentic intergenerational church praxis. This is based on the presuppositions that children should be regarded as collaborators in doing theology; children should be engaged not merely as objects but as subjects of research and knowledge generation; children articulate their own experiences with God; and the biblical imperatives to listen carefully to and engage with children.

Introduction

This article forms part of a collection of articles in this edition entitled, 'Theology disrupted: Doing theology with children in African contexts'. In August 2015, Child Theology Africa and the Centre for Contextual Ministry at the University of Pretoria collaborated to host a 3-day consultation on child theology with the same theme.

The vision of Child Theology Africa is to advance a child-friendly continent by doing theology with, for, about and through African children. A critical outcome from the 2015 consultation was the self-critical question of whether we are actually doing theology with children as our collaborators, an insistence that this should be the case if we truly want to do child theology, but also the humbling realisation that we simply lack the methodological knowledge, experience and rigour to do theology responsibly with children as co-constructors or collaborators.

In this article we explore the voice, role and position of the child in church and society, as important and integral to authentic intergenerational church praxis. The article goes further and argues for a contextual methodology of doing child theology, which will partner with children as collaborators in the task of constructing theology. We provide tentative reflections that we anticipate ourselves and others exploring and unpacking more fully in time to come.

It is important to clarify a few presuppositions regarding children that we made when writing this article. Our presuppositions are informed by theoretical research on the agency of children, social scientific methodologies engaging children as participants or co-researchers, empirical research on children's experiences of God, our own understanding of certain biblical–theological imperatives, as well as theoretical work being carried out on the importance of intergenerational ministry, constituting an important theological and anthropological shift in recent years.

- Our first presupposition is that *children should be regarded as collaborators* in doing theology contextually, affirming and inviting the agency of children in helping us to construct useful and indeed liberating child theologies.
- Our second presupposition is that *children should be engaged* as co-researchers in processes that seek to generate knowledge about children. Increasingly there are ethical pitfalls in doing research with children, but we propose that such pitfalls can be overcome in the process of engaging children *not merely as objects but as subjects of research and knowledge generation*.
- Our third presupposition is based on the fact that *children articulate their own experiences with God* in ways that we cannot afford to miss out on in our theological deliberations.
- Our fourth presupposition stems from an understanding of *biblical imperatives* to listen carefully to and engage with children. Jesus' engagement of rabbinic scholars in the synagogue, at a very young age and without his parents being present, is very instructive in this regard.

- Our fifth presupposition is drawn from a shift in scholarship around children and youth ministry, increasingly *advocating for intergenerational models of ministry* but having the child at the core in helping to shape such ministry.

Children as agents: A political–theological affirmation

Our first presupposition is informed by theoretical research being carried out on the agency of the child (Csinos & Roelkharpartain 2011; Hood 2004; May, Stemp & Burns 2011; Ward 2013).Children are not passive absorbers of information but should be acknowledged as active participants within their families, churches and societies. They have individual interests that intrigue them, and both their interests and individual personalities inform their thoughts, feelings, concerns, perceptions and questions about God. Children also have their own ideas and convictions, which are not necessarily aligned to what they have been taught by the adults in their lives. Children furthermore shape spaces and conversations spontaneously and intuitively without necessarily reflecting on it.

Our theological discourses about children are extremely poor in that they mostly fail to invite children's own voices or convictions into theological dialogue. We mostly speak about children without speaking with them. Our child theologies are echoing our own voices and not necessarily the voices of children in our lives, churches or communities. Willmer and White (2013:20) underscore the importance of placing 'a real child in the midst as sign and provocation'. However, even they then resort to a mere metaphoric use of 'the child in our midst' choosing 'not to place an actual child in our circle' (Willmer & White 2013:221). They speak of reflective spaces where child theology is practised as spaces in which '(e)veryone around the table brought known children with them in their hearts and minds'. This would still be to deny, even violate, the agency of children grossly. It is as alarming is doing black theology in spaces where no black voices participate, or liberation theology without the physical presence and offensiveness of the poor.

It is crucial for theology and church to not only acknowledge but also embrace the realisation that the relationship between a child and his or her context is reciprocal. Children are able to influence the adults in their lives just as much as adults may influence children. However, for that to happen, inclusive, hospitable and just spaces should be created where children are invited to be equally present.

When given the necessary safe spaces, children can reflect on new ideas and actually articulate imaginatively. Despite evidence-based studies that accentuated how children are fully human, unique and capable of contributing to the contexts in which they find themselves in, children are still being excluded from ecclesial structures, policies and resources and particularly from the kind of theological reflection that reduces theology to an elitist, adult and

intellectual enterprise. Willmer and White (2013:15) speak of 'overcoming the weight of tradition and professionalism which makes the child marginal to theology'.

In the Child Theology Movement, in which both authors of this article participate, it is also important to have self-critical conversations regarding the agency of children. This makes all the difference epistemologically and methodologically. If we embrace children as agents, we will generate knowledge with children as our 'interlocutors', children's own experiential and lived knowledge will help inform our theological constructs and such epistemological shifts will require us to become much more innovative in discovering, developing and/or practising methodologies for doing theology *with* children.

A recent electronic debate between different theologians concerned with children asked this question: is child theology as we do it exploitative, merely using children, metaphorically speaking, or is child theology about the liberation of children? It has to do with our epistemological point of departure: whether we value the agency and knowledge children bring as potentially liberating and transforming, or whether children remain objects purportedly placed centrally in our theological enquiry but not authentically so placed.

Doing theology with children in ways that are true to contextual theological paradigms would indeed depart from a commitment to the integral liberation of children, as well as the liberation or transformation of the contextual environments in which they find themselves, if such environments are not life-giving, liberating or mediating fullness of life. Doing theology *with* children would cause us to wrestle, to create and open up innovative spaces in which real children are present, offering their real voices, questions, struggles and hopes, 'not as the object of care by theology, but as a source of critical and constructive light for theology' (Willmer & White 2013:15).

Inviting children's knowledge and insight: An epistemological shift

Social scientists in different disciplines have often performed better than theologians to retrieve the knowledge, wisdom and insights of children through hosting hospitable and safe spaces in which children's full participation is invited. The work edited by Christensen and Allison (2012) – *Research with children: Perspectives and practices* – is particularly helpful as a resource book exploring research methodologies with children, epistemological and methodological considerations, and the important links between theory and practice.

Kellett (2005) speaks of a possible new research paradigm involving children actively as researchers, which could contribute significantly 'to our understanding of childhood and children's lives' (Kellett 2005). Woodhead and Faulkner (2008) explored the challenges faced when doing psychological research with children; they ask whether children should be seen as subjects, objects or participants in research. The work

of people like Alldred (1998) and Mayall (2002) challenged hierarchical research with children, assuming the adult as 'expert' instead of affirming the possibility of the child being expert of his or her own life. Moreover, Jane Murray (2011:91) describes how social science research in recent times 'included enquiry on, about, with and by children'. Most of such research was focusing on the participation of children older than eight years as co-researchers or researchers. Murray's (2011:91) focus is, interestingly, on what she calls 'research behaviours presented by children aged 4–8' in the settings of early childhood centres.

Children's participation in research is explored very differently by Powell and Smith (2009:124), considering the participation of children from a rights perspective. They suggest that children's 'participation rights are particularly compromised when the potential child participants are considered vulnerable and the topic of the research is regarded as sensitive'. It raises the potential conflicting ethical view of protecting children against sensitive research versus the child's right to participation in research that might be deemed sensitive by adults. Powell and Smith (2009:124) argue that children should not be viewed 'as vulnerable passive victims, but as social actors who can play a part in the decision to participate in research'.

All of the above approaches represent an epistemological shift, valuing the child as fully human, possessing of agency and voice and therefore able to make a significant and authentic contribution to the research project.

In the South African context, different researchers have carried out incredibly important work in the areas of children and childhood. Deevia Bhana (2005, 2015; see also Govender 2015) is doing extensive research in the areas of gender and child sexuality. She views children as agents making choices and constructs knowledge therefore through ethnographic work and focus groups allowing for deep and engaged conversations with children and teenagers. In her writing the voices of children clearly emerge as speaking for themselves.

Another important resource for child theologians in our context is the Human Sciences and Research Council publication *Growing up in the new South Africa: Childhood and adolescence in post-apartheid Cape Town*. Edited by Bray *et al*. (2012), the research that is reflected here is a combination of rich ethnographic research with quantitative data, reflecting both the environmental factors that affect the lives of children and adolescents and also the agency that they themselves practise.

A crucial and urgent challenge for those engaging in constructing child theologies is to open up innovative spaces in which children can participate as co-researchers and in which their knowledge and insights can be invited to help construct new ways of knowing together. Obviously such an approach needs very careful attention to ethical considerations, the (im)maturity levels of children and the potential of such relationships to be hierarchical/patriarchal by definition, if not very intentionally deconstructed. At the

same time however, and equally important for consideration, is the injustice and unethical practice of excluding children's voices in research that is about them.

Children's experiences with/of God: A challenge to our spiritualities

Our third presupposition deals with children's own articulated experiences with and of God and with children's own spiritual journeys and spiritual development. This third presupposition of ours is informed by empirical research that reflects on how children experience God (Csinos & Roelkharpartain 2011; Hood 2004; May *et al*. 2011; Ward 2013).

Children regularly speak of God's presence in their lives. They do this by expressing their faith in God, regularly talking with God and often associating God with play. Reflections on children's drawings enable verbal expression of how they view God and also how they shape their faith. Children experience God through words, emotion, symbols and actions. They use the symbols available to them to convey their God-images. Some of these are drawings that enable their imagination, creativity and exploration. These drawings can be used as powerful metaphors of how children understand who God is. Children's drawings, in contrast, often describe their inner turmoil, often unfolding like a cartoon series, with forces of evil and good contending for favour, and God (or Jesus) often emerging as the hero slaying the evil monsters.

In terms of worship, despite there being a growing awareness of the important role children can play in the worshipping experience, children are still not viewed as full participants. Csinos and Roelkarphartin (2011) discuss several metaphors connected to children's spirituality that are relevant to our discussion on how children view worship. The *assembly line* metaphor describes children as waiting for certain spiritual components before they can fully participate in spiritual matters. The *greenhouse* metaphor advocates that the child must pass through certain developmental stages before becoming active agents involved in their spiritual formation. The *pilgrim* metaphor promotes the idea that children, like adults, are travelling through the world as capable as adults of making meaning of their spiritual experiences. This metaphor acknowledges that children are spiritual beings and have the capacity to experience and reflect on God.

In the past two decades different movements have emerged that explore children's spiritualities from different perspectives. The International Association for Children's Spirituality (2015) has hosted annual conferences on child spirituality since 2000. They also have their own academic journal – the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*.

Their purpose is to promote and support research and practice in relation to children's spirituality, within education and wider contexts of children's care and well-being.

Their approach is not from a narrow religious or Christian perspective. They see spirituality 'broadly and inclusively as having relation to the religious and beyond the religious'. They explore holistic understandings of and approaches to children's spirituality and development, drawing from the insights of various disciplines and communities.

In contrast, the Society for Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives (n.d.), has a more specific interest in understanding the spirituality of children growing up within Christian environments. They host conferences every three years, bringing together academics and practitioners 'to discuss child theology, best practices, sociological research, and ministry implications for nurturing children's spiritual formation'. They consider how best to welcome and support children on their spiritual journeys.

What both these movements strongly affirm is the reality of children's spirituality and how closely it relates to their personal development. What is missing, though, apart from anecdotes, narratives or metaphors retrieved by the adults, remains the presence, voices and disruptions of children themselves. We mostly still theologise and theorise over, about and for children, without children being with us in new and hospitable spaces, to be able to share their own experiences, knowledge and insights first-hand.

An intergenerational approach to ministry usually also departs from an embrace of children's own spiritual journeys and experiences with God (Martineaux, Weber & Kehrwald 2008). With that as the basis, intergenerational churches would go to lengths to create spaces inviting and honouring diverse spiritualities and journeys in the faith community. Empirical research (Allen & Ross 2012; Martineaux *et al.* 2008) attests to the fact that most intergenerational churches are intentional about integrating different generations from their conception. One of the ways in which this is reflected is in how these churches place the Eucharist at the centre of their ministry. Although serving children communion is still contentious in many circles, the centrality of Jesus' invitation to welcome children has been used by advocates of children's communion to also welcome them, not only at the table but as equals in the heart of an intergenerational worshipping community (Vanderwell 2008).

Smaller churches often do better with fostering intergenerational models of ministry than larger churches. Larger churches are more inclined to remove children into separate spaces during worship services, denying the gift of the child with us.

The physical spaces of churches are important in how far they mediate intergenerational inclusivity. In one study, media usage in worship services was compared with the use of media in children's ministry (May *et al.* 2011:8–12); the authors reflected on the amount of media used in worship service and paralleled this to the media used in children's ministry. Churches that value intergenerational interaction and participation ensure the use of inclusive media accessible to children as full participants. This is based on the assertion that children have their own authentic experiences of God and spiritual development and are therefore invited to participate fully in the worship experience too.

Biblical imperatives placing children centrally: A theological priority

A further presupposition that we depart from in this article is the presence of certain, at least to our understanding, biblical imperatives to carefully listen to and engage with children.

Children learn and are taught best in the contexts of life events and through engagement with adults (Dt 11:18–21 & 31:12–13). Children's learning occurs by being present in, and not separated from, the faith community (2 Chr 20:13; Ezr 10:1; Neh 12:43). In the case of Jesus, he was not just a passive listener and learner, but we find the striking account of Jesus in the temple (re)interpreting scriptures for eminent scholars, indeed subverting hierarchical relationships that relegate children to inferior positions of silent or passive bystanders. It is a challenge to our theological and ecclesial spaces and the lack of invitation to children to share their own wisdom, knowledge and experiences within the faith community. These few biblical accounts suggest communal and collective spaces where different generations will share deeply but with children at the core.

We also sense from biblical accounts that God deeply values children (De Beer 2006), speaking to the hearts of children (Ps 8:2), placing children centrally in the presence of Jesus (Mk 10:13–16) and letting children acknowledge who Jesus was (Mt 21:12–16). Biblical history continuously affirms that children occupied an important place as the people of God. The prophet Joel assigns great value to the potential prophetic insights and visions that children and young people might share, while the prophet Isaiah (11:6) envisions that a child shall lead God's people. Children such as Joseph and Samuel are called with clear vocations outlined for them.

In history countless events can be named where children indeed led the way. In Terezin, a 'Jewish city' built by the Nazis near Prague as a pit stop before the death camps, children exhibited amazing courage and creativity in building their lives, although they faced imminent death. And exactly 40 years ago, in June 1976, it was young schoolchildren leading the way in Soweto to challenge apartheid education and the forceful use of Afrikaans as dominant medium of instruction.

German theologian Jürgen Moltmann (1983:28–37), in a moving sermon, describes 'the disarming child':

> The kingdom of peace comes through a child, and liberation is bestowed on the people who become as children: disarmingly defenceless, disarming through their defencelessness, and making others defenceless because they themselves are so disarming. (Moltmann 1983:33)

The utter defenceless of this child in our midst at first disarms but then disrupts, as we with our carefully constructed theological discourses and sophisticated political treatises do not know how to handle the child (De Beer 2006):

> After the prophet's mighty visions of the destruction of all power and the forceful annihilation of all coercion, we are now suddenly face to face with this inconspicuous child. It sounds so paradoxical that some interpreters have assumed that this is a later interpolation. The prisoners who have to fight for their rights also find it difficult to understand how this child can help them. But it is really quite logical. (Moltmann 1983:33)

It is precisely in the defencelessness of the child that the child assumes centre stage in disrupting the status quo, offering the possibility of radically new beginnings:

> For what the prophet says about the eternal peace of God which satisfied our longings can only come to meet us, whether we are frightened slaves or aggressive masters, in the form of the child. A child is defenceless. A child is innocent. A child is the beginning of a new life. His defenceless makes our armaments superfluous. We can put away our rifles and open our clenched fists. His innocence redeems us from the curse of the evil act which is bound to breed even more evil. We no longer have to go on like this. (Moltmann 1983:33)

Shifts towards intergenerational approaches to ministry: A shift in ecclesial or community praxis

The fifth presupposition draws from a shift in scholarship around children and youth ministry, and advocates for *intergenerational models of ministry*. An intergenerational shift assumes the equal importance of children as part of the household of faith, and not as marginal members (Glassford & Barger-Elliott 2011). It asserts the importance of having the child at the core of designing and developing intergenerational approaches (Goplin *et al.* 2001), as children need to help shape such ministry for it to be authentic, credible and meaningful. Bhakiaraj (2014:123–133) emphasises the inclusivity of God's household, strongly asserting that the 'household of God' should be understood as more than just a metaphor (2014:132). He laments the way in which children, 'then and now … are treated as something less than equal in the household of God' (Bhakiaraj 2014:127). Understanding the household of God as an intergenerational community (Bhakiaraj 2014:129), he then suggests that children can deepen our theology and missional ecclesiology through their full participation in the household, offering their own experiences and insights.

Grobbelaar (2008, 2012) has contributed significantly to placing an intergenerational understanding of children's ministry on the South African and African agenda, first in his doctoral thesis and later in sole or co-published articles with other local child theologians. Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2013) critique the kind of Christian communities in which 'children are passive and subordinate rather than active participants, depriving them of a sense of purpose and involvement'. In such communities, they argue, 'children are not the only ones

to lose out … Adults need the children as much as the children need them'.

Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2013) state it even stronger theologically when they argue: 'Jesus' instruction to '"welcome the little ones" held a blessing not only for the "guests," but even more so for the "hosts," because it would be an opportunity to receive Jesus!' Denying the child in our midst, as a central and active participant, might mean to deny Jesus. Grobbelaar's methodology (2012:6) for doing theology is shaped by this understanding: that the child in our midst, and in this case more specifically the children of Africa, 'can help us all to see our theology in a new way'. This is the hermeneutical lens through which he views the world.

Conceptualising the term *intergenerational*

According to Villar (2007) and White (1988), anything that is intergenerational includes members of two or more different generations having some degree of relationship developed through cooperative interaction to achieve common goals. It is important to note that the relationships are mutually influential, including the possible contributions children can make.

An understanding of the household of God as intergenerational requires of us to revisit our understandings of faith formation and discipleship (Martineau *et al.* 2008). In the Hebrew scriptures the responsibility of passing on the tenets of the faith to children lies primarily with the older generations (Dt 6:4–6). In an intergenerational approach to ministry it is assumed that should this happen – faith should be passed on from older to younger generations – then through communal faith formation and discipleship in the household of faith, younger people over time will start to reciprocate. Seibel and Nel (2010:1) argue that the church as an intergenerational community is evident retrospective reflection and hopeful expectation. As an eschatological community called to bear witness to the already, but not yet, reign of God, the church must strive to practise what the New Testament frequently describes as 'patient endurance'. These scholars add that the church has the task of transmitting its faith tradition from one generation to the next. Children and youth in the Hebrew scriptures were socialised into the faith community. It was a communal, collective experience taking place as they journeyed. If the older generation seizes this practice or discipline of telling stories of God's care and faithfulness (Jdg 2:10), formation and discipleship in the household of faith will discontinue. Intergenerational models of ministry will invite the faith experiences of young and old, allowing for mutuality to develop and deepen in the household.

This article suggests that the household of God as intergenerational body provides spontaneous and natural spaces for faith stories to be shared, for formation to take place, for mutuality to develop in communal relationships.

However, certain tensions have to be considered when contemplating intergenerational ministry (Snailum, 2012; Glassford & Barger-Elliot 2011). The division between children and young people on the one hand and senior adults on the other has led to disintegrated ministries and perpetual separation in the household of faith. Many churches focus on implementing differentiated programmes, being quite convinced that, for adults to grow and mature in Christ, they need to be free of childcare responsibilities, and furthermore for children to develop properly they need to experience age-appropriate activities. Many churches have arrived at a place believing that separating generations is not only convenient but also educationally and developmentally the most appropriate (Snailum 2012:176). Other tensions include an over-reliance on selective developmental theories arguing for generational differentiation, informing differentiated ministries; cultural constructs that do not value the importance of children's voices in so-called adult discussions; an uncritical embrace of age-based ministries as we have inherited them; and the myth of children not being capable of spiritual maturity as adults are.

Another challenge is the accessibility of and reliance on information that is available virtually in our postmodern society, resulting in communities being less reliant on passing on information in the household of faith. Previously there was much more reliance on relating stories from the past as a reliable guide in constructing identity. Adults played the major and authoritative role in this regard, passing information – and faith – from generation to generation. For many adults and church leaders in particular, there is discomfort in the fact that children now also have access to various other sources of information beyond their parents or the church.

It brings with it a sense that community and involvement in community are optional, based on individual needs only, and individualism outweighs the desire for and belonging to community. Children grow up without sensing a need to be part of a faith community. Partly this is caused by differentiated ministries, focusing on the individual needs of different groups, without celebrating the household of God in its fullness. Today many churches are focussing on young adults because they have realised that there is a lack of faith formation in earlier generations that has impacted on the present fragmented state of the church.

Establishing an intergenerational ministry

In this section we would simply offer a few practical suggestions for constructing an intergenerational ministry (May *et al.* 2011; Snailum 2012).

- For an intergenerational ministry to be established, a congregation – members and leaders – needs to embrace intergenerational community as a core value (Meyers 2006). The vision, mission, purpose and activities of the church need to reflect an assimilation of young generations into the church today, not some day in the future. This

requires a significant paradigm shift, necessitating that the whole congregation embodies intergenerational values as the fully inclusive and equal household of God, instead of merely adopting the latest fad in ministry thinking. Grobbelaar (2008:350) and Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2013) speak of the required paradigmatic shift as a shift from an *educational paradigm* to a *paradigm of hospitality*, of warm and deep welcome and inclusion, of an embrace of the household of God as a hospitable and inclusive household.

- An intergenerational approach does not necessarily mean dissolving all age-specific ministries. An intergenerational approach suggests that sustainable faith formation occurs in an intergenerational community, without which young people grow up being 'out of church' (Meyers 2006). Departing from this conviction still provides space for age-specific ministries, but now as part of a web or network of relationships that includes peers as well as members of other generations. Seibel and Nel (2010:4–6) suggest additional ways a church can bridge the intergenerational gap that exists, namely a commitment of older church members to view new generations not as competitors but as collaborators in shaping the tradition; commitment of older church members to share resources with these younger generations and those who come after them; willingness to listen to the child and a commitment to empower and equip them to contribute actively to leadership and decision-making processes; granting them and those who come after them the freedom to influence the shape of the congregation's tradition and even to nurture their own spiritual traditions and adopting a 'discipline of dialogue' that encourages members of all generations to try to see things from one another's viewpoint. These ways also correlate to the practical suggestions given from the empirical studies mentioned above.

- All leaders in such a community are vested in the process of building up an intergenerational household of faith, not only a designated elder or leader. If that is the case, the leaders collectively and individually help educate the community in the direction of becoming a truly intergenerational expression of faith. Such an educational process should serve to provide the biblical basis for intergenerational community, build an understanding of the value of intergenerational communities for fostering learning and spiritual formation, and help all members to understand the developmental needs of various age groups within this inclusive intergenerational household of faith (Martineau *et al.* 2008).

- Creating an intergenerational community calls for a change in the ethos and traditional structures of a church. It creates a potential tension between those who appreciate traditional ways of doing church and those who seek to be more relevant for the postmodern challenges that churches currently face. Local faith communities should enter into processes of careful discernment, starting with an assessment of where they are at, why there might be a need to become an intentionally intergenerational community, how open the congregation is to change and who the influential people might be that could help facilitate or negotiate the paradigm shift.

- Once the community discerns together that it would like to become intentionally intergenerational, it needs to move ahead strategically. A shared goal of maturity in Christ, an intentionality about journeys of discipleship towards such maturity with all age groups, and the avoidance of big programme changes need to be three clear objectives running concurrently. If there are programmes, they need to be assessed in terms of their theological value for children and not merely as forms of entertainment.
- The process of building an intergenerational community should not seek to dissolve generational differences but rather to honour and preserve the uniqueness of each generation. Intergenerational relationships must extend beyond the generations represented by parents and youth. Those generations feeling alienated or forgotten have meaningful roles to play as role models and mentors to younger generations. Determining their unique needs is just as important – and complex – as determining the needs of children or young people.

Implications of intergenerational faith communities for doing child theology

The insistence of child theology on the agency of children, the authenticity of children's spirituality and the biblical imperative of placing the child in our midst pave the way for a shift towards intergenerational ministry (Glassford & Barger-Elliott 2011). At the same time, almost in a cyclical manner, intergenerational faith communities raise questions of child theology.

Adults need to reflect self-critically on the ways in which their own experiences are shaping what they tell children about God. There is transformative power in talking *with* children and not merely *to* them. By placing greater emphasis on listening to children and not merely dismissing children's ideas, such self-critical, reflective and mutually liberating spaces can be constructed (May *et al.* 2011).

Faith formation as socialisation implies a willingness from all generations to spend time with and learn from each other. Ministry *with* children implies that the adult serves as a guide and not a teacher in the traditional sense of the word. Authentic relationships between both child and adult, as believers, are valued and therefore learning can also occur mutually and reciprocally.

Westerhoff (1976) states the following:

> True community necessitates the presence and interaction of three generations. Too often the church lacks the third generation or sets generations apart. Remember that the first generation is the generation of memory, and without its presence the other two generations are locked into an existential present. While the first generation is potentially the generation of vision, it is not possible to have visions without a memory and memory is supplied by the third generation. The second generation is the generation of the present. When it is combined with the generation of memory and vision it functions to confront the community with reality, but left to itself and the present, life becomes intolerable and meaningless. (p. 53)

Many churches report that children are actually the motivating factor for young adults returning to church. How children communicate and what they value in relationships therefore needs to be taken very seriously, as their agency can help birth a new paradigm. At the same time, however, the memory of the first generation needs to be sustained, as it helps to inform visions for new generations.

Requiring of children and youth to attend something like the main worship service, for the sake of intergenerationality, without actively integrating them into the worshipping experience by calling them into the midst, inviting their voices or confirming their agency and vocation, will fall short of creating truly intergenerational community (Glassford & Barger-Elliott 2011). Child theologies advocating intergenerational ministry need to engage in the retrieval, design or proposal of innovative models that will demonstrate intergenerational community and worship very concretely.

A commitment to intergenerational ministry will shape a shared ecclesial praxis. Later in this article we reflect on the possible use of the praxis cycle as a contextual theological method that can help foster a highly inclusive and participating intergenerational community. A shared ecclesial praxis means the creation of shared spaces where people from different generations can act together and reflect together on their faith actions. Such spaces can allow for sharing of faith and ministry experiences and allow for feedback to each other. It could also be spaces in which biblical, communal, traditional or family stories can be retrieved, told and retold, as part of the process of faith formation as well as fostering an intergenerational faith community. In such spaces, older and younger generations will engage each other, practise care and validate each other for their youthful aspirations or their years of impact, respectively.

Against this backdrop, we conclude this section with a few questions. Can we truly integrate children to be a central part of an intergenerational faith community or will they need to be re-evangelised as adults because of the lack of appropriate faith formation and integration as children? Can churches that place more emphasis on teaching and preaching – where communication mostly flows from adults to children and from pulpit to pews – than on the sacramental, where bread is broken together and God's presence experienced communally, achieve intergenerational cohesiveness? Or is it necessary to revisit our ecclesial structures even more fundamentally? What role do Christian symbols play and does the absence of Christian symbols make a difference to the faith formation of a child?

Doing theology with children in the South African context: Specific challenges

The post-apartheid South African context presents unique challenges in terms of doing theology with children in intergenerational spaces. The previous section focused on

intergenerational households of faith, referring to paradigm shifts within established local faith communities. However, assuming that most children are entering our churches would be a very wrong assumption. Doing theology with children in (South) African contexts should presuppose the task of also doing theology outside known ecclesial spaces, in places where children are most at risk and their voices completely muted (De Beer 2006). How can we foster intergenerational households of faith, also bridging the divide between the church as institution and local neighbourhoods? Is there not a call for the creation of new (or fresh) expressions of church amidst some of the most challenging neighbourhoods in ways that will foster intergenerational conversation, formation, sharing and justice, authentically and from inception?

Sixty-four per cent of South Africa's 11.9 million children live in income poverty (Children's Institute 2010). Moreover, 96% of children living in poverty are black children. Furthermore, 1.7 million children (9% of all South African children) live in informal settlements or backyard shacks. For these children, access to toilets or running water at home is a rare luxury. In 2010 662 000 children were out of school, mainly because of financial reasons (Statistics South Africa 2010). In addition, the quality of education in rural and urban township schools is often completely inferior to former white schools in urban and suburban areas.

One in eight children living with HIV globally can be found in South Africa (UNAIDS 2010), and 1.9 million children in South Africa have lost one or both parents as a result of AIDS.

In 2009/2010 there were 56 500 cases of violent crime against children reported, yet there might be thousands of cases going unreported. Sexual violence against children is rife and often the hidden narrative in communities. Moreover, at-risk children are mostly targeted for recruitment into violent gangs:

> Many children and teens being recruited into gangs on the Cape Flats come from abusive homes or have experienced neglect. The socio-economic circumstances in the suburbs in which these gangs operate are exactly what allow these gangs to prosper as youth seek social protection. (Zinn 2014)

Children even form gangs to solicit social protection against violence in their own communities (Swingler 2014), and children as young as 14 years of age are arrested for gang-related murders.

These figures are staggering. What will happen to 662 000 children who are out of school, growing into unemployed young people, hungry and frustrated with the lack of access to the many freedoms promised? Behind every one of these thousands of children is a boy child or girl child made in God's image, with a name, a dream, or shattered dreams, joys and fears and hopes. They have voices and experiences.

> The actual child can get lost in statistics, stereotypes, ideal types, in theory and organized advocacy and action, even in sentimentality and nostalgia. How could these traps be avoided? (Willmer & White 2013:19)

How does the church make sense of a whole generation of children who will grow up with an extremely bleak, if any, future?

The reality of a nation experiencing growing socio-economic inequality is that some children are birthed into poverty and others into privilege. It becomes a serious theological question about the image of God in every child, the humanity and dignity of poor and wealthy children, the ways in which they differently socialise, what they regard as priorities, how they grow up as the 'lamb and the wolf' never to lie together, with certain mental images and racial preoccupations, and a certain consciousness shaped or biased by their location.

Even when the South African church engages children theologically, it is often from within the narrow enclaves of suburban church life, excluding the vast realities of suffering, abandonment and exclusion hundreds of thousands of children face.

How should we do theology with children who are orphaned or hungry? How should we do theology with children detained for being on the wrong side of the law? How do we speak about God with children who have experienced sexual violence at the hands of a trusted adult? How do we read the Bible with teenagers initiated into the violence of gangs on the Cape Flats and in other communities spanning our country? Entering the life spaces of children, not as adult 'experts' but as humble not-knowing companions, will truly disrupt, if not shatter, our neat theologies. And it should.

The challenge to negotiate identity and diversity for children growing up differently, exposed to violence from a young age and often being victims of abandonment or neglect is a challenge to also be considered theologically. Multicultural churches face the challenge to construct appropriate language, worship and practices that are inclusive and just, not allowing dominant language or cultural expressions to dictate, and deeply sensitive for the different life circumstances children bring with them into the worshipping space. How do we accompany children's faith formation in ways that simultaneously foster within them a deep consciousness for social justice and equality rooted in the dignity of all people, and in ways that can help children to socialise beyond the socio-economic and racial barriers that still keep them apart?

Doing theology with children in the South African context: A praxis approach

The central thrust of this article, informed by its five presuppositions, is to affirm the agency of children,

and based on that to then propose the necessity of doing theology *with* children as collaborators in intergenerational communities of faith. It presents a threefold invitation: to accept, invite and embrace the agency of children; to embark on journeys of doing (constructing) theology with children as collaborators; and to consider and embrace a shift towards intergenerational models of ministry that will place children at the core of the community, hearing their voices together with the multiplicity of voices that are the household of faith.

In this section we would like to briefly consider the use of the praxis cycle (see Figure 1), as developed and proposed by Holland and Henriot (1984), as an approach and method for doing theology collaboratively with children. The praxis cycle is a method for doing theology contextually, going through four distinct moments of insertion/immersion, socio-ecclesial analysis, theological reflection, and planning for action. It has emerged from within poor communities in Latin America where people try to make sense of their own realities together, in small communities, reading the Bible in context, and discerning actions to be taken in order to possibly transform their realities. It is a process deeply rooted in the 'lived faith' of people, discerning contextually, biblically and practically from within their own faith experiences, but in the direction of transformation and justice. The following diagram captures the praxis cycle with its distinct moments.

Although the praxis cycle has taken slightly different forms over time (see Cochrane, De Gruchy & Petersen 1991; Kritzinger 2008), the essence of the method remains with a strong emphasis on action-reflection, flowing from a 'lived faith', rooted in local immersions, vigorous in its socio-ecclesial analysis and geared towards collective action.
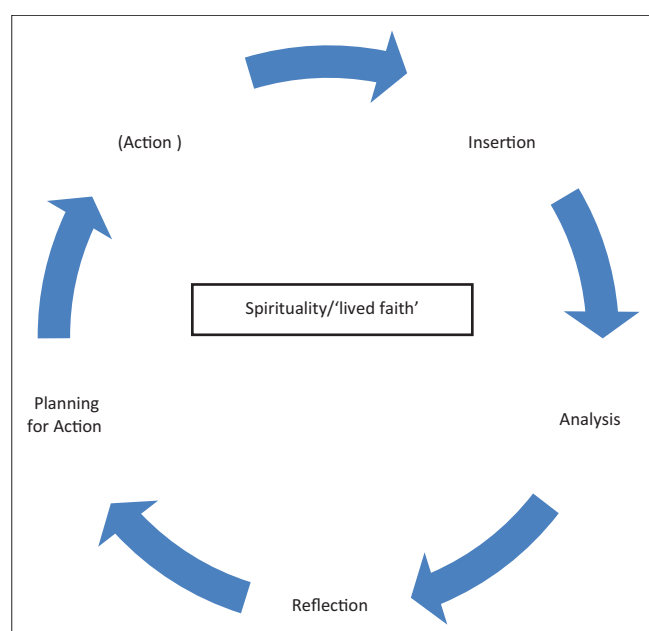
Source: Developed and proposed by Holland and Henriot (1984)
FIGURE 1: Praxis cycle.

Insertion or immersion: In the first moment, people would describe their realities ('thick description') without necessarily analysing it, relating what is happening contextually (see Osmer 2008) and ecclesially.

Analysis: In the second moment, people would now analyse their realities, asking why it is happening, what the systemic or institutional or personal causes might be, or discerning the forces creating the conditions people experience. This could also be thought of as *socio-ecclesial analysis*, as people would analyse both the societal realities they find themselves in but also chart the ecclesial landscape. Who are the churches? How does the church respond to social realities? What are churches not doing?

Reflection: In the third moment, people would now reflect on their immersion and analysis from a theological or biblical perspective, asking whether there are biblical sources that could assist them in making sense of their contexts, or in starting to imagine alternative or preferred realities. It could also be considered as the moment of constructing a theological vision together for their situation.

Planning for action: The fourth moment is moving the group beyond a 'paralysis of analysis' to now discern possible actions, aligned to the emerging theological vision and responding concretely to the challenges described in the moments of insertion and analysis.

Action: The whole process of the praxis cycle is geared towards collective or personal action. The group or people in the group would implement what they discerned together and this becomes part of the basis of their reflection when they next gather for reflection.

Spirituality or 'lived faith': The praxis cycle is steeped in spirituality or, as Gutierrez describes it, the 'lived faith' of a people. A lived faith, Gutierrez says, is the first step in doing theology whilst theological reflection is only the second step. Taking Gutierrez seriously, then, means that children are quite actively engaged in the first step of doing theology by virtue of a lived faith that they experience, sing about and pray about.

The cycle is open-ended, assuming an ongoing dance of action–reflection growing out of people's lived faith, deep local immersion and ongoing biblical and theological reflection, collectively drawn to transformation.

In the context of this article we now suggest the use of this cycle as one possible method for hosting or holding collaborative intergenerational spaces in which we can do theology together, with children participating as agents. It could also serve as a bridge between faith communities and their surrounding neighbourhoods, connecting with the contextual realities of children, as described in the previous section and collaborating with children in conceiving appropriate responses to such realities.

How would it be if in a place like Manenberg on the Cape Flats, where gang violence often erupts and children are hugely at risk, intergenerational communities of faith – including children at their core – could do theology together as a subversive act of working out their own liberation in partnership with God's spirit? We imagine small communities of 12–15 people, scattered all over Manenberg, made up of children, teenagers, young adults, senior adults and elderly people – considering, for example, the challenges of safe recreational spaces in Manenberg theologically. Their collective insertion as people living and growing up in Manenberg – their analysis of the situation (how it is, how it has become and why it is perpetuating itself); retrieving sources of faith and fostering a theological vision of what ought to be; and discerning steps of how the church as intergenerational community can engage the city, local urban spaces and each other to create safe and vibrant recreational spaces – could indeed become a shared and truly liberationist ecclesial or community praxis.

Or can this be done in the inner city of Pretoria where a number of local faith communities are racially, economically and generationally as diverse as South Africa's population? How would it be if local intergenerational communities created spaces in which the praxis cycle could become a living method for doing theology and ministry together – children, youth and adults, together with homeless members of the community, considering ways in which homelessness could be addressed by a local church? Their collective insertion in the inner city, their reading of the streets and parks where homeless people congregate, their theological reflection in which Jesus identifies himself as the homeless stranger to whom we did not give shelter, and their tentative but bold steps to open up the church to offer warm hospitality could once again be a shared and liberationist ecclesial or community praxis in which children no doubt could play a central part. Instead of children being sheltered from homeless people – which suburban theologies often do by design or by neglect – it is often children who notice the homeless man or woman and their exclusion and children who may ask why we cannot open our hearts and hands for the stranger. We desperately need the innocence of a child in our midst, to disarm and disrupt our impotent theologies, to turn the intergenerational household of God upside down, as it was always meant to be.

Conclusion

In this article we argued for an intergenerational approach to ministry, in which children participate as collaborators in doing theology together. We departed from five interconnected presuppositions: the agency of children as a political theological affirmation; the knowledge and insights of children encouraging an epistemological shift; children's authentic experiences with God and children's spiritualities; biblical imperatives placing children at the core theologically; and a paradigmatic shift in discourses about ministry with children and youth towards a more intergenerational approach. We unpacked the nature of an intergenerational

approach conceptually and made tentative suggestions as to the establishment of an intergenerational approach, considering also potential challenges.

We then placed the conversation in the broader context of South Africa, exploring some of the particular challenges children are facing in our communities. Implicit to this reflection is the fact that we might have to create intergenerational spaces for doing theology inside the church but also in communities with children and others who might not attend our churches. In the last section we explored the possibility of using the praxis cycle as a method for doing theology together, as intergenerational households of faith, with children as collaborators.

Doing theology *with* children in our midst – inviting their voices, concerns, dreams and struggles and learning to see the world and God through their eyes – might initially disrupt or disarm our theologies and the violent ways of excluding some. However, once we learn to engage in such a way, there is a good chance that the church – children and adults alike – and our theologies could be liberated, as we discern 'the disarming child' among us.

Acknowledgements

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