



# Living in the Shadow of the Manger: Mission, Ecumenism, and the State of the World's Children

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**I**N 1994, MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN, FOUNDER OF THE CHILDREN'S DEFENSE FUND, noted that Christian churches should be the moral locomotives engaging the conscience of nations with regard to the needs of children.<sup>1</sup> Instead, she observed, they are often the cabooses. Edelman's critical assessment of the situation is not a condemnation. It is a call to action and accountability directed to individuals and communities who identify themselves as Christian. For those of us interested in addressing the challenges facing mission and ecumenism at the close of the twentieth century, this call is particularly relevant. As the new millennium approaches, Edelman's commentary dares Christian churches to deal honestly with

<sup>1</sup>Marian Wright Edelman, "The Children We Have in Trust," *Sojourner's Magazine* (April 1994) 17.

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*In the absence of sustained ecumenical reflection on the place of children as subjects of Christian mission, churches desiring to participate more fully in God's mission may lack the commitment and consensus needed to respond to a religious crisis of unprecedented missiological urgency: the state of the world's children.*

an unsettling question: Have infants and children become the “neglected priority” of mission?<sup>2</sup>

For several years I have been involved in national and international endeavors committed to the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>3</sup> Antecedents to this involvement included my own efforts as a child to act as an advocate for my younger sister who was born with Down’s syndrome. As a young adult, my commitment to children deepened as I became more familiar with the life and death struggles of middle-grade students in the inner city of Chicago. My years of service as a lay missionary in the rural interior of Brazil opened my eyes to the harsh realities of infant mortality, malnutrition, child labor, internal migration, and the extermination of street children by death squads. Upon my return to the United States, my ministry as chaplain in Chicago’s juvenile detention center brought me face to face with children accused of theft, arson, sexual assault, drug trafficking, prostitution, and murder. My memories of their attempts to find God and give meaning to their lives in the context of a children’s jail continue to challenge me as a woman, a Christian, and a theologian.

In the brief reflections that follow, I invite the reader to ponder three questions that go to the very heart of Christian life and practice in a postmodern world: What does it mean to stand with children? What does it mean to live in the shadow of the manger? What does it mean to educate for mission and ecumenism as we approach the twenty-first century? Our responses to these questions may plant the seeds of missionary consciousness and ecumenical vision in the hearts and minds of the next generation.

## I. STANDING WITH CHILDREN

In 1993, I became involved in the Project on Religion and Human Rights, an international initiative that was envisioned by the Right Reverend Paul Moore, Jr. and the now deceased Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer. As a member of an international consultation committee dealing with the “Positive Resources of Religions for Human Rights,” I became aware of a wide variety of lenses through which to see the complexities and controversies surrounding the competing and often conflicting claims of religious institutions and human rights organizations.<sup>4</sup> Though it came as no surprise to me to find children’s issues consistently subordinated to or subsumed by other social agendas and moral concerns, I began to see how the marginalization of children’s rights within the larger arena of human rights was symptomatic of more than the invisibility and silencing of children in a world that is largely constructed and controlled by adults. At issue was the generalized

<sup>2</sup>See Bryant Myers, “State of the World’s Children: Critical Challenge to Christian Mission,” *International Bulletin for Missionary Research* 18/3 (1994) 98-102.

<sup>3</sup>See UNICEF, *First Call For Children: World Declaration and Plan of Action from the World Summit for Children and Convention on the Rights of the Child* (New York: UNICEF, 1990).

<sup>4</sup>See Harvey Cox and Arvind Sharma, “Positive Resources of Religion for Human Rights,” in *Religion and Human Rights*, ed. John Kelsay and Sumner B. Twiss (New York: The Project on Religion and Human Rights, 1994) 61-80.

failure, inability, or refusal of societies to come to terms with the profound connection between relationships and responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> It became clear to me that where there is no real relationship with and, even worse, no real desire or perceived need for investing in infants and children, there may be no common ground for probing a commitment to the next generation, much less sustaining one.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the World Council of Churches and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Without diminishing in any way my acknowledgment of the influence that both have exerted on the state of the world, I am mindful of the fact that another significant anniversary goes unnoticed. Seventy-five years ago, the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, as drafted by Eglantyne Jebb, was presented to the League of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland.<sup>6</sup> For decades, this declaration has served as the foundation for subsequent documents on children's rights, including the most recent United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). For Christians interested in understanding more fully the ways in which mission, ecumenism, and human rights are interconnected, particularly with regard to transnational efforts on behalf of infants and children, the history of this lesser known document, its author, and the movement with which it was identified warrants our attention as an instructive case study.

In the aftermath of World War I, the plight of infants and children throughout the devastated regions of Europe haunted nations and peoples. What was the future of a world where adults lost sight of their responsibility for children not their own? In 1919, Eglantyne Jebb, a political activist, a social reformer, a feminist, and a protestant, was arrested in London. Her crime: distributing leaflets carrying the picture of a starving Austrian child. As founder of what would become a worldwide movement known as Save the Children, Jebb was unrelenting in her appeals to gain support for efforts to restore the human dignity of children betrayed and brutalized by the forces of destruction and revenge. Given the times, it would have surprised no one if the Vatican had ignored Jebb's efforts and appeals, preferring instead to support its own distinctively Roman Catholic initiatives. Governed by the internal logic of church polity, observers would have expected Pope Benedict XV to avoid the predictable judgments of ecclesiastical zealots known for their acerbic criticisms of potentially compromising allegiances. Contrary to the logic of polity, however, he embraced the logic of the gospel.

In the 1919 encyclical "On the Children of Central Europe," Pope Benedict exhorted all patriarchs, primates, archbishops, bishops, and other local ordinaries to collect alms for the support of children ravaged by war. He further encouraged church leaders to include the children of their respective dioceses in this effort as well. Referring to himself as the "common father," Benedict concluded the encyclical with these words:

With all diligence in your power see [to it] that the money thus collected is sent

<sup>5</sup>Penelope Leach, *Children First: What Society Must Do—and Is Not Doing—for Children Today* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

<sup>6</sup>Annual Report, "Children and Women First" (Westport, CT: Save the Children, 1994) 7.

either to Us or to the "Save the Children Fund," which We have before mentioned.<sup>7</sup>

The following year, Pope Benedict wrote a second encyclical on the same subject, reiterating his previous appeal and recommendation.

This case illustrates an important and timely lesson, namely, where a child's right to care is genuinely valued and upheld above all else, churches and church leaders must make every effort to collaborate with other institutions and organizations, even when it means transcending the theological and ideological boundaries that distinguish and divide. To the extent that religious leaders and communities of faith play decisive roles in lobbying for and against policies that determine the state of the world's children for better and for worse, this case is particularly instructive for our own time.

When, as followers of Jesus Christ, we allow the gospel to illumine our understanding of the *missio Dei*, we discover that the preeminence of children in the reign of God is as unambiguous as the mandate to care for them and to include them in our midst. Standing with children is not an option for Christian congregations.<sup>8</sup> It is a non-negotiable and more. It is the criterion of discipleship and stewardship. To be more concrete, any ecumenical effort to address the "neglected priority" of Christian mission must include more than adult perspectives on the state of the world's children.<sup>9</sup> It must include and take seriously children's perceptions of what it means to share in the mission of Jesus Christ.

## II. LIVING IN THE SHADOW OF THE MANGER

I believe there is a connection between how we think theologically about God coming in the form of a child and how Christian communities—adults and children together—regard and respond to the needs of infants and children. It also seems to me that, at its best, the Christian tradition may be uniquely positioned to offer leadership in affirming the primacy of the child (Matt 18:1-5). Given the state of our world and our churches, we are called upon to respond to many unsettling and unexpected questions. As the state of the world's children continues to disclose patterns of neglect, abuse, indifference, and resentment, Christians committed to mission and ecumenism must ask ourselves the following question: Are we setting our energies at the service of infants and children with the same courage, passion, and tenacity that we have afforded other groups who have held us accountable to follow the example of Jesus? If no, why not? If yes, what more can we do? Could it be that we have as many lessons to learn from a theology of the manger as from a theology of the cross?

In a sermon on Matthew 21, Augustine provides us with an interesting insight into the relationship between the God who comes to us as a child and our

<sup>7</sup>Pope Benedict XV, *Annus iam plenus* [1 December 1919], in *The Papal Encyclicals (1903-1939)*, vol. 3 (Wilmington, NC: McGrath, 1981) 170.

<sup>8</sup>See Children's Defense Fund, *Welcome the Child: A Child Advocacy Guide for Churches* (Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund, 1990).

<sup>9</sup>See UNICEF, *1997 Annual Report* (New York: UNICEF, 1997).

responsibility to care for children other than our own. Addressing the subjects of adult avarice and self-absorption as well as the lack of generosity and solicitude for God's little ones, Augustine begins his homily by pondering the death of a child. In so doing, he calls attention to the calamity of loss and the familial ambivalence surrounding the reality of having one less mouth to feed. He then reorients his reflection by casting his exhortation in a less threatening and judgmental manner. Augustine urges his auditors to take action on behalf of children in need. He does so by inviting every family to imagine that they have gained a child. The child of whom he speaks is none other than Jesus Christ.

I do not say then, thou wilt have one less [child]; reckon rather that thou hast one more. Give Christ a place with thy children, be thy Lord added to thy family; be thy Creator added to thy offspring, be thy Brother added to the number of thy children. For though there is so great a distance, yet he condescended to be a Brother. And though He be the Father's Only Son, He hath vouchsafed to have coheirs. Lo how bountifully hath He given! Why wilt thou give in such barren sort? Thou hast two children, reckon Him a third; thou hast three, let Him be reckoned as a fourth; thou hast ten, let Him be the eleventh. I will say no more; keep the place of one child for thy Lord. For what thou shalt give to thy Lord, will profit both thee and thy children; whereas, what thou dost keep for thy children wrongly, will hurt both thee and them. Now thou wilt give one portion, which thou hast reckoned as one child's portion. Reckon that thou hast got one child more.<sup>10</sup>

When I first came across this sermon, I found myself drawn to think more intentionally about the theological and ethical meaning of the God who comes to us in the form of a infant. Though every Christian believes that God enters human history as a child, it seems that outside of the Christmas season, our christological emphases neither encourage nor support sustained reflection on the mystery which Paul Claudel referred to as the "eternal infancy of God." There is something about this mystery, this experience of standing in the shadow of the manger, that leads us in the ways of radical discipleship. For in taking God on God's own terms, we find the question "Who do you say I am?" recast as "What Child is this?" Our theological and moral imaginations are stretched as we engage the following questions: What does the God who comes to us as an infant teach the Christian community about infancy and childhood? In what ways do we perceive the face of God revealed in the face of every infant and child?

Conscious of the interactive dynamic between religion and society as well as the power of churches to inform and transform the commitments of individuals and communities, it seems both fitting and just that those of us concerned with mission and ecumenism address ourselves directly to the task of educating Christians across the life span to make the necessary connections between child advocacy and the cost of discipleship.

<sup>10</sup>St. Augustine, Sermon XXXVI.13 from "Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament," in *St. Augustine*, vol. 4 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956) 372.

### III. EDUCATING FOR MISSION AND ECUMENISM: AN INTERGENERATIONAL CHALLENGE

Along with contemporary trends in world mission, the development of ecumenical reflection on the nature of the *missio Dei* and its relationship to the *missio ecclesiae* has had numerous implications for adult Christians.<sup>11</sup> Unsettled and uncertain about past endeavors and future viability, more than a few North American congregations have found themselves theologically lost at sea in the present moment, unable to navigate the tempestuous waters of reactionism and relativism. Confused and confounded by the distinct and, in some cases, adversarial positions advanced by proponents of the mission *ad gentes* (to the nations) on the one hand and proponents of peace, justice, and dialogue on the other, it is not uncommon to find these unresolved controversies undermining the ongoing formation of adults for discipleship in a world church. The implications of these tendencies for the initial formation of children within our own congregations may be a cause for even greater concern.

Admittedly, it is somewhat difficult to assess efforts to educate any generation for mission and ecumenism, much less the next generation. What, after all, would success look like? Allow me to pose the question another way. Suppose the criteria of success were defined as a visible passion for the gospel, an active interest in one's heritage, a feeling of being at home in or held by one's tradition, a shared sense of Christian identity with children and adults in other places, a moving experience of solidarity with children and adults of other faiths and cultures, especially those who suffer, an understanding of personal and social sin, a wonder and reverence for creation, and a profound belief in the grace of a loving God who calls everyone by name. What would be the measure of our success as congregations and as churches? Would it be possible to say with confidence that we are mentoring one another as well as the next generation to be the kind of Christians the church and the world of the twenty-first century need and deserve?

Prior to 1965, mission education was one of the primary vehicles through which the minds and hearts of Christian congregations were opened to a larger world. During the past three decades, however, the ecclesiological polemics surrounding Christian missionary activity<sup>12</sup> have trickled into more than a few pulpits and Sunday school classrooms. Impressionistic evidence suggests that one of the unexamined consequences of major shifts in ecclesial consciousness is the gradual disappearance of education for mission and ecumenism from the congregational ethos of many moderate, liberal, and progressive Christian churches. I believe it is fair to say that when such educational efforts are ambiguous, ambivalent, mediocre, dated, episodic, or altogether non-existent, the *ecclesial imagination* of adults

<sup>11</sup>See David Bosch, "Elements of an Emerging Ecumenical Paradigm: Mission as *Missio Dei*," in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 389-392.

<sup>12</sup>See, for example, James A. Scherer, *Missionary, Go Home! A Reappraisal of the Christian World Mission* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964); Walbert Buhlmann, *The Missions on Trial* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979); and George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

and children—understood as that which gives rise to personal convictions about the validity of Christian missionary activity and the relational significance of identifying with a particular church tradition—remains disengaged or undeveloped. If this lacuna persists, particularly in the North American context, churches may have little to reap when the seeds of ecclesial consciousness have not been sown. Under such circumstances, to say that the future of mission and ecumenism hangs in the balance may be an understatement.

Though it is important to acknowledge that in many churches, mission boards and missionary societies have done more than their part to design programs that are attuned to intergenerational interests and concerns, it is also critical to note that the issue is not one of supply, but of demand. Are these programs sought out, implemented, and appropriated? Are church leaders really nurturing the ecclesial imagination of all their members, particularly the youngest among them?

In recent years, I have observed with interest the ways in which the compelling appeals of international child welfare organizations have been quite successful in attracting the support of adults and children alike in much the same way as the missionary appeals of old. What are we to make of the curious fact that as communities of faith distance themselves from any identification whatsoever with the dated caricatures of mission education and missionary appeals (e.g., the so-called “ransoming of pagan babies,” the construction of mission schools or hospitals, and the promotion of missionary vocations), it is child welfare organizations (e.g., UNICEF), development and disaster relief agencies (e.g., OXFAM International), and a variety of volunteer organizations (e.g., Peace Corps) that fill the void? How ironic it is that they do so precisely by adopting, innovating, and secularizing many of the same techniques once used by church-based mission organizations. Speaking in terms of form and content, exactly how do we distinguish the difference between the 1954 Lenten appeal to “save a child’s soul for \$5.00” and the more worldly appeal of Sally Struthers to “save a child’s life for \$20.00”?

Within the context of Christian communities, it should not be surprising to find individuals as well as congregations moved to action based upon some basic human intuition that no one should be starved, displaced, abandoned, or abused, particularly children. Though it could be argued that such actions parallel those affirmed by Benedict XV eight decades ago, I think there is an important difference. This difference rests on the fact that during the past thirty years, many Christian communities have lost sight altogether of the interactive dynamic between the great commandment and the great commission. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that many criticisms of Christian mission, however warranted, went unmediated and undifferentiated within many congregations. Given this scenario, should it come as any surprise if the next generation views the proclamation of the gospel as irrelevant or unnecessary?

Though many criticisms of missionary activity are valid inasmuch as they draw attention to the actual and potential problems of westernization, neocoloni-

alism, institutionalization, financial dependency, forced conversions, alienation, exploitation, and abuse, there is another side to the story of Christian mission. This other side bears testimony to the ways in which many missionary efforts have served and continue to serve the best interests of people, especially infants and children, by safeguarding their human dignity and upholding their value as persons. It is my own conviction that serious reflection on the state of the world's children may be the incentive we need to reevaluate the meaning of Christian vision and witness in a postmodern world. The urgency of the present-day reality may be the warrant we need to put our polemics in parentheses so that we may recover together an evangelical sense of responsibility for the children who have been entrusted to us in faith and by faith.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have identified what I believe to be one of the major ecumenical and missiological challenges facing Christian churches: the ecclesial task of preparing ourselves and our children to become the kind of Christians the church and the world will need in the twenty-first century. In summary, these challenges demand of every church the willingness and ability:

1. to communicate to adults and children alike an understanding of the interrelatedness and significance of the mission *ad gentes* and the promotion of peace, justice, dialogue, and reconciliation
2. to engage the religious and moral imagination of adults and children in ways that foster awareness, respect, and reverence for the customs, cultures, and faith traditions of others
3. to involve children and adults in the process of recognizing the possibilities and limits of their own agency and power as Christians so as to deepen their understanding of what it means to bear witness to the message of Jesus Christ and through that witness to identify with the needs and concerns of other people, locally, nationally, and globally
4. to encourage intergenerational relationships of reciprocity and solidarity between communities of faith belonging to the same church tradition in different regions of the world so as to promote a sense of ecclesial identity
5. to educate church leaders and all members of Christian communities about the state of children within the church and the world so as to elicit greater accountability for the proper distribution of resources and investment of energies. ⊕