INCLUDING CHILDREN IN THE LIFE OF THE CONGREGATION:
A CONTEMPORARY MENNONITE EXPLORATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract:

The Mennonite faith tradition, which originated with sixteenth century Anabaptism, practices believers baptism which assumes a voluntary and adolescent or adult decision to join the church as a member. Children are excluded from church membership by virtue of their age. This study explores how, in light of the Anabaptist faith heritage, a Mennonite congregation in the twenty-first century might be more inclusive of its children.

From a liberative stance informed by a feminist perspective, the author reflected on the writings of one Anabaptist theologian, Pilgram Marpeck, the confessional statements of the Mennonite Church, and key biblical texts regarding the nature and nurture of children in order to articulate a theology of children for contemporary Mennonite ecclesiology.

The author’s action in ministry project involved exploring this theology further with real children and adults from one Mennonite congregation in Waterloo, Ontario. Eight children were interviewed about their relationships with God and the church. In addition, the author facilitated a five session series of meetings with a group of ten adults in the hope of encouraging the congregation to examine and transform its ecclesial practices with children. The methodology used to gather data and facilitate the learning process was the shared praxis approach to religious education developed and articulated by Catholic religious educator, Thomas Groome.

The author concluded that, in order for Mennonite congregations to be more inclusive theologically of their children, church membership must be based in community rather than believers baptism, and initiation of the child into the church community happens through a child consecration ceremony. Both a careful process of theological reflection and a new fresh metaphor for church are needed to help congregations practice more age-inclusivity. The author introduces one such metaphor of church as children in God’s playground, in which children are moved from the margins of congregational life to the centre.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Along with nine siblings, I grew up on a farm west of Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Both education and church life were influential in my upbringing. My mother and maternal grandmother were trained professionally as teachers. I also became a teacher by profession and taught at the junior high level for several years.

Both of my parents were active in the local Mennonite church community and involved in its teaching ministry. I have been involved in Christian education and church leadership ever since my teenage years, first in my childhood congregation, and since my marriage, in my chosen congregation of Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, which is located north of Waterloo, Ontario. At present, I serve as the coordinator for children's Christian education, as a member of the Christian Education ministry, and as an elder.

I have been engaged vocationally in Christian education ministries for the last twenty-five years. After a brief teaching career in the secular school system and during the time when my two children were young, I studied part-time at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and worked part-time at a Mennonite Resource Centre, an audiovisual library for congregations. In 1987 I graduated from Waterloo Lutheran Seminary with a Master's degree in Theological Studies and joined the staff at the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada as the Minister of Christian Education. In 1994 I became Director of Children's Education for the General Conference Mennonite Church at the denominational level.

My calling to a vocation in Christian educational ministries with children has given me the opportunity to dream, design, and develop curricular resources for children and Christian educators within the Mennonite Church. I have written several curricula for children's vacation Bible school programs that offered alternative ways of teaching and learning, such as rotation and interest centre models. I was involved in the development process of our denominational children's Sunday school curriculum.

My colleagues and I have launched a new initiative for our denomination's educational ministry that attempts to partner the congregation and family with the intention to nurture and strengthen faith formation in both settings. I am in the midst of designing resources for use by families in either setting and in working with congregations who wish to be more inclusive of their children in a variety of ways in congregational life.
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CHAPTER 1

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

“Let the children come...do not stop them.” Jesus’ words, taken from Matthew’s gospel (9:14), have been a source of encouragement for me as a Christian educator in children’s ministries. Children are a blessing to me as I observe their wonder and engagement in the ways of the heart. They teach me what it means to love God. I feel privileged to be a part of their journey toward an ever-deepening relationship with the Divine that is celebrated personally and within a community of faith.

And yet, it is within the community of faith or congregation that children are prevented from participating in ways that are faith-nurturing. In the Mennonite context, of which I am a part, children are excluded from full participation in the congregation’s worship life because of their age and membership status. I wonder if Jesus would say the same words to Mennonite congregations today as he did to the disciples of the first century who tried to prevent the children from being with him.

As I talk with children’s Christian educators, parents, and congregational leaders, I have become aware of a need for a theology of children in a contemporary Mennonite context. How do we think theologically about children and the place of children in congregational life? To what extent does our theology inform our practice? To what extent does practice inform our theology?
The doctor of ministry program has allowed me to explore these questions and issues around children’s inclusivity in Mennonite theology and practice. I cannot say that I have found answers to all of my questions, but I can affirm that the journey has been an enriching, energizing experience which will continue to create pathways that beckon me to explore emerging issues even more deeply.

I have been able to articulate a theological stance that is rooted in the Mennonite faith tradition and yet offers a contemporary approach to including children in the worshipping life of the congregation. This thesis is the result of my exploration of the question, *In light of the Anabaptist faith tradition, how might a Mennonite congregation be more inclusive of its children?* I examined a number of theoretical dimensions that contribute to the church’s understanding of its children. These dimensions form the theoretical framework for the thesis and my action in ministry. Here is a brief outline of the contents of each chapter:

In chapter two I offer my context for ministry, naming some critical experiences that have shaped and formed me as a Mennonite Christian whose vocational ministry is in children’s Christian education at the denominational level.

Chapter three begins with the theological framework of my faith-parents, the Anabaptists, a product of the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century who argued vigorously against infant baptism. I have chosen to examine closely the writings of an Anabaptist theologian named Pilgram Marpeck as one voice in the dialogue regarding the nature of children before God and in the church. In addition, I look at what some of the Mennonite statements of faith tell us about the spiritual nature of the children.
Chapter four follows the pattern of chapter three as I examine the Anabaptist and Mennonite understandings about the nature of church and how children fit into an ecclesiology that does not baptize them as infants or children. In addition to the "official" writings of the church, which express the normative view, I refer to some recent writings that offer a different perspective from the normative view. I close this chapter with a look at the place of metaphor in Mennonite ecclesiology.

A study of some key biblical texts informed by a liberative perspective, with a feminist flavour wherever relevant, leads me to challenge present Mennonite theology and ecclesial practice regarding children. The biblical framework for my theology of children is outlined in chapter five.

Chapter six addresses the sociological dimension of life as it affects children in the western world. A brief survey of social understandings of the status of children in the sixteenth century and some influences in the development of childhood up to the present society provide a perspective for finding an ecclesiological place for children in a contemporary context. And since educational theory emerges within the social context I comment, in chapter seven, on the influences of religious education theories in forming faith in Mennonite children during recent decades.

My emerging theology of children in a Mennonite context is articulated in chapter eight. After much prayer, study, and reflection, I am able to give voice to my understandings and beliefs about children in congregational life, a voice that both confronts and challenges my faith tradition's theology and practice. Furthermore, I
propose a metaphor for congregational life that has the potential to give children a place of belonging within the worshipping life of the congregation.

In order to determine if my theology of children had any relevance within contemporary congregational life, I chose to “test” it with some real children and some leaders in a real Mennonite congregation. Because of my professional involvement in Christian education, I decided to utilize the theory and process of Thomas Groome’s shared Christian praxis approach for my action in ministry. This became the basis for my research methodology described in chapter nine. Groome, a Roman Catholic religious educator, defines shared Christian praxis as

a participative and dialogical pedagogy in which people reflect critically on their own historical agency in time and place and on their sociocultural reality, have access together to Christian Story/Vision, and personally appropriate it in community with the creative intent of renewed praxis in Christian faith toward God’s reign for all creation.¹

Groome’s approach to religious education provided an excellent framework for engaging dialogue with eight children and ten congregational leaders from Erb Street Mennonite Church, situated in Waterloo, Ontario. A summary of my findings and reflections is given in chapter ten. My experience with the children and adult participants was personally rewarding and transformative in my roles as leader-facilitator and learner-researcher.

In the final chapter I summarize key learnings from my quest for more inclusivity of children in one Mennonite congregation. Included in this chapter are some implications

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for congregations who want to be more inclusive. I have much to ponder as I work personally and professionally as an advocate of children, as well as in ministry with them. In the epilogue I list some further queries that are worth pursuing in the future.

The bibliography and appendices give additional information concerning sources of my thinking and tools used to gather the data used in my research project. The charts, session plans, artwork, and written liturgy may be helpful in understanding both the content and process of the research project.

It is important for me to note that this thesis will not address the ecumenical scene regarding children's place in congregational life. While I am familiar with the work of some other Protestant faith traditions regarding age inclusiveness, I chose to focus my research and study on the Mennonite tradition because of our particular theological stance which does not practice infant baptism, and, consequently, excludes children from membership in the congregation.

All along my journey into the world of children and the Mennonite Church, the many and varied pathways that have led me toward understanding and articulating a theology of children have been richly rewarding. I have learned much and will continue to learn more. I hope that this small piece of research may in some way help Mennonite congregations to be more inclusive of their children so that their children's faith will be strong and, more importantly, their relationship with the living God will not be hindered by the church.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT OF MINISTRY

Informed By My Childhood

I was born and raised in a Mennonite family whose roots grew out of the Swiss Mennonite heritage. Throughout my childhood years I regularly attended a Mennonite church along with my parents and nine siblings. I participated actively in all the programs that this rural congregation offered the children: weekly Sunday school, monthly girls’ club, and vacation Bible school which was held for two weeks in the summertime.

It was during the vacation Bible school program, when I was ten years old, that I became a Christian. In my possession I have a record of this momentous decision and what it stood for: “Confessing to God that I am a sinner, and believing that the Lord Jesus Christ died for my sins on the cross and was raised for my justification, I do now receive and confess Him as my personal Saviour.” A few months after I made this decision, I was

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2 The two Mennonite denominations with which I associate are the Mennonite Church with its roots in Swiss Anabaptism and the General Conference Mennonite Church that came out of the Russian/Prussian stream of Anabaptism. The two congregations of which I have been a part are associated more closely with the Mennonite Church and its faith heritage. Professionally, I work with congregations who are part of the General Conference Mennonite Church.

3 This was the quote I signed on the inside back cover of the Gideon Bible I received in grade five.
baptized and became a member of the congregation. I remember being one of the few youth who attended weekly prayer meetings at the church, more so out of obligation to my parents and to God than out of a desire to pray. In my mid-teens I was president of my youth group and a children’s Sunday school teacher.

Although I have always been an active participant in church life, it was in my late twenties that I experienced an important faith transformation. As I reflect on this experience, I realize that I was in the transition stage from the questioning faith stance to an owned faith. Only then did I feel ready to take responsibility and own my faith, which to me meant a declaration of my intent to be a Christian disciple for the rest of my life. This was a decision of the will, one that I made with both intellect and heart, and one that truly defined me as a “Christian.” It was at that crossroad in my faith journey that I felt I was ready for believers baptism. I regret that I did request rebaptism, for believers baptism as an adult would have been more meaningful for me. It had less to do with being “saved from sin” and everything to do with an affirmative response to an invitation from a loving God to journey together for the rest of my life! My faith journey has shaped me as a Christian, a parent, and an educator. I want children everywhere to experience God as intimate Friend and Companion who walks with them on their journey through life.

Informed by the Constituency

In my current position as Director of Children’s Education for the General Conference Mennonite Church, a Christian denomination comprised of approximately five

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4 The current usage in Mennonite writings of this term, believers baptism, does not use an apostrophe. The term will be defined in the next chapter.
hundred congregations located in Canada and United States, I provide encouragement, training, and resources to help congregational leaders in their ministry with children.

Often I am confronted with issues dealing with the congregation’s role in nurturing faith in its children. For example, in introducing the new denominational children’s Sunday school curriculum several years ago, I was asked periodically which session contained the “salvation” lesson. Apparently, the goal of this lesson is to invite children to “make a commitment to Jesus Christ” that leads to their baptism. Ironically, in each session of the curriculum aptly named *Jubilee: God’s Good News*, children are being invited to be formed and transformed by an ongoing relationship with a loving God. It appears that some adults need assurance of the faith status of the children in a way that is more familiar to them.

As a denominational leader in children’s ministries I have become more conscious of the lack of clarity, both theologically and practically, regarding the place of children within our Mennonite congregational life. Our theology is expressed in believers baptism, a voluntary decision to commit one’s life to God. Because Mennonite theology places a high emphasis on discipleship and accountability within a community of believers, baptism is tied closely to church membership. And because the decision to follow Jesus is based on personal belief, children are neither baptized nor members of the church. Baptism becomes an adult decision and response. The assumption is that children are not capable of discipleship or accountability.

However, Mennonite congregations are committed to nurturing faith in the children in the hope that they will choose baptism and church membership when they reach
the “age of accountability.”

5 Our relatively small denomination produces quality resources for the congregations’ educational ministries. While I affirm and admire our efforts in providing faith resources for the children and youth, I feel that printed materials and programs are not enough for faithful living in the new millennium. The traditional ways of church life will not succeed in keeping the next generation committed to God and the Mennonite faith tradition. Sunday school is in trouble, especially in urban settings. It is increasingly difficult to find volunteers to commit to teach on a regular basis or for any length of time. Larger congregations depend on paid staff to care for their youth. Church and Sunday school attendance seems to be more sporadic as the Sunday morning “sacred time” is sacrificed for sports, holidays, or family time at home.

The worship hour also has its woes. Children tell me they are bored. Parents provide books, toys, or snacks to keep their children quiet and are reminded by stares and glares from others that “children should be seen and not heard.” I receive requests for children’s bulletins to provide “busy Bible work” during the worship service and for resources for “Children’s Church” so that the children can leave the sanctuary during the sermon for their own special time, which often means that they make crafts or practice

5 There is no set age at which a child or youth is “officially” held accountable or responsible for her/his decision to choose to be baptized. In congregations from the General Conference and Mennonite Church denominations the typical age is between fourteen and eighteen, usually during the high school years.

6 Printed resources for these age groups include Jubilee: God’s Good News Sunday School and Venture Clubs curricula for children, Fast Lane Bible Studies for junior youth, and Generation Why curriculum for high school youth. Thousands of dollars are spent each year on Christian education resources for our children and youth. Many volunteer and paid staff are involved in providing human resources for the sake of our children’s Christian education.
singing. Some congregations provide a “children’s time” in which the children meet with the pastor during the worship service for a story or conversation at their level. The end of this time often proves to be the end of any attention the children give to the worship that is happening around them.

Mennonite congregations do not have a well-defined place for the children in their worship life. Many adults prefer it when children are “seen and not heard,” even “not seen and not heard” during the worship hour. During Sunday school, adults would rather be segregated by age than learn with children and/or youth. In our Christian education programs, we have appropriated a “schooling model,” believing that children and adults learn best when they are with their own age groups. I am convinced that faith is nurtured more holistically in settings that are more broadly-aged or intergenerational. When the generations worship and learn together faith can be nurtured in old and young alike.

An Advocacy Role

Children are among the voiceless in congregational life. They are brought to church by their parents. They participate in programs planned for them and on their behalf. They are rarely invited to participate in planning or to share ideas or dreams for being part of God’s people. Some adults assume that children cannot have a relationship with God because they cannot articulate it or because they are too young.

I want to act as an advocate for children. I am saddened and offended when children are ignored in the worship life of the congregation, and when their faith is discounted because they do not have the cognitive ability to articulate it. Mennonite
theology has been clear about children not having membership in the church. However, at present, it seems less certain about where children do fit in. Hence, I wrestle with issues such as the meaning of baptism for children who have grown up in the church and including children in worship in ways that both engage and nurture their spirituality. These questions do not go away: What about the children? What is their status in Mennonite worship life?

Careful theological reflection on Mennonite theology and practice and their effect on the children is needed. It is not acceptable to “just let things happen,” and later match our theology to our practice. I believe that the time is ripe to re-examine our faith heritage on behalf of and for the sake of our children.

A Feminist Mennonite Voice

In my position as a staff person at the denominational level, I feel caught between the “official” stance of the church as articulated in our confessional documents and my more liberal and feminist views that advocate for acceptance and inclusivity of all persons, including the children, who do not have a voice in the institution we call “church.” As a feminist Christian I tend to view both normative Mennonite theology and the scriptures through a hermeneutic of suspicion. I want to listen for the voices that have been lost, silenced, or marginalized, in particular the voices of the children whose spirituality is undermined, ignored, or discounted often by adults in the congregation. I look to the life and ministry of Jesus to guide my way with the children. His loving acceptance,

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7 This concept is used by feminist Biblical scholars such as Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza.
welcoming hospitality, personal attention and touch, lead me to believe that children are to be valued, loved, accepted, and embraced, not on the margins but interwoven into the fabric of congregational life.

I hope that my experiences as a child growing up within the Mennonite tradition, as a professional involved in children's ministries, and as one who has always loved children and learned from them, can serve children well as I look to the past to discern a future with hope for the faith of generations of children to come.
CHAPTER 3
THE FRAMEWORK OF ANABAPTIST/MENNONITE THEOLOGY

Contributions of Anabaptist Theology

Anabaptist Beginnings

Mennonite history began in the sixteenth century during a time of great religious upheaval referred to as the Protestant Reformation. Within this movement, a group of radical reformers known as Anabaptists or “Rebaptizers” moved beyond the theological comfort zone of Luther and other Reformers. The Anabaptist movement attracted a variety of dissatisfied clergy and lay people with its radical theology. As the movement spread Anabaptists were persecuted and martyred by those intent on maintaining both societal and institutional status quo. Power struggles among the Anabaptist groups themselves were in evidence as this fledgling church struggled to survive physically and theologically. Eventually one group gained the leadership and its theological perspective became the “official” or normative theology for subsequent generations of Mennonites.

Throughout our Mennonite history, several confessions of faith and many books have been written to articulate our theological stance. However, as I began my research I discovered that there is little written specifically on the theology of children in the
historical writings or present literature. It is no wonder, then, that there is some confusion and/or dissension concerning the role of children in contemporary Mennonite church life.

In this chapter I will outline the key theological understandings about the nature and nurture of children in the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith tradition. These faith tenets were gleaned from several sources: the writings of an Anabaptist theologian named Pilgram Marpeck, key official confessions of faith articulated during our Mennonite life span, and recent books. Analysis and conclusions are informed by a contemporary, feminist Mennonite perspective.

During the sixteenth century my Anabaptist faith-parents spent much time theologizing about the nature of humanity in relationship to God and the church. The nature of children became an issue as Anabaptists argued in favour of believers baptism. However, it was not out of any real concern for the well-being of the children; rather, they were defending an unpopular position in direct opposition to the Roman Catholic church and Protestant theologians. Baptism, for Anabaptists, was a voluntary and personal decision; therefore, infant baptism must be rejected. The doctrine of original sin as the basis for infant baptism was refuted - children were created in innocence and did not need to repent or be baptized until they could reason and think morally.

Within the Anabaptist circles themselves there was disagreement on the age when children were no longer considered innocent. Some believed that children were capable of rational thought around age seven; others maintained that only God knew and humans had no right to judge when children could make the decision for or against God. This debate over the "age of accountability" still continues over four hundred years later.
Pilgram Marpeck: One Anabaptist Perspective

In my search for an Anabaptist theological understanding of children, I chose to limit my research to the writings of Pilgram Marpeck with brief references to his contemporary, Menno Simons. Marpeck has been a theologian in the shadows of Mennonite history who recently, and well-deservedly, has gained attention in Mennonite academic circles.

Marpeck's theology is considered for several reasons. In the first place, he was a lay leader within the Anabaptist movement who had the ability to write clearly and think theologically even though he was not trained in theology. Nor was he ever part of the clergy in the Catholic Church, as were many of the Anabaptist leaders, before he became an Anabaptist believer. Second, he took a moderate position between two Anabaptist extremes, that of individualism and legalism. He rejected individualism in favour of the community of faith and refused to buy into the legalistic view that demanded obedience to scripture above all else. He chose a third way that was neither fence-sitting nor compromising about his beliefs. One might hope that his view of children's nature may be different from his theological peers. Third, it appears that he had a holistic faith, one that was both integrated and dynamic. Arnold Snyder observes that Marpeck's understanding of discipleship came from a Christocentric view, in which the measure of a Christian was based on "the love of Christ in the hearts of believers (always measured against the scriptural witness to Christ). [which] meant that the law of love must take precedence
over the legalistic application of commands—even those of the New Testament. In Marpeck’s faith there was an integration of the application of the inner and outer Word. He believed that ceremonies, such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, were outward expressions of inner realities mysteriously and mystically integrated by God’s divine Spirit.

Fourth, my desire is to bring Marpeck’s theology from the margins of Anabaptist and Mennonite thought. As we enter the twenty-first century, I believe that there is more openness to theological perspectives that are less authoritarian and legalistic.

Pilgrim Marpeck was a well-respected Anabaptist leader and theologian who lived in Europe in the early half of the sixteenth century. Born around 1495 in the Tirol, the son of wealthy, influential, and devout Catholic parents, he became an engineer and served as a mining magistrate and mayor of Rattenberg in the 1520s. Marpeck and his wife Anna had one biological daughter and three adopted children. There is no record of Marpeck’s early religious life or reasons why he chose to leave the Catholic Church. Upon confession of a deep personal faith, he was baptized as an adult and became an Anabaptist Christian. Subsequently, he left the Tirol in 1528 and moved to Strasbourg. Because of religious persecution Marpeck was forced to move a number of times. He died in 1556, probably of natural causes.

Marpeck did not write a treatise or even a letter on his understanding of the nature and nurture of children. However, his writings allude to a theological stance that

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8 C. Arnold Snyder, Anabaptist History and Theology. An Introduction (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1995), 381.

9 Marpeck’s works include Clare Verantwortung (A Clear Refutation) which appeared in 1531 as a polemic tract to refute Anabaptist “spiritualists” who discouraged
viewed children in a more positive light than some of his Anabaptist contemporaries, in particular Menno Simons. Marpeck’s theology was articulated in the context of a defense or polemic. In some cases he argued against Reformers who disagreed with the Anabaptists’ rejection of infant baptism. At other times his debates took place within the Anabaptist arena as differing groups attempted to define, articulate, and agree on a theology for the newly emerging church.

During this volatile Reformation era several Anabaptist groups erupted across Europe at the same time. In the first years they consolidated into at least three kinds of groups, each with a different emphasis on key tenets of Anabaptist faith. Marpeck’s theological stance was situated somewhere between the theological perspectives of the two opposing groups, namely the “spiritualists” and the “literalists.” It appears that he deliberately refused to side with the spiritualists whose theological base came from the more mystical Anabaptist stream from South Germany. Nor would he join forces with the more legalistic Anabaptists. According to Snyder, “Against the spiritualists Marpeck stressed the incarnate Christ and the necessity of visible church ordinances, while against the more literal-minded Swiss and Hutterites, he stressed freedom of the Spirit and the centrality of love.”

the use of ceremonies such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and reliance on the Scriptures. His *Confession of 1532* argued about the nature of baptism and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. *The Admonition of 1542 (Vermamung)* provided a lengthy statement of Marpeck’s views on baptism and the Lord’s Supper. In addition, nineteen letters have been preserved which provide insights into the life of a group of Anabaptist churches scattered throughout Europe.

10 Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 189.
The spiritualists highly valued the *inner word* of God, believing that the Holy Spirit spoke directly to the individual through an inner voice and stillness. Those who remained within the bounds of the Anabaptist circles, however, did not deny the need for the *outer word* or written scriptures. Snyder asserts that there were no strict literalists among the early Anabaptists, for all believed that “without the baptism of the Spirit there could be no understanding of the letter of Scripture.”\(^{11}\)

Though they did not deny the need for the Spirit, certain Anabaptists gave higher priority to the Scriptures. Among them was Menno Simons, after whom Mennonites were named, who “tended to limit the working of the Spirit to what was verifiable (or sometimes, communicable) in and through Scriptures,”\(^{12}\) forbidding anything that the Scriptures did not expressly command.

Marpeck refused to distinguish between the oral and written Word of God because he believed that the Holy Spirit guided the writing of the Scriptures. Klassen suggests that this Word, for Marpeck, was dynamic:

> But it was not for Marpeck the ink and the paper, or the perishable, creaturely parts of the books, or human speech that is God’s word; rather the ‘meaning, written or spoken, that it contains.’ It is faith that makes the written Word become spirit and life in the heart of the recipient.\(^{13}\)

Marpeck’s criterion for one’s claim to be guided by the Holy Spirit was that it manifested itself in an ethical Christian lifestyle. The scriptures were studied, with others,

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 161.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 162.

in order to apply them to life. The role of the church was to interpret scriptures in *community* in order to guard against the extremes of individualism and subjectivism. This was accomplished with external forms or ceremonies which included preaching, teaching, admonitions, miracles, foot washing, discipline, punishment, ban, excommunication, separation from the body of Christ, and the Lord’s Supper, and were meant to assist and prepare for the Holy Spirit’s direction. Ceremonies were gifts of the Spirit that helped Christians to serve God, external works that were integrally linked with the inward reality they represented.

Conversely, Menno Simons linked the performance of ceremonies with obedience to Scripture. He insisted on a literal discipleship based on the Bible and emphasized the visible purity of the Body of Christ, which was evidenced in spiritual perfection. Obedience was the key rule for Menno and other literalist Anabaptists.

Marpeck’s middle way was not the path chosen by the Anabaptists. As the sixteenth century progressed, the spiritualists withdrew or were expelled from Anabaptist circles and the literalists under the leadership of Menno Simons took over. Menno’s writings became the orthodox view, that is, the accepted and normative perspective. What was passed on was the limiting of mystical expression, letter taking precedence over spirit,

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16 Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 360-361.
outer conformity becoming more important than inner transformation, the church
separating from the world, and church leadership becoming "law enforcers."\textsuperscript{17} Strict
obedience to God and a literal interpretation of the Scriptures became critical requirements
for Anabaptist groups who eventually became Mennonite.

I lament the loss of Marpeck’s moderating influence in the Anabaptist movement
and wonder how differently my faith tradition would have looked had we become
\textit{Marpeckites} rather than Mennonites. Klassen and Klaassen maintain that Marpeck’s group
was "characterized by a profounder commitment to the freedom of the gospel than that
found among other groups, whose pronounced legalistic tendencies and readiness to use
the ban caused much division and acrimony."\textsuperscript{18} With the re(dis)covery of Marpeck’s
legacy in recent years, I hope that Mennonite theology will appropriate and commit again
to a new understanding of the \textit{freedom} to which the gospel invites us regarding the place
of children in our midst.

Though Marpeck did not articulate a theology of children, it is possible to
determine, from his writings, his views regarding their \textit{nature}\textsuperscript{19} in relationship to God.
While I recognize that it is difficult to separate the child’s relationship with God from her
relationship with the church, I will pursue the ecclesiological implications in the next

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 380.

\textsuperscript{18} Klassen and Klaassen, \textit{The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck}, 303-304.

\textsuperscript{19} I understand “nature” to mean how the church understands the status or view of
the child in relationship to God. How we understand children to be \textit{in God’s eyes} has
implications for how the church and society relate with them. Prevailing societal
influences, which include educational and psychological theories of childhood, tend to
affect, even dictate, how the church views children as human persons.
chapter. Throughout our history, Mennonites would affirm that one cannot be faithful to God without participation within a faith community.

From his literalist perspective, Menno Simons demanded strict obedience of children to the authority of the Bible, parents, and the church’s leaders. In a treatise, entitled *The Nurture of Children*, he wrote:

> Children have an inclination toward wrong-doing, and need to learn to be obedient by fearing God...[W]e all, no matter who or what, are born with an evil and sinful flesh from Adam. Yes, and in all our desires from our youth are always inclined to the worst...If now the power of this native disposition is to be broken, suppressed and destroyed, it must be accomplished by the pure fear of the Lord.  

In contrast, Pilgrim Marpeck appeared to have a kinder disposition toward the nature of children:

> Since God ordained that [children] be born in created innocence, God will refrain from accusing this innocence, since sin has its origin in knowledge of good and evil. The children, therefore, cannot be accused of any sin. What kind of state of salvation such infants have, we will allow God to decide since [God] ordered creation in this way.

In the next few pages, I have identified what I believe to be key theological statements articulated by Marpeck about the nature of children.

> *Children are blessed by God.* Marpeck believed that children were accepted as part of God’s realm: “[Children] are without justification pronounced blessed by Christ,

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20 J. C. Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1956), 948-949. Menno believed that the will of the child must be broken in order for the child to submit to the will of God. He advocated moderate corporal punishment.

21 Klassen and Klaassen, *The Writings of Pilgrim Marpeck*, 257.
and regarded as belonging to the sanctified of the kingdom of God: ‘For to such belongs the kingdom of God.’”  

Children are innocent. Like other Anabaptist theologians, Marpeck rejected the doctrine of original sin. Children did not enter the world as depraved sinners in need of immediate salvation - they were born in innocence. This did not mean that they were pure and good, only that they were not depraved sinners at birth. Marpeck wrote that

Only after Adam and Eve recognized good and evil did God accuse them of the sin, and not before. Thus, the children are born with purity of creation, unaware of good and evil. Who, then, would want to accuse the innocent children of an inherited sin? Since the origin and basis of sin, the knowledge of good and evil, does not come with birth, the inheritance of the sin against God comes only with the eating of the forbidden fruit.

Children were created by God as innocent human beings. Christ’s sacrificial death covered children until they were capable of knowing right from wrong. The young child was “a concealed, unrevealed creature, knowing neither good nor evil; it is looked after and cared for by the Word through Christ in God.” The child was unique in God’s creation. According to Marpeck,

No other innocent creature, animate or inanimate, only the child, was blessed by Christ and pronounced clean. When those whom Christ has praised and blessed as clean and precious creatures of God, and when, in spite of Christ’s assurance, they are offered to God in the hope that God will accept them, they are made unclean for

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22 Ibid., 128.
23 Ibid., 246.
24 Ibid., 139.
God has already accepted them, and Christ has, for them and for us all, become a sacrifice in order that we ourselves would all become a sacrifice.\textsuperscript{25}

Children were incapable of distinguishing between good and evil and were simply received by Christ: “Children...are not required to believe or disbelieve these words, but those who are born from the knowledge of good and evil into innocence and simplicity of faith are required to believe. The witness of God and Christ belongs to the process of becoming like children.”\textsuperscript{26}

Not all Anabaptist leaders shared Marpeck’s views of the nature of children. While they agreed \textit{in theory} that children were protected by the saving grace of Christ and, therefore, not in need of baptism, some of the writings indicated that there was uncertainty about the \textit{innocence} of their nature. Menno Simons may have held closer to the doctrine of original sin and the total depravity of children when he insisted that “the nature of [humanity] is completely corrupted in Adam and is rebellious against the Word of the Lord from childhood.”\textsuperscript{27} In addition, Menno stated that “we all, no matter who or what, are born with an evil and sinful flesh from Adam.”\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{Children are not held accountable for sin.} One had to be capable of rational thought before one was responsible for one’s sins. Children did not have such capability. In Marpeck’s view, “All sin, including the fall of Adam (Gen.3:7), consists in the

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 140-141. The assumption here is that when children were baptized as infants they were being consigned to death without their consent.

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\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 129.

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\textsuperscript{27} Wenger, \textit{The Complete Writings of Menno Simons}, 949-950.

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\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 948.
recognition of the knowledge of good and evil; where there is no knowledge, there is no sin (Jn.15:22)," and "faith in Christ can do and produce what pleases God...The salvation of all [humanity] is accomplished, ignorance is excused, and, to children and all who have true simplicity (of spirit), the kingdom of God is given."

Marpeck did not trivialize sin, but maintained that when children reached the age of discretion they were condemned before God and in need of repentance. However, children had a "proclivity" to sin: "Children have before the use of their reason no sin, for the proclivity to sin (erbbresten) is the only thing they have and this does not harm their salvation until it actually breaks out into open sin." Children were protected by Christ’s atonement until they were capable of understanding sin and its effect on them.

Children develop a growing awareness of sin. Marpeck’s views on the nature of the child arose from the conviction that in Christ the fall of Adam and Eve had been undone. Children, then, were not depraved human beings from birth but were innocent, saved by the grace of Christ, and not guilty of sin until they were capable of knowing good from evil. Marpeck did not state at what age children do come of age, nor was he overly concerned about the age factor. According to Klassen, Anabaptists reiterated over and over that children are protected by the atoning work of Christ. Therefore, “no attempt

39 Klassen and Klaassen, The Writings of Marpeck, 108.

30 Ibid., 110-111.

should ever be made to make them feel estranged from Christ until they have reached the age of discretion. When they arrive at that period in their lives the choice is made available to them and they are free to decide."\(^{32}\)

Stephen Boyd outlined how he believes Marpeck understood a young person's gradual awareness of sinfulness:

One grows out of 'created simplicity' into the 'general human, natural knowledge of good and evil.' First there is an opening of the eye or consciousness to an evil for the sake of self. Second a person experiences, meditates on, and remembers oneself and one's needs. Third, the acts of abandoning the Creator, of preferring creation and one's own life, and worrying about one's own care issue into all manner of 'fleshly, sinful lust, desire, selfishness, evil thoughts'...Therefore, every aspect of the human — the spirit, soul, and body — is involved in the sin...Marpeck insists that a process of individuation or personal transcendence must exist before sin has any meaning.\(^{33}\)

If Boyd has interpreted Marpeck correctly, one wonders at what age the individuation process generally took place for a child of the sixteenth century.

*Baptism is not meant for children.* For Marpeck baptism was voluntary and based on knowledge of personal sin. He summarized his understanding of the meaning of baptism in this way:

Baptism is an immersion or sprinkling with water desired by the one who is being baptized. Baptism is received and accepted as a sign and co-witness that [one] has died to [one's] sins and has been buried with Christ; henceforth, [one] may arise into a new life, to walk, not according to the lusts of the flesh, but obediently, according to the will of God. Those who are thus minded, and confess this intent, should be baptized. When that is done, they are correctly baptized. Then, in their baptism, they will certainly attain forgiveness of sins and thereby, having put on Jesus Christ, they will be accepted into the communion of Christ. The one who is thus baptized

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 19-20.

experiences this communion, not through the power of baptism, nor through the word that is spoken there, and certainly not through the faith of the godfathers, the sponsors; as [one’s] fleshly lusts depart and [one] puts on Christ, [one] experiences it through [one’s] own knowledge of Christ, through [one’s] own faith, through [one’s] voluntary choice and good intentions, through the Holy Spirit. 34

Baptism was sacramental because it signified commitment and sanctification, the beginning of new life, and a commitment to a holy covenant.35 For these reasons, and because it had not been commanded in the Scriptures, children were not to be baptized. Children “who cannot speak or think cannot be converted.”36 They cannot distinguish between good and evil and, therefore, show signs of repentance for sin; nor can they voluntarily choose to be baptized. Marpeck believed that “God is merciful toward the infants because of their ignorance and genuine innocence; to others [God] is merciful because of their faith and repentance.”37

Baptizing a child for the sake of that child’s eventual salvation was a dangerous thing for it could lead to a false sense of security:

If one is baptized in infancy before pride, cunning, and self-will (which are surrendered in baptism through faith), are present, the cunning serpent has a free hand. He achieves his effect in the understanding of the unregenerate, and implies with false treachery that (the baptized one) is already a Christian. This, may God have mercy, is what one sees in all people who have been baptized in infancy.38

34 Klassen and Klaassen, The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck, 197-198.
36 Ibid., 206.
37 Ibid., 252.
38 Ibid., 111.
Neither Marpeck nor other Anabaptist groups had a baptismal theology that warranted the participation of children in the Lord’s Supper or communion, which, like baptism, was a sacramental event reserved for adults who voluntarily chose a life of discipleship.

*Christian nurture plays an essential role.* Parents had a responsibility to do their part in nurturing faith in their child. A child consecration ritual, apparently held as part of the Anabaptist worship service, included this directive:

We admonish the parents to cleanse their conscience, as much as lies in them, with respect to the child, to do whatever is needed to raise the child up to the praise and glory of God, and to commit the child to God until it is clearly seen that God is working in [him/her] for faith or unfaith.39

Marpeck insisted that Christian nurture take place so that children understand what it meant to be part of God’s holy church when they came of age:

But, we believe we are to recognize, according to the Scriptures, those to whom God grants life and we are to admonish them and educate them in all virtue to God’s glory. If, then, when they have come of age and come to understanding, they have learned the way of the Lord, and are able to take upon themselves the yoke of the Lord and to learn the will of the Lord, following Him in all righteousness as the Lord gives them grace, *then they shall be baptized if they desire it.* If they do not wish to commit themselves thereto, but would rather pledge themselves to the darkness instead of the light, and if they do not change, we must let them go their way and commit them to the Lord.40

Menno Simons also believed that Christian nurture was necessary in the home. However, his reasons seemed less ecclesial. He was concerned about the outward actions of the children because salvation and the behaviour of the believers’ children were matters

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39 Ibid., 147.

40 Ibid., 258.
of spiritual integrity for the church. Obedience as a major component of the Christian life began with very young children.

[B]e sure that you instruct them from their youth in the way of the Lord, that they fear and love God, walk in all decency and discipline, are well mannered, quiet, obedient to their father and mother, reverent where that is proper, after their speech honest, not loud, not stubborn, nor self-willed; for such is not becoming to children of saints. 41

Reflections on Marpeck's Theology: Five Centuries Later

As I reflect on this early Anabaptist theology of children I find much with which I disagree. As a feminist Mennonite Christian educator of the 1990s, I have a different theological perspective both for myself and for the children. Anabaptist theology was framed in the context of sin, condemnation, repentance and eternal salvation. Salvation depended on repentance, turning from sin, and living a pure and obedient life of discipleship. The God of Anabaptist theology appeared to be male, fearful, judgmental, demanding total obedience under threat of eternal damnation.

While I find it necessary to confront and reject much of the language of my sixteenth century Anabaptist heritage, there are some theological points which I can claim as I explore a contemporary theology of children in a Mennonite context.

Children are innocent. I agree that infant baptism, when understood in terms of immediate and necessary salvation because of original sin, should be rejected. This is a critical theological concept that Anabaptism has given to us: children come from God; children are created in innocence; and children are blessed and loved by God.

41 J.C. Wenger, The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, 950.
Only God knows the age of accountability. Anabaptists did not give a suggested age when children became aware of their sinfulness. Some Anabaptist writers suggested that, by the time a child was six or seven, it was capable of knowing good and evil. This concurred with societal views about the age when children reached adulthood.42 This might also suggest more rigidity in Anabaptist thinking when the dynamic nature of the faith diminished. C.J. Dyck states that the legalism and strict insistence on rules and conformity within the Anabaptist circles led to rigid traditionalism:

Voluntarism was all but replaced by the pressures of conformity to the group. Baptism, then, no longer symbolized new spiritual life and faith but a routinized mechanism for the recruiting of members, not unlike that practiced by infant baptizers.43

Marpeck took the understanding of believers baptism seriously and did not appear to coerce children into making a faith decision. He committed them to God regardless of their choices. He admonished parents to nurture their children in the faith and then leave it up to God.

The issue of the age of accountability is one that refuses to go away in the Mennonite Church. I still see evidence of the legalistic approach to baptism and church membership. And, at the other end of the spectrum is a laissez-faire attitude that assumes that children are Christians because their parents are baptized. I want to believe that, in

42 This will be developed further in the sociological section. I suspect that cultural views on maturity and development have shaped the church's understanding of the age of accountability more than Mennonite Christians would admit.

general, Marpeck’s more moderate stance is still at the heart of the believers church tradition. The congregation and the home have a responsibility to nurture their children, but, ultimately, only the individual and God really know how their relationship is defined.

*Children develop a growing awareness of sin.* I agree that children gradually become aware of sin. However, my definition of sin differs from Marpeck’s view. I view sin as whatever *separates one from being in relationship with God.* Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, children have a loving relationship with God from the beginning, a sense of “at-one-ness” with the Divine. In varying degrees and for a variety of reasons, both personal and systemic, separation from this “one-ness” with God occurs. As children age they become increasingly aware of what separates them from that prior connection.

*Baptism is not meant for children.* I share the Anabaptist emphasis on believers baptism. Baptism is a choice made by individuals as a response to God’s call to a faithful, intentional relationship that includes discipleship. Because of the implications for radical discipleship, baptism is a serious decision made after careful thought. Much of the language of baptism in Anabaptist writings is negative and judging. I believe that this language is inappropriate for children who have grown up in the church and who have been raised by faithful Christian parents to follow God based on love, not fear. We need new language that invites children to ongoing faith transformation. Later in this thesis, I

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44 This is not only a rational decision. I believe it is a decision based on the integration of head and heart, that is, both intellect and emotion. Younger children may have “heart” experiences as their relationship with God is ongoing and transforming. Youth can make the decision based on rational thought. However, for me *believers baptism* cannot be authentic unless both intellect and emotion are involved.
suggest that, in keeping with the believers church tradition, baptism might be understood as one’s *ordination to vocational ministry*.

*Christian nurture plays an essential role.* Nurture is an essential component for a transformative faith in children. I second Marpeck’s admonition to parents to raise up their children to glorify God.45 The consecration service he described hints at a partnership of the congregation and the home in raising children to be Christian.

The issue of nurture is closely tied into the understanding of a child’s nature. The Anabaptists were very clear about the created innocence of children as well as their need to repent when they reached the age of discretion. However, it does not appear that they understood or explored the possibility of a personal relationship between the child and God before the child *came of age* and recognized the need for salvation. It appears to me that, since children were *safe* under Christ’s atonement, it did not matter what kind of *faith*, if any, may have existed prior to the age of moral reasoning.

In my work with children and my reading about children’s spirituality, I am convinced that children can and do have a meaningful relationship with God before they are baptized. We do them a disservice when we do not acknowledge this reality, or when we assume that repentance is necessary in order for a relationship with God to begin!

My study of Marpeck’s theology has raised important theological issues around our understandings of the nature of children. Although traditional Mennonite theology did

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45 However, my interpretation of what it means to “glorify God” may be different. Time does not permit me to explore this theological concept. I would suspect that the term may have more to do with obedience for Marpeck than with praise or devotion, which is closer to my understanding.
not pursue his moderate stance, there have been glimmers of hope, in recent decades, of other ways to understand children and their faith issues. What follows is a brief review of the official Mennonite documents that can inform us about the nature of children since Anabaptism.

**Children and Mennonite Documents of Faith**

Mennonite confessions of faith serve the church in a number of ways: they guide the church in interpreting the Scriptures; they provide direction for both belief and practice; they encourage unity within and among Mennonite congregations; they update the way in which beliefs and practices have been interpreted in the past in order to be relevant in the present situation.\(^6\) I found very few references to children in any of the official documents.\(^7\) Most documents verified the view that children of believers must repent, confess their sins, and be baptized as their entry point into full church membership. Participation in communion or the Lord’s Supper was reserved for baptized members. The age of accountability had no age attached to it, but it was assumed that adolescent children, regardless of their upbringing, must repent of their sins and experience new birth.

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\(^7\) There have been a number of confessional statements adopted by both denominations since the first one was hammered out by the Anabaptists in 1527. I have referenced a few of these documents. Those not quoted include statements that the General Conference Mennonite Church adopted in 1896 and 1941 based on the Ris Confession (Holland, 1776). In them, there are no references to children and/or their faith. The key Mennonite confessions of faith are collected in Howard John Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, and One God*, Text-Reader Series, No. 2 (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 63-111.
The earliest Anabaptist document, *The Schleitheim Confession of 1527*, made no reference to children except to reiterate that infant baptism was “the greatest and first abomination of the pope.” The *Mennonite Confession of Faith*, articulated in Dortrecht (Holland) in 1632, reminded the church of youth’s proclivity to sin: “We believe and confess since [humanity] is by nature inclined to do evil from [one’s] youth and is prone to sin and wickedness, that, therefore, the first lesson of the new covenant of the Son of God is repentance and amendment of life.”

The 1963 *Confession of Faith*, contained only brief mention of children but resonated with early Anabaptist theology:

> We believe that children are born with a nature which will manifest itself as sinful as they mature. When they come to know themselves to be responsible to God, they must repent and believe in Christ in order to be saved. Before the age when children are accountable to God, their sins are atoned for through the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus himself assured us that children are in the kingdom of God.

The most recent statement, *Confession of Faith in A Mennonite Perspective*, maintains the need for repentance as a criterion for baptism. Regarding salvation, Article 8 reiterates the need for repentance:

> We believe that, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God offers salvation from sin and a new way of life to all people. We receive God’s salvation when we repent of sin and accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In Christ, we are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community of God’s people... God brings us into right relationship without coercion. Our response includes

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yielding to God’s grace, placing full trust in God alone, repenting of sin, turning from evil, joining the fellowship of the redeemed, and showing forth the obedience of faith in word and deed.\textsuperscript{51}

The article on “Family, Singleness, and Marriage” stresses that children are to be loved first: “Children are of great importance. Jesus saw them as example of how to receive the reign of God. Children are to be loved, disciplined, taught, and respected in the home and in the church.”\textsuperscript{52}

It appears that Mennonite theologians have a kinder view of the nature of children than their Anabaptist forbears. The language seems more gentle and positive, which is probably a reflection on changing societal attitudes toward children. However, there has been little shift in the thinking about how a child, even a child of Christian believers, is viewed in relationship to God. An awareness of sin and subsequent repentance are required for baptism. Baptism is necessary in order for a young person to join the Mennonite church and participate in the Lord’s Supper. Children are safe in God’s reign but their status has a different meaning than baptized members living in the same reign. Youth are expected to seek baptism voluntarily upon repentance and confession of faith when they are personally nudged by the Holy Spirit.

Over the last several decades several books have been authored by Mennonites about children in Mennonite theology. These popular writings have been beneficial in educating the church about its children. Without exception the authors were professional

\textsuperscript{51} Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 35-36. The statements in this confessional document have been adopted by both Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church denominations who will join forces in July, 1999.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 72-73.
educators and/or deeply involved in Christian education. The books have a Marpeckian slant in that they attempted to provide a theological corrective and/or reaction to what was being practiced or promoted in some congregations under the influence of outside religious forces. For example, Yoder wrote *The Nurture and Evangelism of Children* as a response to a growing trend in the 1950s to baptize pre-adolescent children. The popular revivalist and child evangelism movements were being brought uncritically into Mennonite congregational settings in the United States. Mennonite leaders became concerned when children under the age of ten were being asked to make “born-again” faith decisions. This insistence on conversion seemed to be based on the fear that God punished even the very young for their sins and can be associated with the doctrine of original sin. Jeschke noted that in revivalism “the only people not already full members of the church by personal decision and baptism were preteen children. So the hellfire preaching of the camp meeting was then directed at them.”

To counteract the influence of revivalism and child evangelism, a delegate session of the Mennonite Church adopted a statement in 1955 which articulated twelve key points about children and faith. Most of these statements dealt with the age of accountability: children were protected by the atoning work of Christ; baptism and conversion were not

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53 At the time of their writing Marlin Jeschke was professor of Philosophy and Religion at Goshen College, a Mennonite institution in Indiana; Gideon Yoder served as professor of Christian Education and Church History at Hesston College, a Mennonite college in Kansas; Cornelia Lehn served as Director of Children’s Education for the General Conference Mennonite Church; and Marvin Yoder taught Bible teacher in Japan.

required of children because of their spiritually safe status; early adolescence was the time one became morally responsible to God; conversion was an awareness of guilt and sin, and demanded a decision. When one chose to reject God, one was no longer spiritually safe.\(^{55}\)

There was an admission in this document that children may have significant religious experiences prior to the age of accountability, “such as finding security by trust in Christ, experiencing a sense of forgiveness for [one’s] wrong acts, and enjoying private, family, and church worship and prayer. Yet, these experiences on the part of the child do not necessarily indicate the age of accountability has arrived.”\(^{56}\)

Nurture in the home and congregation was valued in the pre-conversion state of children’s faith in mid-century religious life. According to Yoder, an important goal of Christian education was to

lead persons into an experience of God and a knowledge of [God’s] purposes, and a commitment to them, as revealed in Christ. On the part of children, it involves regeneration of each child when [she/he] reaches the age of accountability. We teach and nurture in order to see [her/him] established as a happy and effective member of Christ’s body, the church.\(^{57}\)

Jeschke, who authored *Believers Baptism for Children of the Church*, was concerned about the faith of the church’s children. For him there were at least four conflicting views in the Mennonite church on how children became believers. One view insisted on a radical conversion experience for children, even though they have always


\(^{56}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 65.
been part of congregational life. A second view implied a complacent attitude about the children coming to faith by osmosis or evolution. This attitude was most evident with children who were \textit{bred, born and raised} Mennonite, and whose ethnicity was more important, or no different from, their faith. Jeschke provided this description:

Parents take for granted that their children are numbered among the elect by reasons of privileged birth, that growing up within the atmosphere of the church will more or less inevitably Christianize their children - if they are not Christians already. Their children's appropriation of the church's faith may be considered a rather routine 'confirmation' by way of the annual baptismal class; thus their youth are acculturated and socialized in values they are expected to accept as a matter of course...[B]aptism too often becomes a sign, not of spiritual life, but only of ethnicity and social-moral respectability.\footnote{Jeschke, 97-98.}

A third view tended toward idolizing childhood. With this view came the desire for the children to be full participants in church life, including equal participation with baptized members in the Lord's Supper with little theological reflection about its meaning. Jeschke argued for a fourth view, a "more excellent way"\footnote{Ibid., 10.} of inviting children to baptism and membership through \textit{appropriation of the faith}, the kind of faith formation experienced by Timothy, that was nurtured by his mother, grandmother and the faith community. Like Timothy, children of faithful Mennonite parents raised within the Christian community

are shaped by the instruction and example of the life of the people of God. They are nurtured in biblical history and doctrine and thus are beneficiaries of the blessings of the Christian way. Children reared in Christian homes and churches are also sheltered from undesirable worldly influences to the extent that this is possible.\footnote{Ibid., 68-69.}
This view does not call for nor expect a dramatic conversion experience for children who are not from first-generation Christian homes and who are part of a church community. However, a New Testament faith is still called for today, accords Jeschke, and the concession of faith still includes...discipleship of Christ, the life of God’s Spirit, commitment to the church, and moral probity. We need not settle for a second-rate faith in second-generation Christians, even though we may be tempted to accept acculturation, socialization, and social conformity as substitutes for genuine faith.61

In 1984 a small booklet for Mennonites was published articulating current beliefs about the place of children.62 Reminiscent of Marpeck’s stance, readers were reminded that children are to be loved, valued, considered part of God’s family. Adults were warned against attempting to precipitate a conversion experience in children before they were ready or mature. There was a call to trust God’s Spirit to work in the hearts of children in a redeeming, reconciling, and restoring way that aided one’s spiritual growth.

Cornelia Lehn encouraged believers in faith communities to love their children and allow the Holy Spirit to call children to public faith: “Reams have been written about [the age of accountability] and what all writers seem to agree on is that no one but the Holy Spirit knows. Always, God is the one who calls, and on the level of his or her own maturity, it is the human being who responds.”63

61 Ibid., 118.


The Need for Another Radical Reformation

It appears, understandably so, that the official documents continue to be in tune with the original thinking (orthodoxy) of the early Anabaptist church under the leadership of the more conservative group. It is serious work to reach agreement on the language and the concepts of our theology when congregations in the denomination are consulted, as was the case as our most recent Confession of Faith was being developed. However, I am disappointed that these documents pay so little attention to the faith needs of the children. It is not that the church does not care about its children. Since Anabaptist beginnings, theologians have had to wrestle with the implications of faith from a believers church perspective which assumes a voluntary, adult faith commitment to God and believers baptism. I suspect that the Anabaptists “theologized backwards” to find a place for the children in the church. Besides, when children were deemed to be spiritually safe, it was less necessary to think about their spirituality.

The lack of reference to children might also be a sad reflection on their low status in church life. It is possible that theologians did not think to include anything about the children. And it appears that there is a hesitancy to define a theological understanding of conversion and baptism that is more appropriate to the reality that twenty-first century Mennonites are no longer first-generation New Testament nor Anabaptist Christians.

I concur with Jeschke’s critique that the church lacks a well-defined theology of children especially as it relates to baptism. His call for new language and understanding of baptism for the children of the church is valid:
One of the weaknesses of the believers baptism tradition has been neglect of a theology of the status of children. It has not necessarily neglected *children* because...the believers church has intuitively developed a program of nurture and youth remarkably like that of pedobaptist churches. Nonetheless, single-minded adherence to the New Testament pattern of baptism has hindered the believers church tradition from giving attention to what we call the more excellent way. Adult conversion and baptism permits, and should lead to, the nurture of children in the way of the kingdom, thus sparing such children a period of life in bondage to evil from which they must then be converted to faith.

The believers baptism tradition has not, in other words, been ready to recognize that the baptism of second- and third- and thirteenth-generation Christians inescapably requires an adaptation of the New Testament practice of baptism of adult converts. And this need of adaptation is not to be deplored or merely conceded with reluctance or embarrassment but celebrated with joy and thanksgiving as the fruit of the New Testament pattern of baptism.\(^{64}\)

I wish that Jeschke would have wrestled more with Anabaptist theologians around issues of baptism.\(^{65}\) Marpeck would probably concur with much of Jeschke’s stance on children. He would support the fact that children should not be pressured to make decisions for which they are not ready or capable; that faith transformation is necessary, but that the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways to initiate the transformation; that parents do their best, then leave the nudging to God.

As I have reflected on the nature of children from Anabaptist and Mennonite theological perspectives, I conclude that, for a theology of children to be relevant in the next century, it is necessary to revisit some foundational tenets of our faith heritage.

Mennonite theology is fundamentally important to me. I concur with the Anabaptist understanding that children do not enter the world as depraved sinners in need

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\(^{64}\) Jeschke, *Believers Baptism for Children of the Church*, 103-104.

\(^{65}\) Jeschke’s concentration is on the New Testament model of baptism from which Anabaptists derived their understanding of believers baptism.
of immediate baptism. **Baptism is a personal and voluntary decision that belongs outside the realm of childhood. With baptism comes faith ownership and accountability to God within the church community. Though the ambiguity around the age of accountability has led to confusion within the church, I think that it is wise to insist that it is ultimately God who initiates the call to deeper discipleship in God’s own timing.**

The Mennonite Church is in need of a more clearly defined theology of children. An understanding of the spiritual status of children is important for the sake of the children and those who minister with them. An important aspect of the church’s ministry has to do with passing on the faith and the values of our Mennonite faith traditions to the next generation. What we believe about children must be stated clearly to help congregations know how best to nurture faith in their children in appropriate and meaningful ways.

The language we use for God and theology is an important factor in shaping our children’s and our own understandings of faith. The God of the Anabaptist era was seen as a male God of judgement demanding obedience and offering salvation from an eternity in hell. Does (can) the present and future believers church have a different understanding of God, one who can be Friend and Guide, desiring a lifelong companionship that assumes trust and discipleship? It is my belief that the language of faith can be articulated in positive terms that celebrate as well as judge human life in relationship with God.

It is time for a revised baptismal theology. In both Anabaptist and normative Mennonite theology baptism signifies a turning point in one’s life as a response to God’s call to salvation. The language of baptism intimates a turning from sin and accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour of one’s life. For children who have been nurtured in a
Christian home and the church, this may be a foreign language. God may already be an important part of their lives. So for them the language of commitment is more appropriate as a reason for baptism. Here commitment is a promise to seek “at-one-ness” with God, to do God’s will in all of life, and to follow the ways modelled by Jesus’ life and ministry.

Our normative baptismal theology assumes that one’s baptism is the beginning of life as a Christian. The recent Minister’s Manual states that “[b]aptism is not the end but the beginning of a Christian’s walk with God and the church.” Such language negates the walk with God that begins long before a child is ready for baptism. Jubilee: God’s Good News, our Mennonite children’s curriculum, repeatedly invites children to walk with God and follow Jesus. For Christian educators who use this curriculum, a loving relationship with God is assumed to be in existence with our children even in early childhood years. It would be helpful if the church’s theological leaders and those who minister directly with children would communicate the same message to the children.

The church exists in the realm of the already-not yet. So much of our inherited theology centres around the belief that children are to be nurtured in the faith so that when they are ready they will make the right decisions. I challenge this view that leads to benign neglect in Mennonite theological reflection around issues of children’s faith. We treat our children as part of the not-yet realm and forget that they already belong in God’s realm.

I believe that it is necessary to revisit the role that rational thought plays in our theological understandings of the nature of children. Ought intellectual and moral capabilities to be the basis for a relationship with God and the church? The concepts of

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knowing good from evil and being morally responsible are important and necessary aspects of our theology, but must they be the determining factors regarding the ability of children to relate to God?

Nurturing faith in children is an important tenet of our Anabaptist and Mennonite theology. Children require intentional Christian upbringing in the home. How Christian parents understand the nature of children has implications for parenting. I agree with Anne Rupp’s assessment that, because the beliefs of parents are communicated to the children, it is important to know one’s beliefs about children. She writes:

If we believe a child is born a sinner, we may be concerned about infant baptism. Or we may propel our child toward an early experience of salvation. If we believe children are born as spiritual beings, we may appreciate their sacredness but neglect to nurture faith, assuming God is at work in the child. If we believe children are born as innocent or moral beings with the potential for choosing good or evil, we will want to understand how faith develops in children and how it relates to moral and emotional development. If we believe children become morally accountable in adolescence, we may look ahead to that time rather than focusing on the process of faith nurture and faith sharing in young children.67

For Rupp, children are spiritual beings right from birth: “If God is at the center of existence and the ground of our being, and if all are created in the divine image empowered by God’s breath of life (Genesis 2:7), we must believe that our children are spiritual beings.”68 And if we believe our children are spiritual beings, loved by God, we need to rethink their place within the life of the congregation.


68 Ibid., 18.
CHAPTER 4

THE FRAMEWORK OF ECCLESIOLOGY

The Role of Imagery and Metaphor in Defining Church

Letty Russell defines ecclesiology as “the theological interpretation of the meaning of church.” How do we understand the church: as structure? institution? event? a place where God is present? a group of people gathered for worship and instruction? Theologians from all Christian faith traditions, including Anabaptists and Mennonites, have employed multiple images to explain, describe, or define church. No one metaphor can give a complete and whole understanding of church—there are challenges in each one.

I have several reasons for choosing to work with metaphor as I examine Mennonite ecclesiology. First, as a visual learner, I learn best through imagery and word-pictures. Second, thinking metaphorically helps me to consider concepts more intuitively and playfully. Third, in Mennonite ecclesiology certain metaphors predominate. I want to examine these metaphors in light of my advocacy for children. What is the place of children in past and present metaphors that the Mennonite church has embraced?

John Driver points out that the “Bible employs nearly one hundred different images for the church, thus developing a composite picture that, like a great painting, is

filled with inexhaustible meaning." In his classic book, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Paul Minear described, in detail, ninety-six images from the New Testament alone! Early Anabaptists were forced to redefine the nature of church as they charted new territory in their efforts to remove themselves from the institutionalized church of the sixteenth century. Feminist theologians, in their challenge of the patriarchy and hierarchy, are attempting to re-imagine a church that is more inclusive and egalitarian. In the same vein, as an advocate for children, I want to image a church in our Mennonite tradition that both includes and welcomes children.

"Ecclesiology," wrote Tom Finger, "cannot focus entirely on the kerygmatic ideal of the church, but must also investigate the social dynamics and assumptions of its present context." The church continually needs to find metaphors that speak to its identity and role in the world in meaningful ways. Driver laments the tendency of the church to draw its models from society rather than from the biblical tradition in its efforts to understand itself. He reminds his readers of the models the church has borrowed over the centuries -- the empire model of the fourth century, the feudal models of the Middle Ages, the imperial model of Protestant missionary activity, the democratic model, and the

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present corporate business model\textsuperscript{73} - none of which have been adequate or, in fact, true to
the radical nature of the New Testament tradition. According to Driver,

If the church is to recover the integrity of its life and mission, it must have adequate
images to capture and inspire its imagination. Models drawn from the secular society
have invariably betrayed it into the hands of the enemy. Even biblical images have
often failed to reorient the church in apostolic faithfulness. The church has allowed
its understanding of those images to be conditioned by the prevailing ethos in which
it participates. Biblical images must be read and interpreted afresh, freed from
traditional and current ecclesiastical practices. That new reading comes to us as a
gift from the Spirit of God. The images must be grasped in the context of the faith
community, committed to obedience.\textsuperscript{74}

We need to find fresh images for the contemporary Mennonite church if we wish
to survive with integrity in the world. But first, a look to the past. How can the early
Anabaptist church inform our search for a contemporary metaphor for church?

**Normative Anabaptist and Mennonite Ecclesiology**

The ecclesiological dimension was central to the theology of Anabaptism. The
church was to embody Jesus Christ visibly and intentionally. Snyder asserts that the
biblical model for the church was

the community of yielded, regenerated, faithful, baptized, committed and obedient
believers - a ‘community of saints.’ The anchor of Anabaptist theology and
spirituality was this community, formed first by the spiritual, and then the water
baptism of believers, maintained by fraternal admonition, and nurtured by the Supper
of the Lord (celebrated as a memorial and a pledge by those who had committed
themselves to the church in baptism), by communal worship and visible expressions
of love among the members of the body.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{73} Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission*, 21.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{75} Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 90-91.
Early Anabaptist theologians debated vigorously about the meaning of church with both Catholic and Lutheran theologies and practices. These radical dissenters challenged many traditions of the Catholic church that were in dire need of reform. However, more than reaction was essential in order for the fledgling groups to survive. Since they had abandoned the medieval church and pushed beyond the Protestant Reformers, the Anabaptists were forced to construct a new theological and ecclesiological foundation on which to build the true free church. According to Snyder all of the Anabaptist groups could agree that the crucial marks of the church as the community of the saints were baptism, communion (the Supper), the ban, and mutual aid. It is through these visible signs that the Anabaptist church exemplified the Body of Christ to the world.

Pilgram Marpeck took issue with the ecclesiological views of both spiritualist and literalist groups within Anabaptism. While he agreed with spiritualists such as Hans Denck on some issues, he “rejected what he perceived to be two fundamental dangers in Christian spiritualism: a doctrine of salvation that excluded the neighbour, and a Christology that ignored the human nature of Christ.” Furthermore, Marpeck insisted

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76 Ibid., 91.

77 According to Arnold Snyder, Marpeck agreed with Denck that it is the living God within that directs the Christian life, which can be described as the “law of love” for God and neighbour that dwells within the heart. For more about Anabaptism spiritualism, refer to Snyder, Anabaptist History and Theology, 305-326.

78 Ibid., 314.
“that the practice and expression of divine love must take place within the community of love, and cannot exist in splendid spiritual isolation.”

The literalists, on the other hand, clung to the scriptures as their guide for Christian living, emphasizing unity, purity and obedience to the scriptures. Ultimately this led to a more literalistic and legalistic understanding of church and its membership.

Menno Simons became increasingly concerned with a pure church which translated into a dependency upon undue strictness in the form of the ban, or shunning those who were not deemed pure. Marpeck disputed this group’s strong, legalistic attitudes and practices:

> It is my fervent prayer that for the sake of Christ, you get your judgements from Christ, and learn long-suffering, forebearance [sic], and meekness from [God]...My great contention in my conscience with you is that nowhere do I find such precipitate, superficial judgements and verdicts on every little matter in Christ and His apostolic church as I find with you.

Marpeck had well-defined ecclesiological views. For him, the church was to be christocentric, scripturally based, pure and holy, and communal. These four aspects characterized the early Anabaptist church from the perspective of Marpeck, who was known to reflect theologically with a group of believers on many points of theology.

> Marpeck’s ecclesiology was strongly christocentric. According to Snyder,

For Marpeck the church as the Body of Christ was a sacramental offer of God’s grace, mercy, and salvation to all. As in the incarnation, God’s grace continues to be offered through the physical Body of Christ to individuals and to the world by

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79 Ibid., 361.
80 Ibid., 339.
81 Ibid., 339-350. Here Snyder critiques Menno Simon’s view of church.
82 Klassen and Klaassen, The Writings of Pilgrim Marpeck, 360.
means of external and visible testimonies, ceremonies, and acts of love... The Body of Christ is also the place where believers are expected to grow in Christian love by means of the practice of the disciplines of worship, love and service. For Marpeck, Christian worship was crucial for evangelism, and also for the spiritual development of believers, for it was through the church that believers were to be challenged and helped in the process of growing into the nature of Christ.  

*The scriptures were foundational.* In *The Admonition of 1542*, Marpeck wrote:

The church of Christ is comprised of true believers and children of God who can praise the name of God. No one else belongs in it except the believers, considering that all people by nature are ignorant of divine matters, and first achieve true faith and knowledge of Christ through the Word... It is undeniable and incontrovertible, therefore that the true proclamation of Christ’s holy gospel is the first thing needed to establish the church.  

*Baptism was one’s entrance into the church.* Marpeck insisted on baptism as the rite of initiation into the church community:

First, the true baptism of Christ is, and should be, a door and entrance into the holy church. For no one should be allowed to enter the holy church of Christ unless it be a fact that [one] who seeks to be incorporated into the body of Christ confesses the true faith by baptism, denies the devil and all [one’s] fleshly lusts, and is incorporated on the basis of this confession into the holy fellowship of Christ.  

Later Marpeck stated that the actual function of baptism is “that believers be joined together visibly and accepted into a holy church.”

*The holy church was a community of believers.* One could not be a Christian alone. Boyd reiterated the important role of the individual and the community in the Anabaptist Christian’s life. There is a new relationship of mutuality, provided by the Spirit, 

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83 Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 362.


85 Ibid., 214.

86 Ibid., 295.
between the individual and God and the individual and the new community. Boyd stated that Marpeck's "affirmation that the new being... integrates the spiritual and the material leads him to a radical ecclesiology... For him, the new nature incorporated individual and communal reality."\(^{87}\)

Because of its strong communal and metaphorical nature the early Anabaptist church took membership and accountability seriously. According to Marpeck, communion which was reserved exclusively for faithful believers served the church in two ways:

The function of the Lord's Supper or *communion* is twofold. The one function is that the holy Christian church shall be held together by it, and be maintained in a united faith and Christian love. The other, that all evil, and all that does not belong to the holy, pure church of Christ and is offensive, may be cut off and banned.\(^{88}\)

One can see that the *community of saints* and the *Body of Christ* were two metaphors which dominated Marpeck's view of church. Both images emphasized the visible presence of Christ as manifested in the faith and practice of the Anabaptist believers. Entry into the holy and pure church was voluntary and via baptism upon confession of faith in Jesus Christ, and a further commitment to accountability within a community of like-minded believers. Was there a place in such a church for the children of the early Anabaptist believers?

For Marpeck discipleship was the key response to one's baptism. Tennant comments that since "a child cannot meet the demands of discipleship...baptism is

\(^{87}\) Boyd, *Pilgrimage Marpeck: His Life and Social Theology*, 92-93.

meaningless.” This was one of the arguments Marpeck used against infant baptism. With their inability to be disciples, children had no place in Marpeck’s church. Tennant summarized the general Anabaptist attitude toward children’s place in the church:

For the Anabaptists, because of the stress on individual, personal decision, because of the voluntaristic notion of the church, and because of the great stress on the need to show the fruits of repentance in the life of the believer (a view reinforced by the practice of the Ban, and the view of an almost ‘objective holiness’ of the church), children were not in the church and could claim no special merit because they were the offspring of believers. 

This view contrasted with the doctrine of a contemporary Reform theologian, John Calvin, who based his understanding of the status of the child on covenantal theology, in which children are “placed firmly within the church with their parents, adopted on the grounds of the covenant made to the believers and their children.”

Though children did not have a firm place within the early Anabaptist church, they were not disregarded. A service of consecration acknowledged their existence within the church community. Marpeck instructed that:

the infants shall be named before a congregation and God shall duly be praised for them; thanks and blessing shall be given to [God’s] fatherly goodness that, through Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior, [God] has also had mercy on the innocent creatures and that, without discrimination, [God] has taken them in [God’s] hands and assured them of the Kingdom of God. We rightfully owe [God] gratitude for [God’s] goodness. In the liberty of the Spirit and the Word of Christ, we should pray for everyone, and also for the child, that God would also in future give us knowledge of [God’s] gracious will, etc. We admonish the parents to cleanse their conscience, as much as lies in them, with respect to the child, to do whatever is

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90 Ibid., 369.

91 Ibid.
needed to raise the child up to the praise and glory of God, and to commit the child to God until it is clearly seen that God is working in [him/her] for faith or unfaith.  

Parents were admonished to teach their children to fear and obey God so that, when they were at an age when they could determine right from wrong, they would choose the godly way and join the *community of saints* in the pure and holy church that lived in obedience to the rule of Christ.

I have much respect for the work of Pilgram Marpeck in articulating an Anabaptist theology of the church. He gave a clear picture of what the church *ought to be.* Because the Anabaptist movement grew out of a reaction to the vices and abuses within the medieval church, it was important and probably necessary to insist on a holy and pure church that was open only to adults who voluntarily committed themselves to serious discipleship. It was more than likely that such radical discipleship would lead to the loss of status, home, even one’s life, in a society that rejected and forcibly removed religious dissidents.

The Anabaptist theological voice came from the margins as it confronted the medieval church. Anabaptists opposed infant baptism with their insistence that discipleship was based on free choice, according to their interpretation of the New Testament scriptures. They were clear in their beliefs that membership in the church had serious implications and expectations for believers. The exclusion of children was a deliberate decision, not out of a rejection of children, but because the church was being defined in a way that included only those who voluntarily committed their lives to follow Jesus. In the

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Anabaptist perspective children were not capable of such choices. We must remember that the Anabaptist movement was a first generation phenomenon which began as a reaction to the church and society and served as a wake up call for true believers to choose a firm, committed stand with their baptism and participation in a community of saints as the visible Body of Christ.

Throughout the generations of normative Anabaptist and Mennonite theology the church has been defined in terms that reflect the early Anabaptist ecclesiological stance. The confessions of the faith tradition hold true to the concept of a holy and pure church that served as the visible Christ in the world. The Mennonite Confession of Faith adopted at Dortrecht (1632) affirmed that the church was the visible Church of God consisting of those who “truly repent, rightly believe, and have received true baptism.”93 The only reference to children in this document is a reminder of youth’s tendency to sin.

The 1963 Confession of Faith viewed the church as “the visible body of those who are Christian disciples.”94 Membership in the church was a voluntary response to God’s offer of salvation, sealed by baptism, and signifying that one was “adopted into the family of God.”95 Parents were encouraged to “pledge themselves to the faithful nurture of their children.”96 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective (1995) reinforced the

93 Horst, Mennonite Confession of Faith, 29.
94 Mennonite Confession of Faith, 16.
95 Ibid., 13.
96 Ibid., 20.
view of the church as a community of faithful disciples. Article 9, “The Church of Jesus Christ,” begins in this way:

We believe that the church is the assembly of those who have accepted God’s offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The church is the new community of disciples... The church, the body of Christ, is called to become ever more like Jesus Christ, its head, in its worship, witness, mutual love and care, and the ordering of its common life.97

This most recent confessional document employs several images to describe the Mennonite understanding of church: assembly of the saved, society of believers, God’s people of faith, household or family of God, the body of Christ, and a community of believers.98 There are no references to children in this article on the church. Article 19 supports the view that children, as part of family, are to be loved and disciplined. They are important because “Jesus saw them as examples of how to receive the reign of God.”99 However, there is no explanation as to what this might mean in practical terms for Mennonite congregations. Even though the family of God is used as a very recent metaphor, it is not assumed that children have much status within that family.

Although many images for the church are used in our Mennonite tradition, there are few that refer to or include children. Children appear to be invisible or non-existent and certainly ignored in our official Mennonite ecclesiology. It appears to me that, on the whole, the orthodox view of Anabaptist/Mennonite theology is still on solid ground in its exclusion of the children from its ecclesiology.

97 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 39.

98 Ibid., 39,40.

99 Ibid., 72.
The Need for New and Inclusive Metaphors

In general when the church defines itself metaphorically there is little mention about the place or status of the children. Even the feminist theologians, who strive so hard for an equal place in the church for women, gays and lesbians, and racial minorities, often fail to talk about the children. One has to read between the lines to determine if present metaphors for the church can be inclusive of children. Through the lens of child advocacy I will reflect briefly on one metaphor, namely the family of God, that has been used widely in recent Mennonite ecclesiology. \(^{100}\)

A primary image for God’s people in the Mennonite faith tradition is family. The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective frequently refers to the church as God’s family as in, “God desires all people to become part of the church, God’s family.”\(^{101}\) In 1973, Paul M. Lederach wrote a pamphlet comparing the spiritual and biological families in Mennonite understanding. He defined the primary role of the children in the church as that of carefully observing the adults.\(^{102}\)

More recently John Driver asserts that the biblical vision that grounded God’s covenantal promise to the children of Israel, continued through the New Testament

\(^{100}\) It would require its own research paper to do justice to the place of the image of family in Mennonite ecclesiology.

\(^{101}\) Confession of Faith in A Mennonite Perspective, 72.

\(^{102}\) Paul M. Lederach, The Spiritual Family and the Biological Family (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973). He maintained that “new birth” assumes entrance into the family of God as "babes" in Christ. This assumes, then, that "real babies" are not part of the church family. For him, the most effective Christian education for children is to observe the adults in action in the congregation as they worship, give care, and make decisions.
understanding, and applies to God’s people today, is articulated in familial terms. The concept of family has always been a basic element of social existence though it has been interpreted in many ways such as tribe, clan, household, nuclear family. “Being a family means participating in a common tradition, sharing in a common character and a common destiny.”

Driver believes that Jesus restored a holistic view of family which was more egalitarian, and which, ironically, did not include fathers. In this eschatological family

God is Father, Jesus is Lord over the household, and its members are his disciples. Older women are mothers, while men and younger people are brothers and sisters. But at the same time, all are little children, even babes, in the family to whom the words of Jesus are directed.

It is difficult to know if in Driver’s view of family the reference to children actually includes children, or if he is referring to the innocence and immaturity of young believers. My suspicion is that, like many other Biblical scholars who examine the texts that refer to children, Driver is “spiritualizing” children, using them to symbolize those who are young in faith but not in literal age.

According to Lois Barrett, the basic metaphor for the house church is the family where members are sisters and brothers to each other who live in a child-parent relationship with God. Although Barrett asserts that the house church includes children, she does not specify the status of children in relationship to the adult sisters and brothers. To her credit she affirms the presence of children in the midst of the house church

\[103\] Driver, *Images of the Church*, 142.

\[104\] Ibid., 145.

activities, where relationships of trust and caring are strengthened: "The house church that seeks wholeness will also value children and youth and seek to support them and disciple them into the family of God as carefully as the church does for adults."\(^{106}\)

C. Norman Kraus has stressed the importance of the "individual-in-community" in relationship with God. This is experienced first in the human family: "In the biblical perspective, the human family (community) living under God's covenant of peace (shalom) is the goal of creation."\(^{107}\) Jesus inaugurated a new age of the Spirit that invited people to participate as individuals within a larger community or family. Jesus also modelled a way for family to be a "gospel-oriented" community.\(^{108}\)

In summary, it appears that, though one might expect that children would have a definite place in a church that used the family as an important image, this does not appear to be the case. One does not become part of God's family until one is born again and becomes an infant in Christ. We have tended to ignore the biological infants and children when we talk theologically about God's family. In God's family, real children are invisible and voiceless.

It is difficult to view the family of God outside the lenses of the nuclear family of our present society. James Dobson and other evangelical fundamentalist Christians call people back to traditional family values based on the myth of the nuclear family of the

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 74.


1950s. This is not the Biblical view of family and it excludes many families that are defined differently (single parent families, blended families, childless families). Dobson's view of family is based on hierarchical authority with father as the "head" of the home, mother as the primary nurturer, and children as obedient followers of the will of the parents and of God. This is not my perception of the type of egalitarian community that Jesus advocated when he expanded his definition of family as brothers and sisters who are doing God's will (Mark 3:35).

Janet Fishburn challenges the "idolatry" of family in congregational language and life. She believes that Americans have domesticated the church, making the pastor chaplain of the family pew (family units) rather than spiritual director to a household of God whose first loyalty is to God's spiritual community and not one's biological family. She promotes the metaphor of church as household of God where spiritual formation of all ages is at the centre of church life. This faith family shares with parents the responsibility for the faith of the children. Fishburn advocates an inclusive family pew as a "gathering of Christians who worship because they want to love and serve the Lord." Some children are there because their parents are Christians. Others are there because someone invited them.  

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110 Ibid., 170-172.

111 Ibid., 183.
The *household of freedom* imagery introduced by Letty Russell challenges issues of authority and equality in the church. The metaphor of round table within this household of freedom affirms equality of relationships and shared leadership and practices hospitality, especially to those on the margins of society. It is unclear to me if Russell would include children as people on the margins who have a place in her ecclesial understanding.

To maintain a viable *family* metaphor for church, I believe it is necessary to reinterpret our understanding of family, something that is very difficult to do. In my view it is better to find new language for church. The *household of God* terminology has potential if its definition can be expanded beyond the traditional family unit to include all sizes, shapes and definitions of family. However, I prefer to find new wineskins, metaphors that give energy and excitement, images that "capture new dimensions that have been lost or somewhat obscured or diminished."  

**Conclusions: An Exclusive Ecclesiology**

Sixteenth century Anabaptist theology did not have a place for children and youth within its ecclesiology. The official church position ever since has been that children cannot participate fully in church life since they are not baptized and they cannot be

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baptized because they are incapable of taking a personal, owned faith stance. By virtue of age alone, children cannot be members of a Mennonite congregation.

As the twenty-first century dawns, Mennonite Christians have become increasingly aware that we have lost the distinctive Mennonite identity that in the past was being formed in children as they were nurtured in faith in a way that led almost naturally to a decision to be baptized. Gerald Gerbrandt writes that it is crucial that “we recognize the need within our Mennonite church to determine a way of developing identity with the church in our children, now that we no longer are part of communities made distinct through geography or custom, and that we develop symbolic ways of fostering such identity.”114 I believe that it is necessary to forge a new identity as Mennonite congregations, an identity that is inclusive of children and youth who are not baptized but are welcomed and invited to participate in church life in authentic ways.

Ecclesiological language plays an important role in articulating the place and identity of children. Although I have discovered that this is a non-issue for many church leaders, I think it is important to have language that is both positive and affirming of the children in our midst. Using the language of children as unbaptized non-members tends to marginalize and minimize their status in congregational life. Such negative language does not seem appropriate for children who have always been part of a Mennonite congregation, who come to church every Sunday, and who participate actively in Christian education programs.

We Mennonites need to wrestle with our definitions of “Christian”115 within our ecclesial framework. The language of my childhood religious experience stated that one is not a Christian until one is baptized. How, then, do we define children who are not baptized? Are they “non-Christian,” or “happy pagans” as one colleague suggested partially in jest? A contemporary theology of children in a Mennonite context will have to wrestle with appropriate language that describes children’s place in the church.

Normative Anabaptist and Mennonite theologies state firmly that baptism is one’s initiation into church membership. With baptism come all the rights and privileges of membership which usually means participation in communion, on committees, and in membership meetings. I wonder if there is a way for the church, with integrity, to redefine its understanding of membership that would allow children to have fuller participation in church life. Can membership be rooted in an aspect of church life other than baptism?

There is potential for finding a more inclusive ecclesiology if we are able to imagine or envision new metaphors for church life. For me the family of God image, which was not a critical image in Anabaptist theology, is no longer an adequate metaphor for the contemporary Mennonite context. I believe that it is possible to find a metaphor that would meet some, if not all, of the characteristics of church that Marpeck embraced: Christocentric, scripturally based, community-minded, pure and holy. With these characteristics in mind and the desire to be inclusive of children, I propose a new metaphor.

115 This understanding of the word “Christian” will be explored further in my findings. As part of my research, I invited children to tell me how they defined the word.
that is rooted in the scriptures and may even catch the imagination of the present Mennonite context: *church as children in God’s playground*.

The search for a new image must begin with the scriptures. In the past, biblical texts that have been diminished or obscured by biblical scholarship and inattention are those that deal with children as *real children*. Perhaps these texts can lead us to a metaphor that is refreshing, engaging, and inclusive of children. In the next chapter I look to the Scriptures for enlightenment about the status of children both with God and in the congregation.
CHAPTER 5
ATTENDING TO THE SCRIPTURES

Pivotal Texts That Refer to Children

According to Letty Russell, feminism is an “advocacy word,”\(^\text{116}\) and a feminist theological perspective “represents a search for liberation from all forms of dehumanization on the part of those who advocate full human personhood for all of every race, class, sex, sexual orientation, ability, and age.”\(^\text{117}\) As an advocate for children who tend to have no power in the church and in society I want to encourage Mennonite congregations to become hospitable places that both welcome and include children. My examination of the scriptures is thus informed by both liberative and feminist perspectives.

The Scriptures are highly regarded in Mennonite congregational life and they inform my faith life as well. A story from the gospel of Mark provides a point of reference for me as an advocate for children. Mark 7:24-30 gives an account of a rare occasion in which Jesus appeared to be “caught with his compassion down.”\(^\text{118}\) A Greek woman from Syrophoenicia challenged Jesus to share his compassion with those outside the Jewish


\(^{117}\) Ibid.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 163.
community after he refused to heal her daughter. The woman entered into debate with him, suggesting that he could show more hospitality to those with little or no status.

Schüssler Fiorenza writes that “as a cultural and religious outsider, she [the woman] enters into theological argument with Jesus about the exclusion of Gentiles from the life-giving power of God’s reign... No one should be excluded. God’s power of salvation is without boundaries.”

This text about “status-equalization” appeals to me on two fronts. As a denominational staff person, I sometimes feel that I do not have the same status as other church leaders. I am female, a lay person, serving in the field of Christian education, with a specialty in children’s ministries. In my ministry work I am acutely aware that children’s needs and issues do not receive much attention from many pastors, church boards, or church institutions. This story of the Syrophoenician woman gives me courage to speak out on behalf of our children who deserve more than the crumbs. They need to be received as genuine persons who have a rightful place in congregational life.

I challenge the structures and theologies that exclude our children, that do not affirm them, and that pay little attention to their needs and to an authentic faith that they already have. Like the audacious woman who “witnessed to Jesus about the need to broaden his ministry of hospitality to those outside the house of Israel,” I want to

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121 Russell, *Church in the Round*, 163.
encourage congregations to be inclusive of the children in ways that are appropriate and meaningful for the children. Russell suggests that

...[T]he way in which Jesus is portrayed as changing his mind and learning new perspectives on his own ministry is a model for us as we seek to gain new perspectives on issues of chosenness and exclusion in the life of the church. Jesus' willingness to change is a model for all of us of what it means to face the contradictions of our lives that serve to exclude the least of our brothers and sisters. 122

I examine the following scripture texts from a hermeneutic of suspicion that allows me to talk back to the normative interpretation that is given them and encourages me to challenge congregations to practice inclusivity as they honour relationships that affirm, celebrate, and accept people of all ages, especially the children.

While there are hundreds of references to children in the Bible, very few refer to real or biological children. For my purposes I have selected a few key texts that are especially enlightening for me and support my claims within this thesis that children have a relationship with God from before birth and that there can be a place for children within Mennonite ecclesiology. While some may consider this “proof-texting,” I do not regard my process as such. I believe that what I am doing here is no different from the way Anabaptists and theologians through the ages have used Scripture to discern God’s direction for being church. The following texts both affirm and celebrate children’s spirituality and presence in the midst of God’s people.

122 Ibid., 164.
Psalm 139:13-16 and Jeremiah 1:4-10. These texts remind the people of God that they are created and called by God to be in relationship. The psalmist acknowledged that God determined both the beginning and end of life. It is God “who formed my inward parts; ... [who] knit me together in my mother’s womb.” The prophet Jeremiah echoed this understanding of connectedness with God from pre-birth: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah recognized that God had a purpose for his life and vocation before he was born. He heard God’s call to follow when he was a young boy, a call reminiscent of the call of young Samuel to listen and respond to God’s voice.

Deuteronomy 6 and Joshua 4. These passages support the role of instruction and liturgy in nurturing faith in children. The book of Deuteronomy served as an instruction textbook for the Hebrew people, guiding them in a way of living that was faithful and obedient to God. Devotion was expressed through lifestyle and liturgy. The Shema, articulated in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, was to be repeated twice daily by the people as a reminder to love God with their whole being, that is, with heart, soul, and might, and to recite this commandment to their children and talk about them all the time. Brueggemann

123 All references are from NRSV.

124 Psalm 139:13. Verses 13-16 suggest that God was involved in human life from conception.

125 Jeremiah 1:5

calls this educative process a “pedagogy of saturation,”127 in which the recital of God’s transformational activity is the “real subject of every conversation,”128 and the “evangelist in the conversation must be a skillful, sensitive, hermeneutist.”129 Brueggemann suggests that

there is a cognitive, intellectual dimension to faith that needs articulation. The conversation with our young must be persistently interpretive. The act of interpretation need not be excessively didactic, but simply ongoing readiness to help connect the little pieces to a larger context to which the adult community of faith subscribes.130

Liturgy, rituals, and ceremonies were conducted within the religious community in part to instruct children about the one true God who liberated God’s people from oppression: “When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your children...”131 The instruction became a story repeated over and over to remind the children of God’s activity and faithfulness. When the people of Israel had crossed the Jordan River, they were commanded to build an altar using twelve stones from the river. Again, one of the purposes behind this activity was to teach the children about


128 Ibid., 103.

129 Ibid., 104.

130 Ibid., 98.

131 Deuteronomy 6:20, 21.
God: "When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them about the waters of Jordan..."\(^{132}\)

The language of *peoplehood* rather than the individual is prevalent in most of the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus it comes as no surprise that children would be part of the religious community of the ancient Hebrew people. Children witnessed the rituals of the gathered congregation of worshippers; they participated in the festivals; and they were taught to worship God at home. It was important to the religious leaders and the parents that the next generation *know* God, and the means to such *knowing* were through instruction, devotion to God, and obedience.

*Zechariah 8*. Zechariah, a prophet who lived around 520 B.C.E., advocated the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s temple. He delivered seven oracles on the restoration of Zion which described his vision of a new world under God’s rule. Children are named and included in this vision:

> Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.\(^{133}\)

In his commentary on this text, Newsome points out the hope and unity expressed as young and old interact in harmony with each other under the rule of a benevolent God:

> The total picture [of chapter 8] is one of peace, justice, and plenty in a world community where the sovereignty of Yahweh is acknowledged. The picture of the joys of the very old and the very young...speaks of hope for the future of humanity

\(^{132}\) Joshua 4:6-7.

\(^{133}\) Zechariah 8:4,5.
before God, a hope which, in our age of war and frequent injustice, is often tragically absent from the human heart.\textsuperscript{134}

Redditt suggests that the message of Zechariah indicated that the time "of eschatological reversal was now at hand."\textsuperscript{135} What a joy to imagine God’s new realm with its picture of intergenerational activity, young and old together in the streets of this new Jerusalem! Not only are children an integral part of God’s new reign, they are playing, obviously enjoying themselves in the midst of urban activity. Could this text imply that play has a place in the prophetic understanding of eschatological reversal? The scene depicted in this text was instrumental in helping me find a contemporary metaphor for church life in the present context.

\textit{Matthew 1 and Luke 1,2}. In a world that placed little emphasis on childhood, one wonders why the account of Jesus’ birth would hold such prominence in two gospels. Both Matthew and Luke give undue attention to details surrounding Mary’s pregnancy and the birth of her son. One explanation given for including Jesus’ birth narrative has to do with the desire to legitimize Jesus’ status as God’s son by giving him a mythical entry into the world. Caldwell points out Nelle Morton’s claim that the early patriarchs perceived man a little lower than God, woman lower that man, and child lowest of all. The illegitimate child who could not trace blood lineage directly through a man was lower than other children. But the male illegitimate ranked lower than the female illegitimate. The female could legitimate blood lineage for her children through marriage and redeem herself. The male child, never! ...[it] was in the lowest of the low that God came present in this humanity. But the early church fathers

\textsuperscript{134} James D. Newsome, Jr., \textit{The Hebrew Prophets} (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 169.

could not bear so great a salvation. It would have meant the end of their rulership and dominance. The whole patriarchal structure would have had to crumble so that the one at the bottom could be free to free the whole people.  

We learn very little from the gospels about the childhood of Jesus except that he was circumcised according to Jewish custom, went annually to the temple at Jerusalem, and grew strong, wise, and in favour with both God and people.  

Because of his illegitimate birth could he have been treated as the "lowest of the low" as a child? If so, perhaps it is why Jesus had such a tender place in his heart for children who, like him, had no status in society.


Children were important to Jesus. He took time to be with them and care for them. Many of Jesus’ healing episodes had to do with children. According to Weber, Jesus’ attitude toward the children was so radical that even the disciples could not understand it. And it appears that the church since has not grasped it either. Weber is convinced that “the very heart of the Christian Gospel is expressed in Jesus’ gestures and sayings in relation to children.”

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139 Ibid., viii.
These texts reveal some important teachings that Jesus gave to his disciples in the presence of the children. As I reflected on these texts, three themes emerged that informed my studies. Through his words and actions, Jesus consistently modelled hospitality, role/status reversals, and inclusivity. These texts suggest that Jesus’ attitude towards the children might help the disciples to grasp the radical and counter-cultural nature of God’s new society.

The first theme I wish to explore is the nature of hospitality. The synoptic gospels record the story of Jesus’ blessing the children. As people brought their children to Jesus to be touched, the disciples tried to send them away. Jesus became indignant: “Let the children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Mark 10:14). Weber noted that the “way in which Jesus spoke to the children and sought physical contact with them, far surpassed what was expected, and must therefore have astonished both the disciples and those who brought the children.”

It appears that the children freely received the gift of God’s rule. Weber has suggested that this gift reveals the nature of God, that of “unreasonable” love:

How did the children merit such a reception? Absolutely no condition is made. The children have not yet reached even the “age of the Law,” and they, therefore, have no merit. Nothing is said about the nature of children. Rather He wanted to reveal the nature of God. God’s will is to present the children with [God’s] kingdom, and against all human calculation, this is done in a totally gratuitous way. Thus, children are counted among the poor in spirit who have been called blessed because ‘theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven’ (Matthew 5:3)."141

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140 Ibid., 18.

141 Ibid., 19.
Hospitality entails welcoming, acceptance, and blessing. Jesus showed that he valued children as children, not for what they might become. According to Gardner, this story from Matthew 19\textsuperscript{142} “clearly validates the presence of children in the community and points out the significance of that presence.”\textsuperscript{143} This same text has been used to support the practice of infant baptism and was much debated by the Anabaptists. Pilgrim Marpeck, while rejecting infant baptism, encouraged the recognition of infants. In his writings there is a service of dedication for an infant of believing parents. Gardner writes that, in this service “the community has the opportunity to receive children, to embody God’s blessing, and to affirm its role in the faith development of the young.”\textsuperscript{144} In Mennonite congregations today, a child-parent dedication service is one of the few instances where children are visibly and intentionally welcomed.

Anderson and Johnson think more radically about the lesson that Jesus’ hospitality teaches us. They claim that “Jesus places children in the center in order to transform the present with the future that God makes new. When we welcome children, we welcome the divine in our midst.”\textsuperscript{145} Feminist analysis of this text by Joanna Dewey also suggests a more radical understanding of this story. In Mark’s gospel of liberation,


\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 294.

the “child, the weakest in society and normally the exclusive responsibility of women, is the symbol of the one to whom service is to be offered. The community of Jesus’ followers should be structured very differently from the usual ordering of society.”

The second theme that I uncovered as I examined these texts has to do with role/status reversals. The story in Matthew 18:3-5 points the disciples to the children as models of discipleship: “[Jesus] called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children...’” (vs 3). This act must have astonished the disciples for children had no status in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament. “Childhood was seen as a weak, insignificant, biographical stage, a preface to adulthood.” Yet, according to Weber,

the gratuitous love of God, assured to the children in Jesus’ prophetic word and action, turns upside down both Greek and Jewish classifications. Children receive a place of preeminence, if human realities were considered, from the point of view of God’s kingdom.

There has been much speculation on what it means to become like children. Characteristics such as humility, vulnerability, and innocence have been suggested, virtues which society does not value highly. Fitzmyer suggested that Jesus was extolling the child-like characteristics of openness, receptivity, innocence, warmth: “Their freshness, their


\(^{147}\) Refer also to Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:18.

\(^{148}\) Weber, Jesus and the Children, 6.

\(^{149}\) Ibid., 20.
lack of guilt or suspicion, their loving warmth, and their lack of any claim to achievement are what is being held up to adults accosted by the message of the kingdom.”

It is Grassi’s opinion that Jesus’ challenge was for the disciples to be open to change and renewal: “Making one’s self a child is a way to pass through death and overcome its powers.”

Jesus’ teaching about reversal was a response to the question by the disciples about who was the greatest in the God’s new reality. Weber believes that:

In Jesus’ response, a child becomes central, not as the one who receives instruction, but as the one whose very presence becomes the clue to answering the disciples’ question. Consequently, a reversal in the teaching/learning situation occurs, which indicates at the same time a reversal of being: the first must be last; the least one is great, the person who humbles him - or herself like a child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

This was a hard teaching, one that the disciples could not accept. Weber concludes that the evangelists very quickly made the shift from the real child to the metaphor of the child: “In Mark, the shift remains implicit only. In Luke ‘this child’ is later assimilated with the ‘least among the disciples.’ In Matthew, a parallel between ‘such a child’ and ‘these little ones’ is established.”

In spite of this shift in thinking, Weber notes that it was appropriate to use children as the symbol for the fledgling members of a


152 Weber, Jesus and the Children, 43.

153 Ibid., 47.
fledgling Christian church. However, I cannot help but wonder how different the Christian church would be had the early church leaders taken the children seriously as children and not merely as symbols of discipleship.

Very few theologians, including those who are Anabaptist and Mennonite, have taken seriously Jesus’ understanding of children as teachers who model what it means to be true disciples. We have understood children as metaphors for new Christians, the poor, the lowly, the outcast, and the weak. But we have rarely taken notice of what the real children in our midst can teach us about God’s ways! To do this would require a reversal of attitude, a change in how we understand age in relationship to status, and an openness to transformation around our practices and beliefs about the nature and nurture of our children. The church needs to be reminded that there is significance in the fact that the central Christian story began with a child:

In the birth of the Christ child, God took on all the powerlessness, weakness, and neediness of human childhood for the sake of our salvation. What is remarkable about that story is that the truth of God is embodied in a child. It is the Child who carries in himself the hope for the world.

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154 Ibid., 48.

155 The writings of Paul and those attributed to Paul reverted to more traditional household codes that reflected society’s view of children. Weber wrote that “Paul wrote profound meditations about our adoption as God’s children, but when it came to real boys and girls, his attitude remained exactly that of a Jew of his time, apparently unaffected by Jesus’ extraordinary words and actions concerning children.” Ibid., 49.

156 Anderson and Johnson, Regarding Children, 20.
I am not sure that the Mennonite church is ready to accept that the real child in our midst “is a model for humanity in its fullness because it includes dependency and the freedom to live with the vulnerability.”\textsuperscript{157}

The third theme that emerged from these gospel texts refers to age inclusivity. Mark 9:33–37\textsuperscript{158} gives an account of Jesus placing a child among a group of disciples who were arguing about greatness. It appears that Jesus placed himself in solidarity with children because they had no power. Myers claims that Jesus was committed to inclusivity but the disciples preferred exclusivity. The Markan text illustrates the way of nonviolence by reversing the normal socio-cultural assumptions about status, elevating the ‘last’ to ‘first.’ And certainly, the child represented the ‘least of the least.’ In a significantly symbolic action, Jesus rescues children from the margins of the new community and places them at its center...as a fundamental object lesson. Again, contrary to the resistance of his own disciples, Jesus \textit{insists} that children ‘not be hindered’ (10:14).\textsuperscript{159}

Judith Gundry-Volf argues that “the model of community Jesus represents, which is epitomized in the taking of a little child into one’s arms, is ‘gendered’ in Mark: it is a ‘feminine’ model of community in that it is characterized by stereotypically female behavior.”\textsuperscript{160} In paying attention to the children Jesus challenged his inner circle of disciples to look beyond the traditional social structures for the true meaning of community.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 21.


\textsuperscript{159} Myers, \textit{Binding the Strong Man}, 267.

Gundry-Volf writes:

How Jesus’ disciples treat little children is the measure of their own faith in Jesus, who identified with the little child. How little children fare in the community tells whether it stands in solidarity with the One who became as a child in order to do God’s work. Social practices in the name of Jesus that overturn the social hierarchy by redefining greatness and status in terms of radical love thus lie at the very heart of the community’s identity and are the test of its claim to follow Jesus.  

Schüssler Fiorenza offers a similar feminist critique in her view that true discipleship is “not an invitation to childlike innocence and naivete but a challenge to relinquish all claims of power and domination over others.” For her, the community of faith is egalitarian, a discipleship of equals, and includes children. She asserts that Jesus’ saying about the little children “insists that the discipleship of equals must be inclusive of children and serve their needs, if the community wants to have Jesus — and God — in their midst.”

In summary, the stories of Jesus’ interaction with children suggest that children do have a place within the faith community. Children are to be treated with respect and dignity. A child’s worth is equal to an adult’s worth and childhood is valuable in itself. Hospitality is extended to the children and is to be received in like manner. Adult believers can learn from the children what they need to know about living in God’s reign. Disciples of Jesus are to be servants to each other and to those who have no status in society. We

\[161\] Ibid., 60.


\[163\] Ibid., 148.

\[164\] Anderson and Johnson, Regarding Children, 21.
are to move the weak, the invisible, the nobodies from the margins of our faith life. As followers of Jesus living in community, the congregation is to offer the world a glimpse of God’s new reality, one that extends hospitality to all, is egalitarian, and inclusive. We can start with our own children, and learn how to be God’s reality in the world by observing them and allowing them to teach us what it means. For this to happen the church needs a new image, one that reflects Jesus’ acceptance and example of children as the ones who have already received God’s reign with open, welcoming, hospitable arms.

**Being Children: Playing in God’s Reign**

I believe there is scriptural evidence to support that children have a spiritual relationship with God from before birth. In the Mennonite interpretation of the scriptures, children do not come into the world as depraved sinners but are created by God in innocence. The texts to which I referred suggest that God calls humanity into relationship based on love and obedience. While obedience is expected, the greatest commandment, according to the Shema, is for people to love God with their whole being. Jesus did not articulate a theology of children but his loving attention to the children demonstrated that children are worthy and valued as part of God’s realm. Without fail he reached out to the marginalized and challenged his disciples to care for the weak, the oppressed, and the powerless.

Children of the ancient Hebrew people were part of a religious family and of the worshipping community, where they learned the faith naturally by observing, asking questions, and being present. Adults were expected to train their children in the home to
love God and follow God's ways through witness, instruction, and story. And children were part of the festivals and assemblies that gathered on a regular basis for instruction and celebration.\textsuperscript{165} In the Jewish tradition of the first century children also accompanied their parents to the temple for religious festivals and were taught in the home.

Many of the biblical texts that I chose clearly represent an eschatological perspective. The prophet Zechariah proclaimed a new vision for humanity, which expressly included the children under the reign of an inclusive God. Jesus ushered in that new vision when he proclaimed that the reign of God is here, a reign that turned everything upside down. In his ministry he modelled the reality of this new abundant life under God's loving rule that is inclusive of all people. And he placed children solidly in the centre of God's reign which was to be a visible presence in the world. Jesus placed relationships above all else -- his caring, compassionate love was extended to all, regardless of age, status, gender, or knowledge. In God's reign, abundant living means joyful and playful activity.

Though we do not live in the biblical world, I believe that we are still being invited to participate in God's alternative society, one that was envisioned by Zechariah and Jesus. The idea of adults playing as God's joyful people may be quite a stretch for Mennonites who espouse the Protestant work ethic and for cultures which revere hard work and dismiss play as unnecessary or frivolous activity. However, I wonder if God might be calling us to celebrate the \textit{already} part of the reign, and worry less about the \textit{not yet}! What might the church look like if it took living in God's reign to heart -- could we be

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{165} See Nehemiah 8 for an example of this gathered assembly.}
more playful and less serious about ourselves? Could we celebrate and reciprocate the gratuitous love that a gracious God has for us and fret less about God’s judgement? Could we take time to be with the weakest members, our children, to learn from them about what it means to love God with one’s whole being? Could we turn upside-down the way we do church with its emphasis on power, authority, and order and, instead, concentrate on finding ways to learn from, and serve, our weakest members?

It is unfortunate that the disciples and the early church chose to not follow Jesus’ radical new teaching about power and status. I wonder whether the fate of the children in the Christian community would have been different if the women disciples and house church leaders had had more influence in shaping the ecclesiology of the first centuries.

I suspect that the radical nature of Jesus’ relationships with people of little or no status, including the children, demanded more transformation than the male disciples could handle. The patriarchal tradition was a powerful structure in first century social and religious institutions. Following Jesus’ upside-down ways may have been just too radical! I imagine that the same reasons for not being radical disciples might be used in the church today. The church has, and continues to be, a product of its time and place in history. Social and cultural factors, as will be noted in the next chapter, have a powerful influence on our Mennonite understandings of human nature, God, and the meaning of church.
CHAPTER 6

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Social Status of Children in Early Anabaptism

The church does not operate in a vacuum but is influenced by the unique social world views which have cultural, political, and theological implications. Our Mennonite theology developed from life in sixteenth-century Europe. It is imperative that the Mennonite Church examine its theology critically to determine what is relevant for the present twenty-first century social context. Societal values are very different now, as are our understandings about childhood. What follows is a very brief overview of the understandings of the status of childhood during the Reformation era when Anabaptist theology was being formed, the factors that influenced the church’s view of childhood over the centuries, and the present social context.

In his comprehensive overview of the history of childhood, Aries traced the rise of the concept of childhood through the centuries. Childhood is a relatively recent invention -- in the Middle Ages there was no place for childhood. Life in general was fragile, more so for children, many of whom did not survive infancy or reach adulthood. Children were infants until they reached the age of seven, when they became adults.166

Popular belief was that seven year old children were capable of starting school and/or work. This was the age that they had command of speech and were capable of rational thought and moral reasoning. In fact the seven-year-old male was considered a man in every respect except for his capacity to make love and war! Children were viewed as adults in the making and did not have any special place in medieval society.

The church held similar assumptions about children. Medieval theology dictated that seven year olds were accountable for their sins and required to attend to penance and confession. Anabaptists seemed to have adopted the contemporary views of childhood even though they would not subscribe theologically to the concept of original sin. The innocence of children did not represent purity nor a romantic view of childhood, but a "state of unselfwilled innocency." In a society that emphasized good and evil, fear of hell and God's judgment, it made sense that people were confronted with a sense of sin as soon as they could understand the implications. The Anabaptist view of the age of moral understanding fit well with society's view of the age of reasoning.

Child-rearing habits reflected the views of society toward children. During the Reformation era there was a preoccupation with morals and discipline. Moderate corporal punishment was accepted as a necessary means of discipline in order to break the will of children especially those between the ages of six and twelve. Early in the sixteenth century

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tracts were being distributed on discipline and behaviour of children. In 1557 Menno Simons wrote a tract on the nurture of children offering "a sound instruction and doctrine as to how all pious parents are, according to the Scriptures, required to govern, chastise and educate their children, and to nurture them in a pious, virtuous, and godly life." A product of his time, Menno believed that obedience was essential to the formation of Christian character. Anabaptist parents confirmed this emphasis on obedience and right living. From prison before their martyrdom, they wrote detailed letters to their children instructing them to live obedient, godly lives. One mother, Soetgen Van Den Houte, included these admonitions to her children:

David, my dear child, ...learn wisdom, that you may set your sisters a good example; and beware of bad company and of playing in the street with bad boys: but diligently learn to read and write, so that you may get understanding... Further, my dear children, Betgen and Tanneken, my beloved lambs, I admonish you in all these same things, as that you obey the commandments of the Lord, and also obey your uncle and aunt, and your elders, and all who instruct you in virtue... Be not quarrelsome, or loquacious, or light minded, or proud or surly of speech, but kind, honorable and quiet, as behooves young girls.

Though Ozment is critical of the Reformation's overall effect on child rearing he asserts that children were loved deeply by their parents and that the purpose of discipline

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170 Wenger, The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, 946-952. This was the title of the tract translated from Dutch!

was “to create a confident, responsible adult who accepted his [sic] place in the larger schema of things and was prepared to demand that others accept their place as well.”

Aries pointed out that during the sixteenth century two concepts of childhood were in evidence. The ‘coddling’ attitude recognized the pleasure that watching and caring for children gave parents. This led to a criticism by some religious leaders and scholars, including Menno Simons, of a permissiveness which was worse than too much discipline. A second attitude began to emerge, led by moralists and pedagogues, of a childhood that “ensured disciplined, rational manners.” Aries noted that this was not a negative view but one that attempted to understand the nature of childhood in order to provide safeguards for the children and develop reason and character within them. Since the Middle Ages, these two concepts of childhood have been evident and have had an impact on the religious and educational practices with children through the centuries.

Views of childhood emerge from society’s understanding of what it means to be human. This question of anthropology continues to be debated in both society and the church for how one views human nature determines how one thinks about children, parenting, even God. Theological anthropology looks at humanization from a religious perspective -- how humankind relates with God, self, and others within the social context.

Tom Finger, a Mennonite systematic theologian, maintains that in the traditional approaches to anthropology “Protestant anthropologies — in contrast to Catholic ones —

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173 Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*, 133.
have focused largely on the origin, dynamics, and penalties of sin.\textsuperscript{174} According to Finger, Thomas Aquinas, a thirteenth-century theologian, stressed that people generally strive for God and what is good in personal and social relationships. Sin “is conceived not as a force directly opposing God, but as misdirection and imbalance among forces which point toward God.\textsuperscript{175} Catholic anthropology did not distinguish sharply between the religious and secular spheres.

Finger asserts that Luther’s sense of sin, evil, and the secular world were very different from his contemporary Catholic opponents. Luther did not share Aquinas’ view that humankind would choose the good. His emphasis on sin and the necessity of receiving salvation through grace instead of the law suggested that humankind was not interested in or capable of seeking God.\textsuperscript{176} In regards to the social impact of Lutheran theology, Finger writes that, “while Luther made God’s presence more vivid in the personal and religious sphere, he made it less vivid in the social, secular sphere.”\textsuperscript{177} This attention by Luther to the religious affairs of the \textit{individual} and less to the social realities contributed in Finger’s opinion to the “emergence of modern secularism, and ...this secularism has sought to handle many of the issues of humanization without reference to religion.”\textsuperscript{178}

\textsuperscript{174} Thomas Finger, \textit{Christian Theology}, 16.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 21

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 22-23.

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 27. Finger maintains that the Lutheran reformation contributed to the transition from the medieval to the modern era.

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 28.
Finger did not examine the Anabaptist writings from a theological anthropological perspective. In my cursory readings of the confessional statements and Marpeck’s writings, I suggest that Anabaptism did not fall within Catholic or Lutheran camps, though I would place Anabaptism closer to the Lutheran view with its emphasis on sin and the need for repentance. However, Anabaptists did not subscribe to the view of total human depravity that required infant baptism. They insisted on both an individual and communal faith in God that was lived out in real ways in the world. They disagreed with Luther’s emphasis on being Christian within the social structures even when the structures were less than ideal. Anabaptists could not capitulate to the social systems with which they disagreed theologically.

This brief discourse on theological anthropology is meant to serve as a reminder that through the ages there have been various understandings about what it means to be human which have affected the church’s beliefs and attitudes about children. There have been additional factors that contributed to the advance of the life-stage of childhood through the centuries.

Some Influences in the Development of Childhood Since the Reformation

The rise of literacy made an impact on early childhood development. In a broadly generalized way, Postman alleges that the invention of the printing press created a new

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179 Ibid., 66. Finger himself advocates a Christological anthropology to which I can ascribe in part. Jesus “actualized potentialities for being human realized by no one else. If we are to begin anthropology with a sketch of fulfilled humanity, Jesus must be our primary source.”
symbolic world that was based on reading competence at least for the middle class. By default this led to a new conception of children, those who cannot read. This emphasis on literacy, then, led to the re-invention of school and, by so doing, made childhood a necessity. Through the process of education designed to make children into good adults it appears that childhood and adulthood became differentiated until it became accepted by the mid-nineteenth century that “the child did not and could not share the language, the learning, the tasks, the appetites, the social life, of an adult.”

By the end of the sixteenth century, the Bible was accessible to the literate and the laity. For the Reformers the written word replaced the visual symbolic world of the Catholic Church that had dominated religious life. The scriptures and the pulpit became central features of Reformed and Anabaptist liturgy.

Secularism is another influence on views of childhood. As stated earlier, Finger suggests that ever since the Reformation there has been a decline in the power and influence of the church as a religious institution. The study of anthropology began to happen without the religious implications. During the Renaissance era philosophy and its methods became more predominant. Historian Michael Buckley believes that this shift affected the way “theologians thought about religion... Instead of reflecting directly on

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180 Ibid., 36.
181 Ibid., 50
their spiritual experience as the major source of their convictions, they began to call upon the methods of natural philosophy (physics) to defend their belief in God.\footnote{182}{Quoted in David Hay with Rebecca Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child} (London: HarperCollinsReligious, 1998), 28.}

Other factors which contributed to modern secularism include the rise in religious toleration, the influence of Marxism, the belief that religion is used for social control, the attitude of anti-clericalism, as well as the perception of conflict between religion and science.\footnote{183}{Ibid., 30.} I would include in this list the influence of various spiritualities\footnote{184}{Here I would name the influence of New Age, Native, Eastern spiritualities, meditation, etc. These are still considered outside the realm of Christendom.} that fall outside the parameters of organized Christian religion. Issues of secularism will have an impact on children’s values in shaping their life and faith. Parents do not always recognize how much surrounding cultural values affect the way they parent their children and nurture faith in the home.

\textit{Modern technology} has shaped our views of childhood. Postman is convinced that just as technology contributed to the necessity for childhood it is responsible for its gradual disappearance. While some may argue that childhood is a \textit{biological} state,\footnote{185}{David Elkind, \textit{All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis} (Don Mills: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1984), 100. Elkind is convinced that children are “biological facts” and not social creations.} he argues that it is a product of culture. The emergence of a visual and graphic world “cannot support the social and intellectual hierarchies that make childhood possible.”\footnote{186}{Postman, \textit{The Disappearance of Childhood}, 74.} Watching
television requires no developmental skills. In today’s society many children have a better grasp of computers than their parents or teachers. Children are better informed than ever, gaining access to visual information that would not have been as easily accessible through print or language. The media is a powerful teacher of cultural values for children. Postman warns us that “the shock of twentieth century technology numbed our brains and we are just beginning to notice the spiritual and social debris that our technology has strewn about us.”

Theories of childhood affected parenting and the education of children. Two major schools of thought emerged in the eighteenth century education influenced in part by theological anthropology. John Locke believed that at birth a child’s mind was *tabula rasa*, i.e., a blank tablet. Parents and educators wrote on that slate in order to form a civilized adult through “literacy, education, reason, self-control, and shame.” Rousseau, on the other hand, believed in the natural goodness of children. The child was a “wild plant with organic and natural growth.” These opposing views affected the way children were educated in both the secular and religious arenas. If one subscribed to the Lockean view, one insisted that the will of the child be broken or bent in order for the

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187 Ibid., 146.

188 Ibid, 57. John Locke was an English academic who lived from 1632-1714.

189 Ibid., 59.

190 Ibid., 60. Rousseau was a romantic who believed in natural, unrestrained freedom for children’s development.
child to become a good citizen or Christian. If one followed Rousseau, one trusted that the children would naturally seek God and what is good.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Freud and Dewey published materials that tried to balance the theories of childhood promoted by Locke and Rousseau. Using a scientific framework, Freud preferred Rousseau’s view of the nature of the child, yet recognized the importance of parental influence in shaping the child’s personality. Dewey used a philosophical, Lockean approach to reiterate the need to shape the child’s character in order for her or him to become a fulfilled adult in the future.\textsuperscript{191} Postman claims that all the research and theories that followed these two men has been “mere commentary on the basic childhood paradigm.”\textsuperscript{192} The structural developmentalists, who became prominent in the 1950s and who were influenced by Locke’s views, contributed to recent theories of education which will be explored in the next chapter.

**Social Status of Children Today**

As I reflect on the status of childhood today I agree with Postman’s assessment of a disappearing childhood. Television reveals children as miniature adults in their actions, language, and dress. Play for children has become organized, competitive sports activities orchestrated by adults. Postman suggests that our society promotes the emergence of both the “adultified” child and “childified” adult.\textsuperscript{193} When there is no

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 62-63.

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 63.

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid, 126.
difference between clothing, play, or leisure activity in adults and children the line between them becomes blurred. This is not a good thing. Children can easily become confused not knowing in whose world they belong, and not having a defined place in the present social structures. Though they may look like miniature adults, children are not considered adults by legal or moral standards. And psychological research suggests that moral responsibility comes during adolescence\textsuperscript{194} rather than childhood.

In modern society the role of the church has diminished greatly. It is not assumed that people will be part of a faith community let alone attend worship regularly. Bibby’s research suggests these trends in Canada toward less participation in organized religion.\textsuperscript{195} He offers several reasons for the decline in church attendance: rampant individualism; relativism; and spiritual needs not being met by organized religion.\textsuperscript{196} Also there are women who find it difficult to remain in the patriarchal and hierarchical church. It appears that, in our society, one can take or leave both God and the church. While most Canadians say they believe in God, it is not the God of the Reformation era. The notion of an omnipotent and judgmental God does not predominate. The language of sin, conversion, and damnation is less prevalent in the church of the 1990s than of the 1950s.

\textsuperscript{194} At a recent conference I heard that the age of adolescence is now between ages ten and thirty.

\textsuperscript{195} Reginald W. Bibby, There’s Got to be More! Connecting Churches & Canadians (Winfield: B.C.: Wood Lake Books, 1995), 17. Bibby predicted that by the year 2015 only about 15% of Canadians will attend church weekly, compared to a 1995 level of 23%.

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 15-40. Bibby’s first chapter outlines ten key findings from his research on trends in Canadian churches.
Where do Mennonite children fit into today's social picture? My observations are that our children and families are more steeped in contemporary culture than we might wish to admit. Both modernization and urbanization have taken place since the last century when most Mennonites lived on farms. A majority of our children attend public schools and participate in community activities. Our homes have televisions and computers. Even as families participate in church life, the church appears to have limited influence upon their home and social life. Attendance at church is less consistent for families with children or for children involved in marriage breakdowns. It appears that, in general, both attendance and participation in congregational life are more optional than even a decade ago.

As in Anabaptist times child rearing habits reflect the society around us. Children in Mennonite families are loved, coddled, and sometimes abused.197 Some parents, who are unsure of their parenting skills, are looking to the church for direction in guiding their children in life and faith.

The present reality affects our theology of children. Gerbrandt writes that "the time when our Mennonite communities were so close that a distinct Mennonite identity was formed in children long before they were confronted with the question of baptism is

197 Here I refer to physical child abuse. Donald Capps, The Child's Song (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) discusses the theological ideas and biblical injunctions that have been used in homes to legitimate the physical and emotional abuse of children: literal interpretation of scriptures; a view that human nature is basically sinful; and the necessity to punsh sin.
largely behind us." Without the strong communal forces from our past we lament that our children do not desire to be part of church life. We want them to know that they are loved and they belong. Gerbrandt suggests that participation of unbaptized children in communion has become one way to show children that they are included in church life. However, such a practice undermines our theology of baptism and church membership. In light of our social context how can Mennonite congregations give our children a sense of identity and community that is true to our theology?

I suggest that Mennonites must engage in serious theological reflection about our place within social structures. We have a long history of being counter-cultural. This tradition can help us find relevant ways to give our children a sense of belonging within a faith community in a society that de-values religion. As we view our faith life through the lenses of our tradition, culture and experience, we can combat and confront what Brueggemann terms the church’s “profound amnesia,” caused by prosperity and affluence which has contributed to our memory loss of God’s activity among us and for us. He writes:

We have arrived at a great divide between those who have “outgrown” the old memory, either to a kind of urbane liberalism based in current experience, or a spirit-filled piety that finds everything present tense, or a mean-spirited traditionalism that

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199 Ibid.

200 See Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, The Art of Theological Reflection (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

201 Brueggemann, Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism, 72.
is judgmental and restrictive, but lacks the characteristically expansive polyvalence of our Jewish memory... We live in an environment of a hostile culture where the fabric of faith is thin and fragile. We are at a moment of recovering a lost inheritance. That recovery now requires reading, interpretation, booting, appropriation of the whole memory.\textsuperscript{202}

Brueggemann calls for "counter-nurture,"\textsuperscript{203} that is, the activity of teaching our children how to resist negative cultural influences that impinge on their spiritual life. This means that our conversations with our children teach them not to be good citizens but to "be able to perceive, embrace, and enact the world according to the peculiar memory and vision of faith held by the gospel community."\textsuperscript{204} Intentional counter-nurture and counter-cultural living may be necessary if the Mennonite faith tradition will survive in a society that has little use for religion.

In summary, as I reflect on the sociological framework I see evidence of the two somewhat contradictory theological anthropological views expressed in the way adults and the church understand their children. Without wanting to oversimplify important tenets of faith, I suggest that the view that points toward the depravity of the human condition demands a breaking of the will of the young child in order to avoid God's judgement and an eternity in hell. It appears that the writings of Luther and Locke subscribe to this view which can also be found in the religion of the Puritans, in revivalist movements, and in churches and homes that legitimize child abuse by insisting that the sinful nature inherent in children be punished.

\textsuperscript{202} Ibid., 90,91. The author is referring to Nehemiah 8 and the Festival of Booths.

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid., 98.

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid.
In contrast the view that sees humanity as basically *good* holds a kinder disposition toward children which can lead to extreme permissiveness. Aquinas, Rousseau, and the Romantic era promoted this view that did not believe that humanity was innocent, but that it naturally sought the good.

Mennonites have been in both camps, or somewhere in the middle, throughout our history. As people were being pulled toward the prevailing socio-religious views of the times, Mennonite leaders attempted by means of writing and education to provide a corrective theological view in order to keep alive the vision of their Anabaptist faith-parents. How our strong tradition of education and nurture has been influenced by theology and the prevailing views of society is explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 7
A Mennonite In Dialogue With Christian Education Theories

Christian Education Theories and Mennonite Curricula

Christian education has strong support in Mennonite congregational life. The Sunday school program is itself an institution. Our small denomination has valued education highly as a means of children’s faith formation to the extent that it takes great care in the development and production of its own curriculum for children. In the last decade I have been involved in the design and development of Mennonite educational curricula for children. However, only since I began my research and study program have I begun to critique the impact of current models of secular education on the way our denomination develops its curricular resources for the nurture of children.

From 1973 to 1993 Mennonite children were raised on the Foundation Series, a Sunday school curriculum which offered a thematic approach to the Bible. The development of this curriculum was influenced heavily by the work of Ronald Goldman, who was a follower of Piaget, the guru of cognitive psychology whose thinking dominated western educational theory for generations of learning. Those who promote developmental theories of education accept the view that intellectual capabilities occur at different ages and stages in childhood, culminating in rational thought during adolescence
when children can see the world "as adults see it." Therefore, concepts are taught at age-appropriate levels and in age-appropriate ways. In his work on religious thinking in children, Goldman "launched an important debate about the way in which the mental development of children relates to their ability to grasp the meaning of religious narrative, particularly the text of the Bible." Hay and others believe that, unfortunately, Goldman's "personal assumptions led him to ignore the possibility that spirituality might feature in the lives of children." Furthermore,

Goldman took the view that 'the mystics, who claim to have direct sensations of the divine, are exceptions, but as they are extremely rare cases, rarer in adolescence and practically unknown in childhood,' he would ignore them. The mistake he made was to assume that spiritual awareness is always something extraordinary, equated with mystical ecstasy, instead of holding onto the possibility that it might be a very ordinary aspect of young children's everyday experience.

Westerhoff, a Protestant religious educator, critiques developmentalism believing that it begins with the assumption that children are incapable of expressing, perceiving, or thinking as mature adults. A child's way is considered inadequate and

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207 Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play. An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 138. Berryman disputes claims by Goldman that children do not have mystical or religious experiences. I agree with both Hay and Berryman that children are spiritual beings who can and do have a personal relationship with the Divine.


underdeveloped. The developmentalist aim, therefore, is to discover how children develop mature, adult ways of experiencing, perceiving, and thinking so that we might assist or influence their progressive movement through stages of lesser to higher means.  

Robinson, who researched adults' childhood experiences of faith, claims that childhood "is an element of the whole person," and that children can and do have significant religious or mystical experiences of the divine.

I taught the Foundation Series in our Sunday school program and my own children were raised on it. In hindsight I am aware of the strong emphasis placed on rational thought and factual knowledge. There was little attention paid to nurturing children to be in relationship with God. The assumption was that children were incapable of such a relationship because they were too immature.

In the development of the more recent children's Sunday school curriculum, Jubilee: God's Good News, developmental theories continued to play an important role. Fowler's theory of faith development, however, was not to be the sole theory that undergirded this curriculum. Although his work was useful in helping curriculum writers determine the age appropriateness of some of the intellectual religious concepts being taught, we designers realized that curriculum was more than intellectualizing theological concepts -- it needed to include an awareness of children's spirituality. As Hay reminds us,

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210 John H. Westerhoff, introduction to The Original Vision, xi.

211 Robinson, The Original Vision, 8.
"Spiritual or religious knowing is very different from knowledge of factual information, or speculation about religion. It is much more like a direct sensory awareness."\(^{212}\)

Sonja Stewart and Jerome Berryman are two Protestant religious educators who informed the development of *Jubilee*. They partnered in writing a book for educators of young children using an approach that integrates religious education with worship.\(^{213}\) In a worshipful atmosphere, teachers tell Bible stories with story figures and other visual aids. Children respond to the story in ways of their own choosing, such as art, story, or play. This methodology pays attention to both biblical content and the child’s spirituality.

*Jubilee* curriculum is based on a narrative approach to the Bible. The biblical story is at the heart of each session. And rather than factual responses to the story, children engaged through wondering and reflection. Because Mennonite educators were not prepared to give children complete freedom to respond in personal ways, and because publishers could not part with printed student materials, response activities are more traditional, teacher-directed activities such as crafts, drama, paper and pencil activities. It seems to me that with *Jubilee*, the development and curricular design emerged from biblical rather than secular sources. Both an educational and a biblical consultant were part

\(^{212}\) Ibid., 52.

of the development team. However, we were informed primarily by religious educators
who promoted a narrative approach to learning that engaged the whole person. We relied
less on the need for intellectual acquisition of knowledge about the Bible based on past
developmental theories of learning.

Influential Teachers from the Ecumenical Scene

My work in Christian education has been enhanced by the written work of
current Christian educators in the ecumenical setting. Maria Harris, a Catholic religious
educator, offered a broader view of curriculum and an invitation to use one’s religious
imagination in teaching. Westerhoff’s outline of faith styles provided a balance to
Fowler’s more rigid faith stage theory. I appreciate and applaud Westerhoff’s adamant
views that our children will have faith if the adults have a dynamic relationship with
God, and if the importance of the faith community in nurturing faith is kept in mind.

Jerome Berryman’s concept of religious education as godly play has contributed
to my development of an ecclesiological metaphor that respects play. For him, “godly
play is an effort to give room and permission for existential questions to arise. It is a way
to give children the means to know God better amid the community of children and caring

\[\text{References}\]

14 See Maria Harris, Fashion Me a People. Curriculum in the Church (Louisville:
Westminster/John Knox, 1989) and Teaching and Religious Imagination (San Francisco:

15 See John Westerhoff, Will Our Children Have Faith? (New York: The Seabury

16 While Berryman’s approach is in the sphere of religious education, I am taking
his concept of play beyond the “classroom” to the whole of congregational life to include
adults as well as children.
adults as guides." Maria Cavalletti helped me to see that an important goal of nurturing spirituality in the child is to “accept the silent request of the child: ‘Help me to come closer to God by myself.’”

Horace Bushnell’s underlying principles of Christian nurture outlined over a century ago have influenced my theology of children. Written in 1861 Christian Nurture offered an approach to the nurture of children in the church that has been controversial at times in Mennonite circles. Bushnell, a pastor of a Congregationalist church in Northeastern United States, opposed the prevailing views that demanded a radical conversion as the only means of salvation and the belief that children could not have a valid Christian experience. The thesis of his book, in answer to the question of the true idea of Christian education is “that the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself [sic] as being otherwise.”

Although I disagree with Bushnell on a number of theological issues, I can appreciate his emphasis on parental responsibility in nurturing faith and shaping character.

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217 Berryman, Godly Play, 137.


219 Mennonite Christian educators such as Gideon Yoder and Jeschke would concur with the importance of nurture in the home and congregation that leads to an appropriation of faith rather than the necessity of a radical conversion experience. Those who are influenced by a more evangelical conservative theology would still insist on a New Testament “Paul-like” conversion.

in the child at home, his critique of the church’s “piety of conquest rather than love,” his promotion of education that includes both feelings and experience and not just intellect and doctrine, his insistence that children be included as church members. In a society of strict Puritan values Bushnell promoted play as a necessary aspect of the Christian’s life. Based on Zechariah 8:5 Bushnell suggested that “as play is the forerunner of religion, so religion is to be the friend of play; to love its free motion, its happy scenes, its voice of glee and never, by any needless austerities of control, seek to hamper or shorten its pleasures.”

Finally, I acknowledge the powerful influence of the work done by Thomas Groome in his shared praxis approach to Christian education. I resonate with both his theory and methodology which are outlined further in chapter nine.

Popular secular theories of learning have made an impact on the teaching and reading that I do. Originally, I had intended to pursue secular educational theories in more depth. However, as my research evolved, this framework did not seem necessary or critical to my thesis. I realize that an obvious next step resulting from this project will be

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221 Ibid., 13.

222 Ibid., 51, 69, 370.

223 Ibid., 162-194. Bushnell devotes an entire chapter to this theme basing his defense of this practice on the covenantal promise given to parents on behalf of their children.

224 Ibid., 340-41. I recognize that Bushnell is advocating play in the home as a necessary and religious activity for children. What I take from his commentary is that play can be a viable part of Christian nurture for adults as well as children and in the context of congregational life.
curriculum design and development. When this happens, I will be more interested in a critical examination of current educational theories. For the purposes of this study, I will make very brief references to a few key current educational theories.

In the 1980s experiential learning theory was introduced by David Kolb. I affirm the necessity of experience in shaping learning in children and adults. More recently, Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has been made accessible by a number of other educators, including those in Christian education. Gardner expands the intellect beyond the usual understanding by including music, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills as intelligences that are as crucial to learning as mathematical and linguistic skills.

In Ontario schools brain-based research is being incorporated into classroom teaching. I think that Christian educators need to be aware of the ways children are being taught in school. However, we need to be careful that as Christian educators we do not jump on the secular bandwagon without critical reflection and analysis. Instead of taking the secular theories and adapting them to our use, we need to root our curricula firmly in theological and biblical foundations.

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225 David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1984). There have been a number of spinoffs from his work in the field of education.


227 An example of this theory is Eric Jensen, *Brain-Based Learning* (Del Mar, CA: Turning Point for Teachers, 1996).
As we begin to envision Christian education needs for the next decade, we are committed to developing children’s curricula that are both theologically and educationally sound. It is my hope that we can move beyond the schooling model and plan for faith formation in our children through a variety of ways: family life, small groups, mentoring, intergenerational events, spiritual guidance, catechism, and mission and service events.

As I consider the influence of education theories in forming me as a Christian educator, I am grateful for the religious educators such as Harris, Cavalletti, Stewart, Berryman, Westerhoff, and Groome, whose approaches and methodologies are based primarily in theology rather than current secular trends. I will look to these teachers to guide my thinking about the optimum resources the denomination can create in order to nurture spirituality in our children for living in the next millennium. I envision a congregation that nurtures faith in ways that are true to the children’s experience, to Mennonite theology, and to God’s reality. In my studies, I have been attracted to the paradigm of nurture as play as an important element in congregational life. As I begin to articulate a theology of children in a contemporary Mennonite context, I take play seriously as an appropriate metaphor for the church. Melchert aptly advocates a wisdom approach to Christian nurture that is playful. He writes that in thinking of teaching and learning as a form of playing, we picture ourselves holding ideas rather lightly in our grasp so that they can be turned around and looked at from different angles. If we grasp too tightly, we cannot easily let go long enough to see things from the other side.228

CHAPTER 8
TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF CHILDREN IN A MENNONITE PERSPECTIVE

Key Theological Statements

The intent of my research and study was to articulate a vision for Mennonite congregational life that was more inclusive of children. What follows is the result of theological reflection on my Anabaptist faith heritage using the writings of Pilgram Marpeck and key confessional statements. In my dialogue with the scriptures I returned to key biblical texts that refer to real children. These texts confirmed my bias that children already have a relationship with God. As I examined the social and educational understandings of children I recognized their strong influence on religious life. In listening to my own voice and the voices of professional and lay theologians, in reflecting on childhood experiences of faith, I am convinced that children can have a dynamic relationship with God and a place within the faith community. The question is, then, can this understanding about children be reflected in the teachings and practices of contemporary Mennonite congregational life?

\[229\] I like to think that in the Mennonite church everyone who reflects on God and God's activity is a theologian, even a child.
In this chapter I offer key theological statements that reflect my emerging theology of children in the present Mennonite context. I anticipate ongoing dialogue with children, colleagues, and church leaders as I test these theological concepts with them.

*Children are spiritual beings created by God.* Genesis 1 describes the initial relationship of God with humanity, affirming that God’s image is within humanity, and that what God created is good. Children are born in *created innocence*, meaning that they do not come into the world as depraved sinners needing immediate salvation.

*Children have a relationship with God from birth.* Children come from God, and as such, are closer to God than adults. We cannot assume that they need to be rational before they can have a bona fide relationship with God. We need to find ways to nurture and not stand in the way of what is already there! Both the psalmist who wrote Psalm 139 and the prophet Jeremiah believed that God knew them even before they were born. This suggests to me that there was an awareness of God’s Spirit within them before they reached adulthood.

*Children are blessed by Jesus and welcomed in God’s reign.* Jesus’ attitude toward children was so radical that the disciples could neither understand nor accept it. In teaching his disciples in the presence of the children and through his words and actions, Jesus consistently modelled hospitality, role/status reversals, and inclusivity.

*Children can teach adults about how to be church.* Present Mennonite theology assumes an observer-participant stance for much of congregational life. Children do not

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have a voice and sometimes not even a presence. Feminist theology calls for mutuality in
the church. Nelle Morton believed that the church was a community of faithful people that
included children:

The communal nature of the church itself includes both the adult and the child in a
mutual ministry which the Word brought into being and to which the Word speaks. Therefore listening becomes as important for the adult’s becoming as for the child’s.
Listening to a child may be a means by which God’s grace and judgment impart themselves to self-sufficient and pride-prone teachers and parents. It may involve being delivered from exalted self-images and entering the very life of the other. ²³¹

*Faith is a journey with God in community that begins in childhood.* When we view faith as a process, journey, or pilgrimage through life, we recognize that transformation can occur through one’s entire life beginning with childhood. Faith markers along the way in the context of the congregation celebrate God’s transforming activity. One such marker, a child consecration ceremony, signifies the desire of parents to train their child in God’s reign within a supporting congregation that will also hold them accountable. I believe that such a ceremony can be the child’s *initiation* into the faith life of the congregational life. ²³²

*For children of the church, faith appropriation language is often more appropriate than repentance and conversion language.* Most children in our Mennonite congregations are not first-generation Christians, but have been nurtured to varying degrees by Christian parents and by the church community primarily through worship and Christian education. A dramatic Damascus Road conversion experience is not what is

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²³² See Appendix D for a sample child consecration ceremony.
expected of these children. Children who have been nurtured faithfully need not think of themselves as unbelievers. Like Timothy, they can experience a gradual and ongoing transformation or conversion experience.233

The language of faith appropriation does not negate the need to acknowledge that sin and evil exist in the world. Awareness of sin, that is, a sense of separation from a relationship with a loving God, is necessary for faith growth.

It is probably best that we consider the language of faith as “both-and” rather than “either-or.” I need to be reminded that God chooses to encounter children in God’s own way. It is the responsibility of parents and other care-givers to nurture what is present within each unique child and to depend on God’s Spirit to convict and transform. Walter Brueggemann reminds us, “The process of transmission into the next generation is not fully accomplished through human intentionality....One cannot dictate the shape of faith to the next generation.”234

_Baptism marks one’s ordination to vocational ministry._ Here is where I diverge from normative Mennonite belief and practice. I argue that the rite of believers baptism is neither the beginning of one’s faith journey nor the entry point into church membership. Such an understanding dismisses years of the nurture that took place up to the point of

233 I acknowledge, however, that an increasing number of adults and children with little or no Christian or biblical upbringing are finding our congregations. Without childhood nurture, we cannot make the same assumptions about faith appropriation. There is not a _one-size fits all_ theology of children. As the Mennonite church functions in an increasingly secular society where Christianity is rarely acknowledged it needs to be more intentional in its instruction and catechism, even with children.

baptism. I take a minority Anabaptist view when I insist that believers baptism and membership need not be so closely intertwined and argue for church membership that is based on participation in community, not on baptism. However, baptism is an important marker in the individual’s life; it signifies a voluntary and personal decision to fully participate in a commitment to the reign of God within a particular community of believers. Baptism, then, becomes the public declaration of an owned faith.

I believe that Jesus’ baptism was a response to a deeper level of understanding of his at-one-ness with God. Baptism was the faith marker that symbolized his public ministry, that of doing God’s will regardless of the consequences. What would it mean for Mennonites to view believers baptism as one’s ordination to vocational ministry? This entails a conscious, adult, rational decision to live intentionally, faithfully, and vocationally in relationship with God within the context of a faith community. Vocational ministry is defined in terms of one’s faith, not one’s profession in the work-related world. Our Christian vocation is to be faithful to God in whatever situations we find ourselves. When one is ready to serve God vocationally, one is ready for baptism. By using language of ordination, I believe that each adult has a valid vocational ministry. This view makes the assumption that children are not baptized.

Meaningful rituals and ceremonies celebrate faith growth/milestones in children. If baptism is reserved for believers and dependent upon an adult decision, the

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235 See Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, 46-47 in which baptism is called a “sign” that represents God’s action of salvation and the human response of discipleship within the context of the church.
church must find rituals which celebrate children’s ongoing engagement with God. I recommend a consecration service for infants and children whose parents are sincere in their desire to nurture the spirituality of their children. Although this is not to be interpreted theologically in the same way as infant baptism, it can be understood as the child’s initiation into membership with congregational life. A celebrative, welcoming ceremony gives the child both status and identity in the congregation and reminds parents and the congregation of their responsibilities to nurture faith in the child.

In order to validate childhood spirituality, more rituals between birth and baptism are necessary. Faith markers can be spontaneous celebrations of God’s transformations and/or tied in with age: a Bible given to six year old children to acknowledge their beginning ability to read; a teen entry ritual that celebrates a new faith and life stage. When the congregation pays more attention to the spirituality of its children, it can find many ways to celebrate God’s activity in their lives!

*Children are nurtured in faith as they participate in the worshipping life of the faith community.* Children’s faith has validity when adults pay attention to their spiritual experiences. Children feel valued when they can sing the familiar songs of the church, when they understand that God has a message for them, too, and when they are known by name. They experience healing and hope as they are included in the intercessory and thanksgiving prayers of the congregation. As they worship and learn in the midst of the congregation, children can experience God’s love and acceptance. Children need to be more than participant-observers waiting to worship when they are older. If children were
received into the congregation as members when they are infants there would be an obligation to pay more attention to their worship needs.

*Children's faith is nurtured as they witness a holistic spirituality in adults.*

Children learn much about faith and God by observing the adults practicing a dynamic faith. Marpeck’s gift to the Mennonite community was an insistence on the integration of faith and life rather than perfection for believers. I suspect that his active participation in the secular world informed his ways of being within the church community just as his church participation influenced his ministry as an engineer. The best gift the Mennonite faith community can extend to its children is the heart and mind of God expressed by adults who have an integrated faith. Such a faith carefully discerns God’s message via Scripture study, prayer and an expectation that the Holy Spirit continues to speak today. This discernment happens mutually and in community as children and adults, lay people and clergy, reflect together on what it means to be faithful witnesses to God’s activity.

Children can witness faith when all ages engage in rituals and ceremonies that invite the mystical, transcendent nature of God to be experienced. These *holy* moments, such as baptism, healing, and anointing, can have a lasting effect on children even as they participate by observing. Children witness an integrated faith when they see adults seeking and pursuing justice for all especially for the least among us. The witness of a holistic faith in adults will teach children more about faith and one’s relationship to God than any Sunday school curriculum or doctrinal teaching can ever accomplish!

These ten theological statements begin to define my present and personal understanding of the nature of children and their place within congregational life. While
this theological perspective may never become the definitive Mennonite perspective on children, I believe it can offer another voice in the theological conversation, a voice that pays attention to the voices and the faith experiences of the children in the twenty-first century Mennonite context.

After reflecting on the nature of children and their place within congregational life, I suggest that a new metaphor is needed to provide stimulus for transformed thinking and action regarding children in the Mennonite Church. I offer next a contemporary metaphor for congregational life that is inclusive of the children and has a *playful tone* that has the potential to engage both children and adults.

*Playing With a Contemporary Metaphor*

Embedded in the language of church members, and implicit in their behavior, self-images represent the core values and commitments by which they reaffirm and live out their sense of belonging. Leaders will find these self-images more in the congregation’s shared memory than in its theological statements, more in its lifestyle than its publicity. Images are not precise definitions, but symbols around which congregations gather for ministry. They are not the boundaries at the edge, but the banners at the center.236

According to Nelle Morton, “As a community changes, the symbolic image, to remain alive and function actively, must ever be re-examined and allowed to reshape itself.”237 It is my view that the Mennonite community is changing and that present metaphors are in need of re-examination. My preference for a new metaphor stems from my desire to be creative and provide an effective image for an inclusive ecclesiology. What

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I offer is the germ of an idea for a contemporary metaphor in the hopes that others will help to shape it. A more appropriate metaphor for the church that includes children is *church as children in God's playground*.

This metaphor affirms and celebrates children as *children!* They are not little adults, depraved human beings, sinners in need of repentance, but children created by a loving God to enjoy God's friendship. Children at play are living expressions of God’s *joie de vivre!* This understanding of children fits with the Mennonite view of the nature of children before they reach the age of accountability. I wonder what would happen if baptism was viewed in the language of one’s *re-entry into child-like wonder and play*, in addition to the language of accountability, reason, commitment.

We can interpret *God's playground* in a number of ways. I imagined the Garden of Eden as the place where God came to play with Adam and Eve. There was a sense of “at-one-ness” and companionship. The psalmists and prophets made frequent reference to joy, celebration, and play in the new paradise, and Jesus’ life modelled abundant living in God’s reign. The playground metaphor suggests interaction, celebration, and *care-free* living in partnership with God.

The playground image assumes that there are boundaries. Most play areas have fences around them. Boundaries help children and adults to form an identity and to know limits. They are not meant to exclude but to provide a safe place for children to play without fear.

In any playground basic rules for living are learned as children relate to others. Through play, children learn about cooperation and competition, collaboration and
conflict, leading and following. They experience pain and laughter, sorrow and joy, winning and losing. They learn to play alone, with a few others, in teams, and in large groups. They learn to get along with children who are older and younger. They can teach others how to play games; and they learn from others.

Most public playgrounds accept people of all ages and abilities. Everyone can participate as they are able and as they choose. Adults are expected to accompany their children to watch over them and/or be a presence in the form of coach or supervisor. If the children are fortunate, the adults will play with them. Recently I observed school children at play during recess. Several children skipped; a group stood around talking; some walked together; a gang played soccer; a few sat alone on the grass. These children were all students at the same school, but their age, size, skin colour, abilities, and interests were not the same. In the same way, diversity within congregational life can be welcomed when there is a common bond that connects members to one another. Perhaps the awareness that we are all God's children could be that common bond.

The concept of God’s playground as a metaphor for the church is liberating for me. It hints at the reign of God that is filled with joy, exuberance, abundant living, and freedom to be in relationship with God in a playful, invitational way. In this view of church, there is an invitation for all to participate, to celebrate the friendship of God, to be both teacher and learner, to be a transformed community of followers of the Jesus way that invites those who observe from outside the fence to come and play in God’s playground.
This playground metaphor suggests a reversal of values. Here it is the children who are the prime actors and the adults become the observers who participate as they are able. Here the “business” or “work” of the community is godly play. This metaphor may speak especially to those who are yearning for something more to life than work and who long for a reunion with God in the new garden of Eden.

Even though I am an idealist, I realize that there can be a dark side to this metaphor. Playgrounds can have unsafe equipment; there can be accidents; there are bullies who do not prefer to seek the highest good for all. Some people may feel excluded because of perceptions about the playground and/or the people within. Sometimes players are not welcoming or ready to share equipment or participate in play. There can be discrimination based on race, age, ability, and gender. Nevertheless, I think that it is God’s intent and God’s ideal to which this metaphor strives.

Theologically, this metaphor invites a different understanding of humanity’s relationship with God than the church has offered previously. God is no longer the severe judge, the authoritarian and omnipotent male, but perhaps a child who wants to play! The view that God wants to play and desires companionship with people of all ages appeals to me. It invites me to explore a new dimension of God’s nature that may have a place in our contemporary context. Elizabeth Johnson, in writing of God’s Spirit as Wisdom or Sophia, suggests that “images of God’s power and action as Spirit...convey a

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238 See Robert Munsch, Giant or Waiting for the Thursday Boat (Toronto: Annick Press, Ltd., 1989). This book, written for children, images God as a little girl who resolves a dispute between two fighting adults.
way of relating that is mutual, reciprocal, full of friendship from God’s side, so to speak, as well as the human side.” Such friendship, according to Johnson, “entails a reciprocity of relationship that exists independently of one’s place in the social order, making it possible to cross boundaries of race, sex, class, and even natures.” Melchert reminds his readers of the role of Woman Wisdom in biblical and theological history: “Instead of prophetic condemnation and reassurance, Woman Wisdom offers playing, singing, dancing, feasting, and making love as ways of being with God and presents “delight” as a divine-human relation!” Such an image of a God who delights in playful relationships can have a powerful effect on people who are craving meaningful relationships in our present society. This metaphor calls for relationships with God and humanity that celebrate life. Abundant living is achieved as people of all ages become children of God who, as individuals and in community, delight in God’s presence and company.

Much can be celebrated about this metaphor. However, there are dark sides to most metaphors, including those used to describe Mennonite church life. The family metaphor, for example, can be exclusive in its definition. There are dysfunctional families, abusive parents, neglected children, authoritarian and patriarchal systems. Yet the church strives to live up to an ideal of family life. Congregational life is not always expressed in relationships that are ideal. There are people who grasp for power, who become bullies,


240 Ibid. I think it is safe to assume that boundaries of age can also be crossed.

241 Melchert, Wise Teaching, 198.
who refuse to cooperate or share what they have. This is the reality of communal living, even in church life. Congregational life is strengthened as people struggle to be faithful together. Faithfulness, not perfection, is the goal of the faith community. Both our relationship with God and our images of God may need to be re-visioned as we consider the implications of this metaphor for church life.

Marpeck’s Ecclesiology and God’s Playground

Marpeck’s understanding of ecclesiology was that the church was christocentric, scripturally-based, pure and holy, and strongly communal. Are these characteristics visible in a church that is described as children in God’s playground? Here are my observations.

_The metaphor of the contemporary church is christocentric._ The life and ministry of Jesus forms the foundation for community life. How Jesus treated children models for his followers how we should act in the world. Jesus demonstrated how adults are to live abundantly in God’s new reign, by being like children and by choosing to live in ways that empowered people on the margins to move toward the centre. It is not the death of Jesus that is central in this metaphor for church; it is a celebration of the living, resurrected Christ who continues to show us how to live.242

_The metaphor is rooted in the Scriptures._ This image is connected to the scriptures. The stories of Jesus’ interaction with the children, along with his challenge to learn from the children, have convinced me that there is clearly a place for children within

242 I believe that this fits with the moral influence view of atonement theology. This view is articulated from a Mennonite perspective in John Driver, _Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church_ (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1986), 44-49.
God's new reality, and it "remains for those attached to Jesus to create or adopt models that mirror nature as understood by Jesus' words and actions."243 For me, the image of children at play is in tune with Jesus' way with children and his understanding of what it means to live in the reign of God. Jesus did not have a romantic, unrealistic view of children. He knew from close observation that they do not always cooperate or even play well together.244

The prophet Zechariah's vision of the messianic era was, I believe, manifested in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The oracle recorded by Zechariah suggested that "God's return and presence is signaled by the joyful play of children."245 Is not the church to be a visible sign that God's reign is already here in the advent of Jesus?

_The metaphor does not demand purity and holiness._ The church as children in God's playground does not have the same connotations of purity and holiness as understood by Pilgram Marpeck. However, Anabaptist expectations have taken their toll on Mennonite Christians who have equated purity and holiness with perfectionism, particularly around moral standards. People struggle with guilt and depression because they cannot live up to such high standards in their own eyes and in the eyes of other church members. I recommend that we live as people of liberation, celebrating the


244 Weber, _Jesus and the Children_, 5. In commenting on Matthew 11:16-17, Weber believes that Jesus was a close observer of children at play, and used their sulking or refusal to play as a parable to describe the behaviour of the present generation.

245 Grassi, _Children's Liberation_, 6.
freedom that God's grace and goodness offers and the mystery of God's invitation to play with us. What might pure and holy mean in light of God's grace and gratuitous love?

_The metaphor celebrates community._ A playground is meant for many people to interact in many ways. There is freedom to play alone or with others, in small or large groups. This image reminds me of Kraus' language of "individual-in-community" in relationship with God. Jesus inaugurated a new age of God’s Spirit that invited people to participate as individuals within a larger community. Although people have freedom to act as individuals, there are parameters within which they must abide if they wish to be part of the community. However, these parameters invite people to participate within them and are not meant to exclude or reject them.

This is one place where the metaphor breaks down as it relates to Anabaptist ecclesiology, and where I challenge the traditional Mennonite ecclesiology of exclusion. In early Anabaptism, boundaries were meant to keep the community of saints as God’s pure and holy church. Those who did not play by the rules were excommunicated. It was clear who was in and who was out! I prefer to err on the side of God’s grace and the model of Jesus' ministry in practicing hospitality, accepting and welcoming all who came to the gates in search of God’s company.

_The entry point into the contemporary church is not baptism._ Both Anabaptist and Mennonite theology clearly place baptism as the entry point or initiation into church life as a full member. Only those who are capable of a rational decision to follow the way

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246 Kraus, _The Community of the Spirit. How the Church is in the World_, 38.
of Christ can join the church. In God’s playground the gates are open to people of all ages. The entry of a new child into the community is initiated by a special ceremony.

I admit to having some difficulty in knowing where to place believer’s baptism within this metaphor. If baptism is considered one’s ordination for vocational ministry and symbolic of an owned faith, it may symbolize a willingness for more responsibility and accountability within the structures. Different activities within a playground call for more highly developed skills in leadership, endurance, and commitment. Some activities may be dangerous for people who are physically small or weak; others may require assistance and/or guidance because they are young or elderly. But no one is excluded from the playground based on age alone!

In summary, I find that many of the characteristics of Marpeck’s ecclesiology can be defined in a contemporary understanding of church as children in God’s playground. I believe that I am being true to the spirit of Anabaptism in my search for an ecclesiology that is appropriate for God’s people five centuries later. Ongoing and careful Spirit-discerned reflection and study of the scriptures within the community of believers are critical for finding God’s way for the present context.

Limitations and/or Intrinsic Challenges of the Metaphor

The most obvious limitation for this metaphor of church as children in God’s playground is the fact that it goes against the strong views of the early Anabaptist understanding that church membership was reserved for adults who voluntarily committed themselves to a lifestyle of radical discipleship. I must admit to a certain dilemma here
around the aspects of exclusion and inclusion: As a Mennonite, I believe that believers' baptism is an important rite that symbolizes vocational ministry. As a feminist, I wish for an egalitarian church that is inclusive of all people, including children, who minister to each other in mutuality as they are able. This for me is the crux of an evolving inclusive theology of children and the holding to the tradition of believers' baptism. Further dialogue and exploration are needed.

The church’s emphasis on accountability provides a second challenge in considering this metaphor. Mennonite theology stresses accountability and rational thinking. The language of discipleship often means obedience to God and the teachings of the church as well as accountability to the congregation for one’s beliefs and actions. The central theological tenet for the metaphor that I propose is one of grace and abundant, joyous living. One’s relationship with God is mystical and intuitive, lived within a community that welcomes diversity, is hospitable, and extends the friendship of God to all who want to come and play. There is a more fluid quality to this metaphor, which suggests that it is God who finally determines who belongs and who does not. This metaphor assumes that accountability and boundaries, while probably necessary, are not central to one’s understanding of ecclesiology.

A third limitation may be its offensive nature to adults. This metaphor reflects that attention is being paid to a group of people who have been typically on the margins. Here children are moved into the centre alongside the adults. Adults are invited to become like children and know God by playing with children. I suspect that such an image of church may be offensive to many adults in the church. Power, hierarchy, status, and
intellect are strong forces that pull Mennonites away from the call of Jesus to radical discipleship, to "change and become like children" (Matthew 18:3). In this new image of church, children are welcomed and included and serve as role models for the adults. I would anticipate resistance from Mennonite congregations to such a counter-cultural view that makes children the prime players and invites adults to watch and participate as they are able. This reversal, while reminiscent of Zechariah 8, may be too much of a stretch for our church leaders!

I suspect, too, that there would be resistance for this metaphor from non-Western cultures who tend to devalue play. Adults in these cultures believe that one must be diligent in productivity and that play is not beneficial because of its nonproductive nature. This view is not solely the view of non-Western Mennonite cultures. It is also part of my Swiss Mennonite heritage. There are many Mennonite adults who would think that play is not appropriate or necessary behaviour for children or adults, especially in the context of church. The Protestant work ethic is still evident among Mennonite Christians.

I believe that this metaphor can challenge and perhaps provide a corrective to such a view that play is not necessary for abundant living. The reign of God that Jesus heralded included celebration, joyful living, and playing with children! In nurturing relationships with God and other believers, perhaps we need to reconsider what it is that strengthens faith -- working for God or wasting time with God.

The images of God as friend, companion, even child may be offensive to adult Christians who espouse a normative or orthodox view of the Christian faith. Some people
have a difficult time believing that there are images for God in addition to “father.” Images that suggest a God who is vulnerable, weak, or playful may not be appreciated.

Moving Beyond the Boundaries

Feminist thinking from the margins often moves one beyond the boundaries of traditional thinking into what bell hooks refers to as “spaces of radical openness” that “offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternative new worlds.” It has been energizing to imagine new possibilities for being church. I feel an affinity with this particular metaphor for an inclusive Mennonite ecclesiology. I will continue to play with this metaphor as I take time to observe children and adults at play and test my theological understandings of children with colleagues and children who like to dream and envision God’s reality in the midst of today’s world. I look forward to putting flesh on this metaphor as I reflect on implications for faith formation in children, worship and nurture settings, as well as administration and structures.

I believe that, with imagination and openness to paying attention to fresh winds of God’s Spirit, the Mennonite church can offer hospitable space and an affirming identity to all God’s children, especially the young ones. Our Anabaptist heritage is a good one; yet we need to discard what is no longer adequate for our times. Some important tenets of Pilgram Marpeck’s vision for a church can form the foundation for a Mennonite ecclesiology for the twenty-first century that honours both individual and community, that

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248 Ibid., 150.
honours and respects the gifts that children are and bring to the congregation, and that champions radical discipleship. How these faith principles are to be practiced faithfully is determined by the continual critical theological reflection by God’s people, another important legacy given to the church by Marpeck.

Jerome Berryman coined the term *Godly play* as a way to approach religious education. He suggested that “Godly play is a way to know God.” As a religious educator, Berryman sees his role with children to be about “teaching the art of playing so one can come close to the Creator who comes close to us and even joins us when we are playing at any age.” Adults respond to God’s sacred story as we discover the inner child who is “full of energy, creative, spontaneous, and deeply centred...Godly play is a way to keep open the opportunity for the true self to emerge in childhood and the possibility that adults may return to where they began and begin to grow again.”

For me the metaphor of church as children in God’s playground encourages godly play. Playgrounds invite active participation and are not for spectator sports. And active play involves the whole person and celebrates the body. In participation in active play that require movement of all the muscles, children and adults are being invited to honour creation and the God who created them.

I look forward to imagining how this metaphor can inform the design and form of curricular resources for children who live as Mennonite Christians in God’s playground.

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250 Ibid., 12.

251 Ibid., 158.
CHAPTER 9
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Shared Praxis Approach to Christian Religious Education

As one who is strongly committed to Christian education, I chose to situate my action in ministry in a methodology that is solidly rooted in religious education theory. I was attracted to the work of Thomas Groome who developed an approach to Christian education which he terms "the way of shared praxis." In this chapter I begin with an overview of Groome's methodology. Then I describe the process of my action in ministry, including the selection process for research participants, session outlines, and the method of data collection.

Thomas Groome currently serves as Professor of Theology and Religious Education at Boston College's Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, which is a Catholic and Jesuit university.

In a concise paragraph, Groome offers his interpretation of shared praxis:

In its complete expression, shared praxis as an approach to education in Christian faith can be enacted by a focusing activity and five subsequent pedagogical movements. I use the term movement intentionally. It implies that shared praxis is a free-flowing process to be orchestrated, much like the

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Groome, Sharing Faith. I relied heavily on this book in outlining the sessions for my action in ministry.
movements of a symphony or dance. The movements have a logical sequence..., but in an actual event they often overlap, recur, and recombine in other sequences.  

The first movement has to do with naming and/or expressing the present action. This can be expressed through a variety of ways, according to Groome, “through a recognizable activity, in making and describing, in symbolizing, speaking, writing, gesturing, miming, dancing; that is, through any form of human expression.” The second movement invites critical reflection on the present action, with the intent to “bring participants to a critical consciousness of present praxis.” Movement three makes accessible the Christian Story and Vision. The faith life of the Christian community as expressed through scriptures, traditions, and liturgies, is offered along with the vision that empowers Christians to be faithful to God’s rule in their lives.

In movement four participants place their critical understanding of present praxis around the Christian Story and Vision and ask how present praxis affirms, questions, and challenges us in our present praxis. In this movement participants are encouraged to “appropriate the Story/Vision to their own lives and contexts, to know it for themselves through judgment, and thus to make it their own as agent-subjects in the larger Christian community and in the world.” The fifth and final movement calls for participants to

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253 Groome, Sharing Faith, 146.

254 Ibid., 146-147.

255 Ibid., 147.

256 Ibid.
make a decision about living their Christian faith. Decisions can be personal and/or communal.

I chose Groome’s methodology for various reasons. In my teaching experience I find that this approach engages both adults and children in learning. I like the flow of the method. The five movements are fluid and tend to recur, overlap and recombine as in dance steps. The method also allows for flexibility. One can do all five movements in one short session or expand the movements over the course of a longer unit or semester. I decided on five sessions with the adult group with a concentration of one movement per session. I like the hospitable style of leadership modelled in the shared praxis approach. The teacher as facilitator guides the learning in non-intrusive ways, thus inviting participants to trust and share of themselves more openly.

I chose this approach because of its effectiveness and my familiarity with it. For the purposes of my study, I chose to critique this approach from a feminist perspective and in a Mennonite context. Does Groome’s methodology work with a mix of children, lay leaders and clergy whose theology and practices are not informed by Roman Catholicism?

Second, I believe my topic is conducive to this shared praxis approach. As children reflect on their relationship with God and the church community they can begin to name their vision for an inclusive place in the congregation. And adults, in recalling and reflecting on their childhood experiences and in hearing the voices of the children, can find authentic ways to be more inclusive of the children in their midst. This approach offers an opportunity for adults to dialogue with the Story and Vision in light of their past and present experiences and to respond to the call for a lived faith action.
Third, this methodology is rooted in experience. Feminist theology and education rely on experience as an important element in knowing. As we reflect on our experiences we are shaped by them. Groome’s first two movements depend on reflection upon one’s own and each other’s story and experience.

Fourth, this methodology is deeply rooted in Scripture. The Mennonite faith tradition takes the Bible seriously. It is central in the congregation’s worship and education life. We look to the scriptures to define how we are to practice discipleship. Groome used the Biblical story of the road to Emmaus,257 a story of teaching and learning that led to transformation, to exemplify his methodology.258 Transformation is, I believe, at the heart of Christian education. My exploration of a theology of children is deeply rooted in the biblical record of Jesus’ interactions with real children.

Fifth, Groome’s methodology is not dependent upon current trends in secular education259 but on the Christian Story and Vision. It is the Christian tradition that guides how we learn to live in God’s reign. In the Mennonite tradition the confessions of faith have guided congregations in faithfulness to our faith heritage. Although I do not think that such documents carry the weight within our denomination that they do in some other

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258 This is described in detail in Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education. Sharing our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980).

259 Groome, however, is not against secular educational theory and practice. He encourages the use of art, drama, writing, creative imagination, etc. in helping the learning community to reflect on experience, hear the Christian Story and Vision in a new way, and respond to God’s invitation to be transformed. Both intellect and emotion are necessary for transformation.
faith traditions, the Anabaptist and Mennonite church writings have had a direct impact on congregational practices with children.

A sixth reason for choosing Groome's methodology has to do with a strong expectation of a lived faith response. This approach offers creative potential for action that can lead to living more radically in God's reign.

In teaching and learning settings where a congregation is open to pay attention to God's leading and willing to attend to a process of discernment, I have hope that God's truth will be revealed and transformational living will become a reality. I anticipate, in my action in ministry using Groome's methodology, that there will be movement in one congregation toward more inclusivity of its children.

The Action in Ministry

The purpose of my study was to help me to articulate a theology of children in a Mennonite perspective that would include children more fully in congregational life. The action in ministry was designed to test my hunches about such a theology with both children and adults in one congregation. I hoped that through the reflection process the congregation would find specific ways to integrate the children more fully into church life.

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260 One of the legacies of Anabaptism has been, I believe, a deep seated suspicion of authority and hierarchy of denominational church leadership. At present there are Mennonite congregations who refuse to affirm the 1995 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective because it is too "liberal." Several congregations in western Canada have chosen "non denominational" children's curriculum over our Mennonite Jubilee: God's Good News arguing that the theology is too "feminist" because it uses inclusive language for God and humanity!
This action in ministry was designed as a qualitative research project using a "modified" grounded theory approach. In grounded theory, one develops a theory after carefully listening to the stories and reflection of the lived experience of a group of people. My intent was to explore, with real children and congregational leaders, my emerging theory or theology of children to see how it fit with the experience and practice of Mennonite congregational life.

Choosing the Research Group. The selection process for a congregation and the participants is outlined in my thesis proposal. The pastor readily suggested names and introduced my project via a memo to the adults and the parents of the children on the list. I made follow up calls extending personal invitations to participate. The adult group consisted of six women, including the pastor, and four men. Three girls and five boys participated.

Meeting with the Children. My one time session with the children followed the format outlined in the thesis proposal, using the first two movements of Groome’s shared praxis approach. I met once with the eight children, whose age range was from 5 to 14, on Saturday morning, October 3, 1998 from 9:30 until noon. As parents brought their children I reviewed the assent form with them. Both parent and child were requested to sign the form before the session began. After a general explanation of the project, I conducted personal interviews with the children in a separate area. Sandi, the Christian

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261 See Appendix A.

262 The first names of the participants are listed in Appendix B.

263 The session outline, including interview questions is in Appendix C.
education staff person, led the remaining group in a variety of activities which are outlined in the session plan. After the interviews I met with the entire group, served snacks, and distributed small gifts, and invited them back for my final session with the adult group.

_Meetings with the Adult Group_. The adult group met five times during October and November, 1998. I facilitated each session attending closely to the five movements outlined in Groome’s shared praxis approach to religious education.²⁶⁴

_Gathering and Recording the Data_. Data for my research was gathered in several ways. I used the interview method with eight children from Erb Street Mennonite Church, located in Waterloo, Ontario. I developed a set of fourteen questions to help me to pay attention to the children’s experiences of God and the church. I used a tape recorder to document these individual conversations with each child.²⁶⁵ Later I transcribed the recorded information.

With the adult group, I relied on charts, written responses and videotapes from the five sessions to document information. In small group discussions, key points were recorded on chart paper. In plenary sessions, we added to the charts. When groups worked from assignment pages, I requested that the papers be handed in. I used a technician to videotape all the plenary sessions so there was an accurate record of the discussions that occurred. In addition to the verbal exchanges recorded on video, I was able to make observations on body language and facial expressions that might inform what

²⁶⁴ Complete session plans are located in Appendix D.

²⁶⁵ I had planned to use video technology for the interviews but in the end chose to use audio recording. I thought it might be too intrusive and/or distracting for children to be interviewed individually about personal faith issues.
is being said. Each member of the adult group was required to submit a written evaluation of the sessions using a form that I developed. All forms were returned.

The Issue of Confidentiality. In choosing to operate from a feminist perspective that gives voices to those with little or no voice, I requested that the participants allow me to use their first names in my written report. The consent forms, therefore, did not request anonymity. It is my hope that real children's own voices can be heard from the margins as a way to move them closer to the centre of congregational life. In the spirit of egalitarianism I made the same request of the adults. The consent form for the adults clearly stated that real first names would be used and that I would seek validation and permission from individuals whose names and quotes I used. In the children's assent form, which both parent and child signed, it was clearly stated that I would have permission to use the child's first name and age in my thesis upon their approval of what was written.

Verification. As a way to verify what was quoted by the participants in the action in ministry, I sent a copy of the chapter on my findings and reflections to each participant, along with a cover letter requesting feedback and response. The adult participants responded via telephone, as did the children and/or their parents. In the instances where there was an issue, I made changes or footnoted the comment. I feel that what is articulated in the next chapter adequately reflects both the content and the process of the sessions.

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266 This evaluation form is part of Session five. See Appendix D.
CHAPTER 10
FINDINGS AND REFLECTIONS

Lenses of Interpretation Within a Stance of Exploration

How does one make sense of the volume of data gathered in an action in ministry? Since I entered the project looking for verification of my “hunches” about children and inclusivity, it was not difficult to determine the framework for interpreting the data. However, it has been a somewhat daunting task to search for meaning in the reams of data that I collected from the interviews, videotapes, as well as charts, discussions, and informal conversations. After sitting with the data, reading, reviewing, creating numerous “mind maps” and “wall charts,” I have organized my findings within the framework of four levels of interpretation: Mennonite theology which includes ecclesiology, age inclusivity, power of tradition, and process of education.

As I examine the findings through each interpretive lens, I do so from an exploratory stance in the context of theological reflection. Killen and deBeer define theological reflection as a search for meaning that invites us to befriend our Christian heritage, our lived experience, our culture, and our contemporary faith community as conversation partners on the journey of faith. It asks us to hold our heritage, our culture, our community, and our own experience
as companions in a conversation, a conversation where the questions and the exchange of discourse reveal new insights.\(^{267}\)

These authors suggest that there are three standpoints with which to situate oneself in theological reflection. I have chosen "the standpoint of exploration."\(^{268}\) Unlike the standpoint of "certitude"\(^{269}\) which depends on the tradition, or the standpoint of "self-assurance"\(^{270}\) which claims experience as the ultimate power, I look to both tradition and experience from an exploratory stance as I search for insight on my questions.

With each level of interpretation I will share my findings and offer analysis and/or reflections. These findings will verify or disprove some of my hunches. In the first place, then, I examine the data from a theological and ecclesiological perspective within the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith tradition.

The Lens of Mennonite Theology and Ecclesiology

How do today’s Mennonite children experience God? My research and thinking has led me to challenge the assumption of Anabaptist theologians that young children cannot be in relationship with the Divine because they are too young to understand and/or think about God until they have gained rational capabilities. I questioned what kind of relationship, if any, existed between the child and God. Is it grounded in God’s judgment

\(^{267}\) Patricia O’Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 3.

\(^{268}\) Ibid., 16-18.

\(^{269}\) Ibid., 4-9.

\(^{270}\) Ibid., 9-13.
or God's love? My sense was that, in our present context, Mennonite children are being raised in a more egalitarian, less authoritarian manner. In what ways does this make a difference in how they understand and experience God?

_The Spiritual Nature of Children According to the Children._ The interviews I conducted with eight Mennonite children confirmed that children can relate to God in a personal way that is rooted in companionship and love. Several children described times of feeling especially close to God or Jesus. Fourteen year old Paul said, “I can’t really think of an occasion, but I know there have been times when something really sad happened or somebody dies, and you almost feel like somebody’s there with their arm around you.”

Laura (10) felt close to God “on Christmas eve, when we are at church.” Violeta (9) recalled a deep sense of God’s presence at her first sleep-over when she was in grade two. More recently she felt that God was with her in her new school: “I felt...God was with me when I made friends because he wanted me not to feel so alone.” Five year old Meaghan thought about God’s presence “sometimes when I get up and when I go to bed.” The other children, all boys, could not recall a time when they felt especially close to God.

I invited children to share images or word-pictures of God. For Paul (14), God is “loving everybody and forgiving.” Brent (11) described Jesus as “friendly.” Laura (10) said God was “very loving, kind and gentle, and forgiving.” Stephen (7) drew a picture of

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271 In this chapter I usually identify the author of the quote. Where no author is given it was intentional in order to protect the author. This footnote verifies that all the quotes that have been identified have been validated by the person named.
God “making sure the angels don’t get into any trouble, ‘cause, you know, they can sometimes get into fights.”

Most children used male pronouns when referring to God. However, Seth (7) tentatively said that “God is our spirit,” and Paul (14) avoided male and female pronouns when talking of God in the abstract:

It’s sort of hard to say [how I picture God] ‘cause I’ve never seen God, but, like in the movies and stuff, it’s always like a guy with a white coat...I think that’s really sexist, and I don’t think God’s actually like that. I think it’s more of a spirit, not an actual form.272

The Spiritual Nature of Children According to the Adults. In session four the adult group wrestled with my theological statements regarding the spiritual nature of children. The group whole-heartedly agreed that children are spiritual beings created by God. “Absolutely,” wrote Sandra, “all humans crave spirituality in whatever culture or belief system (or lack thereof) in which they are born.” The adults agreed that a child is a “gift from God,” and the “spirit is within children.” However, there was disagreement over my statement that children can be in relationship with God from birth. One small group of three273 insisted that a child would not have a relationship with God without nurture from a parent or care-giver: “God watches over children, but the capacity is not there for children to know God without assistance.” The group spokesperson admitted that one reason for this belief stems from our inability to “measure” an infant’s relationship with

272 Though, for Paul, there is a sense of form when God provides comfort with loving “arms.” This, too, could be metaphorical language.

273 Group members included a grandmother, a young dad, and a Sunday school teacher at the middle elementary school level.
God. Both Sandra and Joanne disagreed with this group’s assessment that a child could not have a relationship with God without the presence of a nurturing care-giver. Both felt that, even without it, a relationship exists. Don offered the metaphor of “electromagnetism,” suggesting that the church and care-givers reinforce what is already there.

In summary, the adults accepted that children can and do have a relationship with God. There is tension between a sense of an innate spirituality within children and one that must be nurtured apart from God’s initiative alone. Because a child cannot articulate her or his spirituality, the faith dimension can easily be missed or dismissed as non-existent.

*The Meaning of Baptism.* Since believers baptism in current Mennonite theology is the rite of passage into church membership, I expect that children, as future baptismal candidates, should know what baptism represents. I discovered that children did not view baptism as a symbol of repentance and conversion or as an initiation into church membership; however most could not define the term. For Stephen (7) it was “one of those inside things that you can’t explain.” Laura (10) and Paul (14) viewed baptism as a commitment to devote or give one’s life to God and Jesus, and live the “way God and Jesus want them to live.” Only two children related the rite of baptism with congregational life. Danny (12) thought it had something to do with “becoming a bigger part of the church.” Brent (11) believed that one had to be older to “know what the meaning of church is.” These responses support my claim that the language of repentance and conversion is not familiar to or understood by the children of the church. While baptism seems to signify a deeper commitment to God and a life of discipleship, there is an understanding that it is a natural event in a person’s life when they are older. It seems that
the assumption that faith can be *appropriated* when children are beyond the childhood years holds more truth for today's Mennonites than the language found in the official documents of the church.

It was a disappointment to me that little discussion took place among the adult group on the subject of the language and meaning of baptism. However, Sandra offered this written response regarding repentance and conversion language:

The language of repentance and conversion is not appropriate, as the message children receive is that God is love rather than the old fear-mongering that is representative of the above. Faith is a journey rather than a short trip that begins and ends with conversion.

Don, a long-standing Mennonite Christian, lamented the emphasis our theology has placed on baptism as *works* rather than *grace*. Sandra argued for the use of faith appropriation language that suggests we grow in faith, which is a gift given by the grace of God to be developed. There was expressed interest in my views of baptism as *ordination to vocation*, although the discussion centred mainly on my definition of vocation. In our brief discussion about the meaning of baptism, my sense was that there was little desire for this congregation to use the language of repentance and conversion in calling for a faith response among the adolescents. The language of faith appropriation made more sense, and the rite of baptism seemed to have more to do with an owned faith.

*Defining a Christian.* In current evangelical circles, as well as in my adolescence, the language of *being a Christian* was associated with a conversion experience and/or

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274 In respecting the choices made by group members for discussion purposes, I had little control over small group decisions. In addition, the assignment I gave was too large for the short time that I allowed for discussion.
baptism. I wondered how Mennonite children of the 1990s understood this term. On the whole, responses suggested that being a Christian has to do with being in relationship with God in a way that is both inwardly and outwardly focused. For Paul (14), being a Christian is a lifestyle issue. A Christian is somebody who doesn’t believe in war and fighting, and usually tries to help people who are in trouble, maybe here or in a third world country, and somebody who worships God, and, I think we aren’t very judgmental, like, we’re fairly accepting of other religions.

Brent (11) and Stephen (7) connected being a Christian with Sunday worship: “A person that knows a lot about God, goes to church every Sunday and sits in the service and listens and worships God.” Stephen added that a Christian “is very important.” When I queried him on this he replied that a Christian is “sort of, like, a way to bring God and Jesus here.” Laura’s (10) definition coincided with her understanding of baptism: “A Christian is a person who believes in God and Jesus, and wants ... to live like them.” Violeta (9) suggested that Christians have moral sensitivity: “They know what’s right and wrong, and if they hurt somebody’s feelings, they would say ‘sorry’ if they knew that was wrong.” Young Seth (7) sighed when asked the question and could only conclude that a Christian is “something that takes place in your heart.”

My follow up question for the children was, “Do you think you are a Christian?” Responses were varied. Paul (14) gave an emphatic “Yup! I started going to church because my parents wanted me to, but now that I’m here, I’m getting some stuff out of it. I’m learning about the Bible.” The other children were not so sure if they were Christians. Their responses were ambivalent, summed up with this child’s response: “sort of, I guess,
maybe.” No one said they were definitely not a Christian. One child was confused about being Christian and Mennonite and not at all sure that one could be both!

I wonder about the ambivalence and uncertainty noted in the children’s responses. Is the term too abstract for children this age, since only the teenager claimed the title? Or are there too many layers of interpretation within church and society? Is there a relationship between baptism, being a Christian, and church membership that is vaguely understood but not able to be articulated? Could this uncertainty stem from the way the adults in the congregation have named children all along, as Mennonite rather than Christian? I wonder how the children would have responded if the question, “Are you Mennonite?” had been asked. The consciousness of being Christian will to some extent depend on how Mennonite children have been named by the faith community as well as how much experience and teaching they have had to consider themselves in the wider Christian fellowship of which Mennonites are a part.

In a brief adult discussion on the topic, I noted a similar ambivalence around the language of being a Christian. Elizabeth reported that her teenage grand-daughter thinks of herself as a Christian, though she is not baptized, but knows she will be sometime in the future. According to the adults, this seems to be the prevailing attitude among the congregation’s youth, who are not “bad kids.” There is no social pressure to “stick up hands and walk down the aisle.” Apparently this is a far cry from the atmosphere for teens at Erb Street Church during previous generations. Sandra recalled her teenage years in the 1960s, when “if you were fourteen, you hung your head and said ‘no,’ if asked about being a Christian.” With the present understanding of an appropriated faith, she feels that
children are growing in faith, they have a belief system that centres around Christ, and so they assume they are Christians. Don admitted that in the past “you knew if you were in or out.” And there was no question - if you were baptized, then you were a Christian. He reminded us that, in the past, one could not be “legally married and legally buried” at Erb Street Church unless baptized. This view was hardly the intent of the Anabaptists who insisted that baptism was a voluntary act based on faith!

*Understanding Ecclesiology in the Present Context. In my exploration of ecclesiology then and now I was reminded that many Mennonite congregations operate out of both an exclusive and inclusive ecclesiology, especially with regards to the children. The congregation is faced with a dilemma: It values family and community. It wants children to feel accepted in congregational life. Yet it adheres to a theology of believers baptism which excludes children from its membership. When children feel included and valued, they may already consider themselves to be members and, in the long term, may question the need for baptism when they are older.*

Erb Street Mennonite Church also finds itself caught in this dilemma. It declares a membership that is clearly defined by believers baptism: children are not baptized and are not members. One cannot be a member of this congregation unless one is baptized. In a conversation with Renee, the pastor, I learned that the congregation practices its exclusive ecclesiology in three ways: it is understood that children do not participate in communion;

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275 It is interesting and revealing to note that, without fail, the children I interviewed clearly believed that they belonged to Erb Street Mennonite Church. They did not feel excluded *because they were not baptized.*
only members can vote at congregational meetings; and it is a privilege of membership to “participate in the life of the church,” meaning they can serve on committees and boards.

These rules seem to apply less strictly to adults than children. For example, adult non-members can participate in communion “upon confession of faith in Jesus Christ,” but children do not have the same privilege. The same is true for participation on committees. The stumbling block here for children, in addition to their non-member status, is their age and lack of maturity. It appears that this congregation has been more true to its Anabaptist theological roots regarding children than it has for adults who, for whatever reason, choose not to be part of the membership.

Conclusions. In listening to the conversation partner of Mennonite theology in my search for a theology of children, I encountered a few surprises and had some of my hunches confirmed. I was hoping for a clearer sense of the existence of a loving and experienced relationship between the children and God. There is some sense of relationship with God in all the children; however, some appear be more aware of this relationship than others. Perhaps it is a matter of articulation. Violeta, Laura, and Paul were able to express their thoughts well enough for me to grasp a sense of their spiritual nature. For others it was difficult to give verbal expression to their thoughts and feelings. This alerts me to the need for various means to express faith as well as the language to communicate that faith.

276 In a further conversation with Renee I learned that these adults may not be baptized.
The children at Erb Street Church did not have a good grasp of the meaning of baptism and its association with church membership. There is a need for more intentional congregational teaching about such important tenets of our theology. If congregations expect their youth to become part of the church through believers baptism, it is wise to educate them long before they reach adolescence.

The definition of Christian is unclear among children and youth. With an increasingly pluralistic and multi-cultural society on our doorstep, it is important that children have a sense of what Christian means. This is a multi-layered, nuanced word that requires explanation so that children can understand their own religious heritage and articulate their belief system to those whose faith traditions are not Christian.

Age Inclusivity: “Not Excluded and Not Included”

The key issue for me has been the issue of inclusivity of children in the worshipping and communal life of Mennonite congregations. This second level of interpretation, then, deals with age inclusivity. On one level Erb Street Church provides a hospitable, friendly, welcoming place for its children. Just ask them! The adult group generally felt pleased with the attention given to the children. In my exploration of the data from this perspective, I found evidence of both inclusive and exclusive ecclesiology at work in this congregation.

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277 When I speak of inclusivity in the context of this thesis I am referring to age inclusivity, meaning that children should not be excluded because of their age and factors associated with age.
Childhood Memories of Church: An Adult Perspective. During session one I invited the adults to think of a memorable experience of congregational life from their childhood to share with the group. I wanted to learn how the adult’s childhood experience may have influenced their present view of children’s involvement in church life. I make the following observations.

First, there was a performance aspect to their participation. When Tom was five years old he was given a special pin in the church sanctuary, a rare place for children. His memory is one of being welcomed and treated as a special person. Jennifer has a vivid memory of singing a solo in her church as a twelve-year-old, a first time occasion for singing and having her family at church together. Christmas time was a time for children to be at the front of the church, facing the congregation, to perform in pageants and choirs. For Marianne, this was the only time that children were allowed in the sanctuary.

Second, memories of worship experiences were not highly positive. The group agreed that, in their childhood experience, worship time was for adults. Don remembers boring worship services: watching the clock during long sermons; the pressure to be quiet; the solemn nature of communion. Richard has a vivid memory of a serious event in which the children were dismissed during the worship service and “the doors were closed behind

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278 Childhood church connections brought a rich mix to the group. Five of the ten participants, Don, Elizabeth, Sandra, Richard, Alan have spent most of their lifetime as part of Erb Street Mennonite Church. Renee’s childhood was churched in a nearby Mennonite congregation. Tom and Jennifer were first connected with the United Church of Canada. Marianne was raised in a German Lutheran congregation. Joanne also had a Lutheran upbringing.

279 The assumption here is that children’s time was in Sunday school.
him.” Elizabeth recalled that worship held “nothing really for kids...but we listened, we were good.” The adults, who did not grow up in Mennonite congregations, were aware of being excluded from the worship service and felt valued when they could be present.

Third, people and emotions were part of the memories. Alan, one of the youngest members of this group, recalled the more informal, playful times when he interacted with adults at intergenerational events. Most adults could name one or two persons, including parents, who had made an impact on them as children. And they noted that their childhood memories were mainly visual and emotional.

*The Voices of Today’s Children.* For the children, relationships with peers and adults were crucial in making them feel a part of the congregation. Without exception the children enjoy being part of this congregation because of friendships and Sunday school. Seth (7), Brent (11), and Paul (14) mentioned the importance of friendships. Seven children reported that Sunday school was a positive experience: they liked their teachers, their friends, and fun activities such as skits, games, snacks, and crafts.

The sense of belonging held different connotations for the children. Brent felt included because “lots of people are nice to me and they... all know me...and say ‘hi’.” Violeta (9) echoed this feeling of acceptance: “I know people so well, and they’re so nice to me. Whenever I say ‘hi,’ they say ‘hi’ back, instead of just not paying attention.”

Stephen’s (7) response about belonging at Erb Street was interesting: “Well, I think I’m

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280 Later he learned that one of the members was being “disciplined” by the congregation for alcohol use.
sort of meant for God and stuff.” Though he did not articulate what he meant he believed that this congregation was the place for him.

Children feel accepted at Erb Street Church because adults and peers know them by name and enjoy their presence. There is a sense of community and friendship among children and adults. However, two children reported feeling excluded in peer related incidents. Paul recalled the difficulty of breaking into a Sunday school class: “The first day when I came...I didn’t know anybody; all the people in my Sunday school class knew each other and stuff. But soon after that they made me feel really welcome.” Violeta recalls being teased as a younger child because of “the colour of my skin.” When asked how she felt about being teased, she replied, “I felt sad, and I just wanted to go home.” She thoughtfully remarked that she is no longer teased because “I know them so well.”

The Children’s Experience of Worship. During the interviews I heard, without too much surprise, that worship did not receive high marks as a place of inclusion for the children, though none stated explicitly that it was a place of exclusion. It appears that children gain their sense of belonging from the informal interactions with adults and in Sunday school setting, and not from worship. For Paul (14), a sense of belonging came when he became involved in practical ways: “I speak in church sometimes and I usher...when they don’t have enough people.” Worship becomes boring when it “goes over my head and I don’t really understand it.”

Most children named the children’s time as the only appreciable aspect of worship. This is a regular feature of the worship service at Erb Street Church in which children up to grade six gather at the front for a short story or feature geared especially to
them. As for the remaining time, the most common response of the children was that it was "boring." 281 Several children admitted to paying little attention after the children’s time. During the "especially boring" sermon time the children read or "played around," but few listened, with the exception of Paul who, at fourteen, admitted that most sermons "are usually pretty good because they talk about experiences and stuff." Stephen (7) commented that sometimes he listened to the Bible story and that he liked "watching the plays."282

Worship, in the children's understanding, is for adults. With the exception of a brief children’s time there is very little that attracts their interest. I conclude that, while some attempt is made to accommodate the children by offering a time that is exclusive for them, worship patterns at Erb Street Church ignore the children.

In listening to the experiences and comments of the children and the adults who grew up at Erb Street Church, I believe that in general children have felt accepted at Erb Street Church, especially through informal relationships and on special occasions when the children "performed." A noted difference is that the children I interviewed did not share stories of performing for the adults. I suspect that the Christmas pageants and choirs

281 One of the younger children admitted that, though he liked the snacks and crafts in Sunday school, it is "kind of boring, too." Adults involved in the public education sector reminded me that children would probably consider school to be boring also.

282 Later in the interview I discovered that Stephen was referring to the worship time during Vacation Bible School, which was held in the church sanctuary and included a drama each day. Stephen recalled in detail the story of Elijah and the widow who ran out of flour and oil which he had heard at VBS six weeks prior to the interview. When I asked if he had seen this funny play in church or Bible school, he replied, "In Bible school, but I consider them pretty close to the same."
belong to yesteryear and they have not been replaced with occasions that can function as memory markers for the children.

In this congregation children have always been present in the worship service though it appears that today’s children have more license to be restless, partially because of a more permissive attitude towards children in general. In the past children were definitely seen and not heard. Several adults recalled the expectation from parents and other adults that they sit quietly and “be good” during worship.

There continues to be a sense of ambiguity around issues of inclusion of children. Don’s comment about children and communion is one that applies to a broader context of congregational life: “Children are not excluded but not included.” There was, and still is, a recognition and acceptance that some activities in church life such as the worship service and participation in communion are for adults. Children are still passive participants, not expected to contribute in any active way to the worship experience.

The Present Practice. Through personal reflection, as well as small and large group discussions, the adult group attempted to determine the degree to which children are included in congregational life at Erb Street Church.\(^{283}\) When considering the whole of congregational life, with all its programs and ministries, how do the children fare on the exclusion-inclusion scale? Jennifer, Don and Elizabeth indicated the lowest marks on the

\(^{283}\) See the instrument, a continuum chart, used for this reflection by the group. It is located in Appendix D with session one’s outline. The variance in “pastoral care” and “special non-traditional services” were due to differences in interpretation of the terms. The pastoral care aspect led to a useful discussion on the meaning of pastoral care with children.
scale from zero to ten, but agreed that this is not a negative commentary on the place of children. In reality, children are not involved in the “business” of the church in areas that deal with broader church functions, stewardship, and committees. They are considered too young to plan events. Don conceded that children did not have a strong voice: “Children are not asked for their views unless the issue is specifically geared to them.”

Six group members who marked at the high end of the continuum asserted that the congregation “does a good job of including children in developmentally appropriate ways.” This appropriateness has to do with age and intellectual development. Therefore, children are incapable of leading worship or serving on committees. The primary settings for including children in meaningful ways are Sunday school, informal intergenerational events, and being present in the worship service.

Much of this discussion regarding inclusivity focused on children’s participation in worship. Tom expressed gratitude that the children are allowed to worship with their parents, which was not his childhood experience. Most adults felt that the children are included “adequately” in worship with the special children’s time, which offers “an interpretation of the sermon.” Alan suggested that we “invite children to participate as able.” Richard wondered about using the language of “belonging” rather than “participating,” since the latter word often means “doing.” This led to a fundamental question: *What does it mean to participate actively in worship for children (and adults)?*

My findings lead me to believe that, in this congregation, worship is something adults do, and for which children are present but are not expected to find meaningful for themselves. Children’s worship time happens when they are *spotlighted* for a few minutes
for an age-appropriate children's sermon. According to the adults, the intent of the children's time is to "help children feel part of the worship service." Otherwise their participation in worship is very much passive which is not seen as a negative thing.

I was reminded by one small group that children learn by observation: "Not to participate, i.e., in communion, is participation because there is much to learn from listening and observing." There is trust that children are listening and learning even as they read or "play around" during worship. But an important question for me is, What exactly might the children be learning while they observe the adults at worship? Though I agree that children can learn by observing and listening, educators assert that people learn best through active engagement and experiential activities. The idea of waiting until you are ready may be appropriate for baptism and communion; however, in weekly worship and congregational life, we owe more to our children. One small group noted that our "high-tech" society has heightened children's expectations of church experiences. Alan gave the example of the fast paced "action and entertainment" of the Mennonite Youth Convention held in Orlando in 1997 in which the congregation's youth participated. I am concerned that our youth and children will not tolerate being "talked at" or ignored for too long. In the secular world our children are being allowed to express themselves more readily than in past generations. And they are wanting to be entertained! Congregational leaders will need to address ways they can meet the worship needs of the children and youth, as well as the adults, without succumbing to the "entertainment mode." I believe that children are capable to worshipping God, just as adults are capable. An age-inclusive congregation can find ways to worship that touch the hearts of all of its worshippers.
I note the healthy tension in the way the adults wrestled with issues of belonging and exclusion regarding the children. Their childhood experiences impacted their thinking. Those who experienced exclusion from the worshipping body as children strongly affirm the present involvement of children in the worship life of the church, and those who grew up at Erb Street Church feel comfortable with the present efforts to include the children.

There is a strong sense of community in this congregation. Children are known by name and affirmed in informal, social ways. These intergenerational relationships are maintained beyond the church walls. Jennifer told how her young daughter beamed as she chatted with an “old” friend from church whom she met elsewhere during the week.

The adult group offered reasons for excluding children from participating in communion and decision meetings by the membership. Since these aspects of church are based on membership, children are excluded by virtue of age and development. This membership rule, however, applies more strictly to children than to adults.

The congregation has been informed by Anabaptist theology and influenced by developmental theory in its ecclesial practices. Until children are ready, assuming old enough, to be baptized, they are learning what it means to be a member by observing and listening, especially in worship and communion settings. They are not, however, invited to committee meetings to observe how the business of the church is conducted.

When we talked of active versus passive participation in worship, there was a tendency to think in terms of leadership. The question became, what can children contribute to the worship service? Suggestions given were reading scripture, playing a musical instrument, singing, and ushering. One child expressed a feeling of intimidation
around leading worship because adults "do it so good." I wonder how worship might be different if we thought about it in terms, not of what children can contribute to its leadership, but what meaningful ways can the leadership offer the children that will engage them in worshipping God?

Toward More Inclusivity. In the fourth session I facilitated discussion on how my proposed theology of children might move the congregation more faithfully toward God's vision in ways that respects the children and the nature of their spirituality. Out of this dialogue with the Story and Vision, we reflected on three ways that might validate children's spirituality within congregational life: meaningful rituals, intentional inter-generational interaction, and exploration of a contemporary metaphor, that of church as children in God's playground.

In my theology of children I suggest that meaningful rituals and ceremonies can celebrate faith growth in children. As an example, I distributed a service of consecration for welcoming the child into the faith community. Such a ceremony has the potential to initiate children into congregational life in a way that gives the child a firm place of belonging right from the start and reinforces the responsibility and privilege of the parents and the congregation in the faith formation of the child. This service of consecration is meant to replace or strengthen the present parent-child dedication ceremonies that some congregations, including Erb Street Church, offer to parents, usually in the first year of the

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284 This is Groome's terminology for movement 3.

285 See Appendix D under session four's outline. This is my revised service based partially on the feedback from the group.
child’s life. The present practice places more emphasis on the duties of the parent in nurturing faith in the child. I argue for a ceremony that consecrates the child to God and initiates it into the community of faith, thus placing the child, not the parents, in the centre of the ritual.

This example served as a springboard for discussion on the power of naming children, the need for examining the purpose of rituals and whom they are meant to serve (parents or children). There was affirmation for the “family” feel to the consecration service, in which the child is “venerated, but not,” in Don’s words. I was confronted about the individual nature of my ritual and reminded of the strong sense of community exhibited when several children are dedicated at once.

Some adults expressed a desire for additional faith markers between a birth and baptism. Joanne recalled a “coming of age” ceremony for adolescents from a House Church who were entering the teen years: “The child is the centre of attention and you can ‘see them grow.’” Renee is “encouraged to think about how some of our current traditions (child dedication, Bibles to third graders) can be infused with new creativity in language and in the act of doing those rituals.”

Intergenerational interaction is necessary in an inclusive church. When asked to consider changes in worship and other practices in order to be more inclusive of children, the group suggested ways that engage people of all ages in worship: the use of visual

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286 I understand that Erb Street has had some rich experiences when older children were involved in parent-child dedication rituals. This is worth pursuing at another time.

287 It is the practice at Erb Street church to have one dedication service per year.
symbols, dramatic presentations, “child-friendly” music, and the practice of “exchanging the peace.” In music, children can be involved at both the participation and “performance” levels and possibly as part of an intergenerational choir. “Special twice a year intergenerational Sunday school classes” were also considered.

Intergenerational social functions such as the annual Sunday school picnic, the spaghetti supper hosted by the youth, and previous family camping experiences were highlights for building community. Jennifer recalled, with fondness, working on a quilt with her young son and making “a million cinnamon buns” with a church leader.

I planned session five’s intergenerational event with the intent to model a meaningful faith-building experience. This was a highlight for me as I observed adults and children interacting comfortably and engaging in godly play. Jennifer was not surprised at this - at this church children are acknowledged over and over again by adults who “get to their level to talk with them.” Richard, who has no children, was surprised at the uniqueness of each child’s personality. He was teamed up with Seth, who was described as “enthusiastic, spunky, and with a great sense of humour!” Sandra said the children were “genuinely open and trusting because they are in the context of the church.”

The activity planned was a “status-equalizer” as adults and children sat and squatted around the enlarged paper model of Tom’s image of “church” in their attempt to add ways that they can learn to know God better together. It was a joy and privilege to

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To engage the children beyond listening during the children’s time, children could receive a visual or tangible object to take back to the pews with them. While this is not an idea for intergenerational activity, I felt it was too good an idea to miss recording.
watch Laura and Jennifer talk together, then draw their walking trails and showers; to see Tom attempting to draw Danny into the process; to watch Seth and Brent “playing around” on the edge of the activity, entering the conversation on occasion; to observe Sandra and Paul engaged in quiet conversation about church life.

This event concluded with a psalm of celebration, read as a litany in which adults and children contributed an action and a spoken (shouted) line. Richard commented on how the children paid attention to the psalm as they waited to shout out their part and found this “an interesting way to teach the children.” I have the feeling that the same could be said of the adults - the children’s exuberance gave them permission to become more active participants themselves!

In their final evaluations, half of the adults made specific comments regarding the need for more inter-generational activities as a way to be more inclusive of the children. Jennifer plans to organize a family camping experience for the summer of 1999 and “an intergenerational cross country ski/indoor board games day for a winter afternoon, followed by a potluck.” She would like to “invite more church friends home for lunch after church, especially older adults.” Don, who found the meeting with the children to be “a very positive experience,” would like to encourage the leadership to “increase intergenerational activity, especially the ends of age (old/young).” Richard hoped that in the event of a building project there would be attention given to make it “more of a child-friendly place.” Alan “will focus more on how what we do includes people of all ages.” Renee was “challenged to consider how conversations between the generations (within families) can happen with greater intentionality around issues of life and faith... There
should be continuity between the generations in regards to faith wherein faith is formed and grows in the next generation."

As a result of this activity, I am convinced that faith can be nurtured in inter-generational settings. What we did together was a helpful experience, illustrating both communal formation and communal learning, and reiterating how Story and Vision can both inform and shape each other.

I invited the children to think metaphorically about church as a way to guide the conversation toward the subject of inclusivity. First, using portraits of my extended family, I offered the metaphor of “family.” I noted that “body” was another metaphor used for church. My intent, however, was to explore with the children my metaphor of church as children in God’s playground. After showing several photos of children and adults in a playground I asked, *What do you think of the idea of church as a playground?*

Though responses varied they sparked interest and laughter among the children. Brent (11) thought that “the kids would have fun,” but was unsure if the adults could find a place: “Well, they could but ... they’d rather sit and listen” than play. Laura (10) liked the comparison of Erb Street Church to a playground: “Well, there’d be lots of people usually at the playground. There’s lots of people at church and usually they’re all enjoying their selves at a playground. You enjoy yourself at church, too...sometimes.” She, too, was unsure about her parents’ response: “I think they’d rather do other things

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289 Earlier in the interview Brent suggested that the children could “go outside and play games about church” during the worship service. One game he suggested was Dr. Dodgeball, a game of tag in which sick children cannot move until a healing person like Jesus touches them.
[than play].” She laughingly suggested that “we could keep one or two [church benches] off to the side” for the people who chose not to play. For Stephen (7) the leap to church as playground was not a huge one. His memories of Vacation Bible School reinforced the idea that church and play belong together. Like the others, he was not sure that adults would like to come to church to play: “I think they’re too busy lately.”

Violeta (9) proposed her own profound metaphor for church: “I think of it as a heart - like the earth is...loving and caring.” I asked, “So if you were to draw the church you would draw a great big heart?” Her response was, “Yeah, with the church in the middle.” Paul (14) had difficulty with the playground metaphor because it was not “serious” enough. While he preferred the family image because “you have the old people and the young people ...and everybody usually gets along,” he saw church as “a place to worship God, not a playground.”

I was curious to see how the adult group would respond to the metaphor, after hearing the children’s suspicions that adults would not think that church and play belonged together. In session three the adults illustrated their ideal playground. Then, in next session I challenged them to consider what Erb Street Church might look like if it took seriously the metaphor of a more age inclusive church as children in God’s playground. Tom was the only group member to take up the challenge. He created an interpretation of church that took play seriously. His picture exemplifies the high priority he places on

290 Stephen was laughing as he said this. Then he told me how he and his Dad play together, concluding with, “Sometimes we have stink bomb fights with our socks!”

291 A reduced version of his picture, as well as his description, is included in Appendix E. This same picture was enlarged for use as a floor model in session five.
community and accommodating the children. The group, with enthusiastic response to his vision, agreed that children would probably look forward to being part of this “church.” Tom thinks that “this is a playground for adults, too.”

Tom’s model was used in session five when children and adults contributed ideas for “getting to know God better” in a playground conceptualization of church. These ideas advocated for interactive, multi-generational activities that paid attention to the communal aspects of the congregation and beyond. There was a suggestion that the kitchen could be used to provide meals for the homeless.

This metaphor helped the children and adults to think outside the box about how to be an age inclusive community. From my observations, children may have to teach the adults how to play at being church. The metaphor supports the strong sense of community, acceptance, and participation that does not depend solely upon one’s ability to lead or perform. There is a place for everyone, even those who think less rationally because of their age. This does not diminish the use of rational thought but it confronts the issue of the role of the intellect in faith nurture. Don pointed out that “faith is more emotion than it is logic...we like to think we are rational.”

This metaphor is timely and relevant. Jennifer noted the present emphasis in society on the value of play for children’s psychological growth. Tom found the metaphor appropriate because “play is how children learn.” Don noted from his experience that grandchildren can bring out more “playful” ways in older people, giving them permission to “skip and dance” with them.
While the image of play might be viewed by some as yet another venture that upholds consumerism, individualism, and modern society’s obsession with sports, I think it can offer a counter-cultural voice with its emphasis on cooperation, inclusivity, and status-equalization. God’s playground invites all who want to play together.\footnote{292}

For those who place undue emphasis on work and productivity, this metaphor confronts the familiar paradigm of the Protestant work ethic to which Mennonites have subscribed heavily in the past. Don pointed out that we Mennonites “are so task-oriented. We only play after the work is completed.” Don does not see this metaphor to be opposed to the work ethic, but a corrective in that we must take time for both “creation and recreation.”\footnote{293} While I admit that this metaphor may not be a perfect fit for all aspects of Mennonite theology, it is worth exploring as a relevant image. Richard’s comments offer an appropriate last word:

I looked at the church model spread out on the floor today and I thought it’s kind of a cathedral (maybe for the 21st century). I understand that in the middle ages most people were illiterate. A visit to the cathedral was educational. [People] could look at the windows and become acquainted with the scriptures. They could be in awe. Today’s cathedral also teaches, but in a way that is relevant to today.

\footnote{292} My vision of a playground is more like a school yard or public park than Disneyland or the super sports complexes that require high entrance fees. In a playground all are participants. This concept challenges the attention people give to spectator sports rather than participatory sports. It also encourages interactive play with people, not computer or television screens. In the cultural context this metaphor is counter-cultural to children and adults alike.

\footnote{293} While this was not mentioned, I think another “timely” reason for such a metaphor has to do with the inability of many people in today’s society to find meaningful “work.” Can the church look at people’s worth through a different lens than one’s job or profession?
Conclusions. As I consider the extensive data I gathered that informed me about the inclusive nature of one congregation I conclude that this congregation is both inclusive and exclusive in its practices with children. Theologically its ecclesiology is exclusive in that children do not have membership status. This understanding is reflected in the worship practices that assume that the children are learning to worship as they are present with the adults, but are not expected to worship actively until they are older. I think that “active” worship in this context has more to do with engaging the intellect than the whole person. The congregation attempts to include its young in the brief children’s time when the theme of the sermon is interpreted at their level. And in most of the Christian education programs age groups are segregated so everyone can learn in developmentally appropriate ways. The “development” again is assumed to be mostly intellectual.

The congregation practices inclusivity in many of the non-theological ways it functions with the children. Children feel like they belong because of the strong emphasis on community. It appears that children consider themselves members based on the communal aspects of church life. As part of the church community, children are present in worship and informal social functions. As part of the church community children feel valued and are welcomed into the faith community via a meaningful parent-child dedication service. As part of the church community they are nurtured in Christian education settings with their peers by attentive and caring teachers, a tradition that has been upheld for generations.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ Elizabeth recalled a teacher named Nora who was a strong influence in her life, beginning in early adolescence and continuing for many years. In fact, “Nora’s class” still
Perhaps Maria Harris' insights are helpful in considering the place of children in this congregation's communal life. Harris offers five aspects of church life. It seems that at Erb Street Church, children are in the koinonia of the church, that is, they are involved in the communal aspects. They are also involved as learners in the didache or teaching aspect of church life. However, by virtue of their lack of official membership status, they are excluded from the church's kerygma (preaching and proclamation) except in a passive way, its leiturgia (worship and prayer), and its diakonia (service) aspects.

While Erb Street Church practices age-exclusivity theologically based on its insistence upon membership in the context of believers baptism, its emphasis on community (koinonia) provides the basis for including the children as much as theologically possible. The theological basis for the congregation's practice emerges from its attention to its Anabaptist/Mennonite faith tradition. As I explored ecclesial practices with the adult group I discovered that the congregation's reliance on tradition was not always based on theological understandings.

The Power of Tradition

Several times the adult group reminded me that Erb Street Mennonite Church was unique as an urban congregation situated near two universities. Each congregation has its own unique flavour and Erb Street Church is no exception. The presence of a paid

exists decades later. The group of teenage girls who first experienced Nora as a Sunday school teacher continued to meet on a monthly basis.

295 Harris, Fashion Me a People. This book outlines her understanding of these five aspects of church life as the curriculum in the church.
staff person for Christian education exemplifies the high value that is placed on education, especially with the children. There is a strong sense of community for an urban church.

I was struck by the strong role that *tradition* plays in the decisions and activities of this congregation. In reviewing the data from the action in ministry I found Erb Street Mennonite Church to be very much *tradition bound*. When I asked the group who most influences the present practices regarding children, the group’s unanimous response was “tradition.” It appears that the “leaders have influence but the greatest power is the tradition.” This is illustrated by the clearly defined process for critical decision making in this congregation: from committee to ad hoc group to church council to the membership.

From the beginning of this project I learned of the powerful role tradition plays in this congregation. Therefore, I chose to explore the data from this lens or level of interpretation. I am interested primarily in how this congregation has been influenced by traditional or normative Anabaptist and Mennonite theologies, Mennonite ethnicity, and the tradition of the status quo.

*Menonite Theological Traditions.* In general Erb Street Church’s practices regarding children are consistent with its Anabaptist and Mennonite theological roots. Children are not church members, and as such, do not have all the privileges or responsibilities accorded the adults who are members. They are expected to be baptized when they are ready, which means when they are older. Because they are not members, they do not participate in communion. I sensed a resistance to changing communion practices. Though Mennonite theology shapes this practice I think that tradition, or “the way we do things here,” is also evident.
When I raised the issue of children’s participation in communion, Elizabeth became emotional as she recounted an incident in which she witnessed children taking communion. She concluded with, “It just didn’t look right.” Others said that children participate as they “listen and learn.” This learning stance can provide an “opportunity for parents to teach their children about the need to make a decision regarding baptism and church membership.”

Though the congregation now is heavily influenced by normative Mennonite theology there was a time in its history when “Moodyism” made a strong impact. Don recalled the time in his youth when the “evangelical history and values of Dwight L. Moody” promoted a strong emphasis on scripture memory and “narrow theological definitions.” Perhaps the strong evangelical thrust in the memory of those who are now in leadership has influenced the attitude that faith appropriation is the better way to faith nurture in children and youth. Sandra’s comment that “children consider themselves Christians based on belief in God rather than on an act of conversion or repentance” affirms this view. She wonders if this attitude has an impact on key ceremonies: “traditions around baptism, communion, etc. may not be as important in today’s society.”

**Ethnic Mennonite Tradition.** In the Mennonite tradition it is sometimes difficult to separate theology from ethnicity. When I refer to Mennonite ethnicity in the context of this paper I am thinking of the practices of congregational life that stem from a Waterloo

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296 I wish now that I would have pursued this conversation further to learn whether “Moodyism” is still a strong influence with the oldest generation that is still a vital part of the congregation.
County, rural, family-oriented, religious community mind set.\textsuperscript{297} As adults considered the assumptions about children they brought from the Mennonite heritage, their responses reflected the influence of the ethnic tradition. First, the older generation expected that “children should be in church every Sunday.” For many of these people both family and friends attend Erb Street Church. Jennifer expressed some frustration about this expectation. Since her family ties are not local, it means travelling on weekends to visit them. She seems to feel judged when she is not at church every week.

Second, there is an expectation that “there would always be involvement in congregational life at the youth level.” In the past young people learned to lead music and worship through Sunday evening services. This tradition has continued, though in a different form, as youth are invited to lead several worship services a year and participate in readings at other times. Marianne noted the strong affirmation that younger children receive from the congregation the few times they participate in leading through readings. The tradition of somewhat limited involvement by young people continues in the present.

Third, the congregation has the tradition of a weekly “special” time with the children. Don and Elizabeth remember being marched to the front of the church for a story by the Sunday school superintendent at the end of the church service. According to Don, the tradition continues but the church has moved the children’s time into the worship service. There is still that need to have the children gather together in a visible place.

\textsuperscript{297} Note that this is not the tradition of the present Old Order Mennonite community that exists in Waterloo County, though I suspect there are still some familial connections at Erb Street Church.
One noted difference in the tradition is the loss of the church community as the focal point of family life. Church is no longer central in all of life as it was in the past. Richard recalled when everyone would gather weekly for worship, when there was strong participation in meetings and “sewing circle,” and when church women did the cooking for funerals. While it is apparent that this way of life will not be restored due to cultural influences, Richard maintains that people must make choices regarding their participation in church life. For him, it was a deliberate, “conscious choice” to form his friendship base at Erb Street Church. He worries about the message parents give when they attend church on an irregular basis, yet insist that church is very important to them.

Based on my own experience and observations of other local Mennonite congregations, I conclude that this congregation functions typically as a traditional Mennonite church. In my opinion, its proximity to the universities and/or its urban status does not give it as much of a unique status or mission as does its strong sense of community.

Maintaining the Status Quo. Congregational life is shaped by societal values around it. Generally, this congregation takes its cues for treating its children from its past traditions and the influence of the surrounding culture. The education program is theoretically sound and developmentally appropriate. The schooling model of Christian education is practiced with the children. Programs and activities are planned for the children without too much input from the children. If children have any voice within

298 The “sewing circle” was the only setting for women of the church to meet by themselves. Quilting for relief purposes was the main activity.
congregational structures it may be in their Sunday school class or, rarely, because the adults invited them. Tom reported that children are “very included where we want them to be,” but no initiative is expected from them. I experienced some resistance in my attempt to redefine the language used for the status of children from my position as an advocate for children. When I mentioned my interest in finding more positive language to describe the “unbaptized non-members,” status of children, Elizabeth suggested that “if the children don’t complain, it shouldn’t matter.” I wonder if it would matter if there were complaints. In our western society and the church, children are considered too young to have a voice within our institutions.

In Erb Street Church’s worship life the status quo for children has been passive participation. This understanding, by both adults and children, is that worship is something adults do. For the past generations “that’s just the way it was.” Sandra recalled that, as a child, she “did not feel badly or hard done by” because it was the way “we always did it.” This tradition continues as children are generally seen and not heard until they are old enough to understand rationally what church membership entails. In the meantime they learn by observation as they wait to become more active participants as adults. Children participate as children which means they have neither the responsibilities nor the privileges that come with adult membership.

When asked, children were unable to contribute suggestions for ways that would help them feel more included in worship times. They could not imagine worshipping any differently even though they were bored. One child talked about “rather being at home with friends” than at church. Another said, “I don’t usually want to come to church...but
then when I get there and all my friends are there...and then it's fun.” Another found both worship and Sunday School to be “boring.” It is evident that some children are at church because they are not allowed to make their own choices about attending. I doubt that their parents can make the same assumptions as previous generations who believed that, naturally, children will choose to be baptized and join the church when they are older.299

The adults who had little worship experience outside of this congregation seemed to be satisfied with the present practice regarding children in worship. Renee offers this insightful thinking in her evaluation:

I sensed that...as we delved into the theology of children and as we began to think about how we might apply our new learnings toward a new practice, the group began to flounder. Is it because we feel we are doing things well at Erb Street so no significant change is needed? Is it because we are hesitant to “mess” with the traditions that we currently have? Or is it that even though we may see the need to strengthen children’s participation in congregational life, we are simply lacking in being able to formulate a creative, new vision?

It seems to me that people at Erb Street would rather not “mess with the traditions.” What was good enough for the past is generally good enough for the present and future. The practices of this congregation reflect the traditions of the past regarding the children and are similar to the *modus operandi* of other Mennonite congregations in the area in their attitudes toward the children. However, some of the adults were observing trends that gave them cause for concern and that may ultimately affect some of the longstanding traditions of the congregation.

299 One of the younger adults commented that now parents of young adults are happy that their children choose *any* church affiliation, let alone Mennonite.
Disturbing Trends. One of these concerns expressed involved church attendance. What are long term consequences of the lack of commitment to regular attendance and/or participation in the gathered community? Another concern named was the apparent exodus of young families. Jennifer reported that in the last five years the children’s Sunday school attendance has dropped in half, while a neighbouring Mennonite church is growing rapidly. She asks, “What are we missing at Erb Street that is not attracting young families?” Another concern dealt with the loss of some of the congregation’s own youth and young adults. While urban mobility was named as a factor of the present social context it did not explain to everyone’s satisfaction why the youth and young adults have also disappeared from congregational life. How can the congregation “keep our children so they stay in church when they are the youth?”

There is a large population of older people in this congregation who provide stability and who influence how congregational life is conducted. Sometimes they need to be reminded that the “good old ways” are not always acceptable for the next generation. As one example, Elizabeth suggested in partial jest that the way to help the church grow is by “having bigger families.”

The issue of “professionalism” was expressed as another concern. Don mused about the long term consequences of a group of professionals, that is paid staff, who do church for us while “we come to watch.” Will this lessen the expectations placed on the

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300 In the validation conversation with Renee, it was reported that, while this number was given and may have been perceived as an accurate assessment, the congregation’s statistics do not bear this out.
members? As an advocate for children I note the irony in this observation, for in the worship setting there are few expectations of children except that they “come to watch” the adults do worship.

Some adults worry about the erosion of Mennonite theology in the congregation’s tradition and practice. Joanne wonders about the long term results of our theological heritage being “watered down” if we are so grateful that people attend church, even if they are not Mennonite. Don has noticed a shift in the traditional understanding of discipleship: “The perception of a stricter faith community is overshadowed by an embracing-more all encompassing religious thought, but this may be due to the nature of the congregation where influx of other faith traditions may be influencing this.”

In reflecting on this concern, I think that it will be important for the congregation to conduct some critical reflection on the meaning and importance of tradition in their communal life in order to determine what traditions will be, or need to be, sacrificed in order to be an effective community of faith in a Mennonite context in the future. There is the potential for creativity if the ecumenicity found in the congregation can be both celebrated and helpful in assisting the congregation to determine its self-identity and its role as the tradition-bearer of Mennonite theology. Congregational leaders could wisely engage their members from non-Mennonite traditions to contribute from their experiences to a new vision of inclusivity of the children.

Conclusions. During the course of our sessions together I detected a shift in the adults’ thinking about children and church life. For some, it means minor adjustments to the status quo. Joanne wrote, “While some specific activities could be added to use
children more in worship, I feel quite satisfied that our pastoral team is doing an excellent job in incorporating children and youth.” For Tom “children continue to be an important part of our congregation and always will be... I now feel we need to spend more time considering the needs (spiritually/personally) of the children.” For others, there was movement toward something new. Both Renee and Jennifer want to consider new rituals and ceremonies that enable the congregation to “celebrate growth in faith in children’s lives.” Sandra believes that “children need to be actively engaged, not just involved, as the involvement may at times be superficial.”

Erb Street Church functions well as a traditional Mennonite congregation with respect to its children. The traditions of the past have a strong voice in the church’s life. The theology of the congregation resonates with the normative theology of its Anabaptist faith heritage. The tradition of community is still strong, though there are signs of erosion around the centrality of the church in family life among the younger generations.

Children are treated the way they have been for generations. They are seen and not heard when the congregation gathers for worship. Here the old paradigm of learning by observing is predominant. The congregation pays little attention to the worship needs of the children.301 For the radical nature of Jesus’ teachings about the status of children to take effect, this congregation will have to reflect critically on which traditions need to be sacrificed in order for Erb Street Church to be an effective community of faith in the present Mennonite context.

301 This congregation’s education program provides opportunity for children to learn about God in a formal setting. I see the worship time as communicating with God.
The Process of Education

The fourth and final level of interpretation of my research data concerns the effectiveness of Groome’s shared praxis approach as a method in my action in ministry. Did Groome’s method provide an effective research tool\textsuperscript{102} for exploring my hunches regarding a theology of children with one congregation? I believe it did. In this section I offer a critical reflection on the method as I experienced and interpreted it in my action in ministry, and I assess my role as a facilitator in the process.

The intent of my action in ministry was to determine, in a collaborative way, how one Mennonite congregation could better practice age inclusivity. The shared praxis theory emerged from a Catholic educator’s understanding of third world liberation theology,\textsuperscript{303} and his experience of teaching religious education to high school and elementary school children from the Roman Catholic tradition. Would it work with children and adults who are part of a faith tradition that has some significant differences from the Roman Catholic tradition? Is it a model that a feminist Mennonite Christian educator can appropriate in her work in an advocacy role for children?

One of the reasons that nudged Groome toward developing this approach was to invite participants to critique both their own experience and the Christian tradition so as to

\textsuperscript{102} My reasons for choosing Groome’s shared praxis approach are outlined in the chapter on research methodology.

\textsuperscript{303} Groome was influenced by the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, known for his work in adult literacy to make learners the subjects rather than the objects of learning. He believed that learners can teach the teachers and that learning is not a matter of banking or transmitting factual knowledge.
see potential for a different vision for living in God's reign. This was my hope as I met
with the adult group - that they would examine their practice in light of the Christian Story
that was offered from a more radical theological perspective. From my experience, I am
satisfied that the shared praxis approach has potential for transforming Mennonite
tradition, and I affirm it as an effective process of education. It has also raised some
questions that may require further exploration.

The Strengths of Shared Praxis

Both the content and process of learning are determined by the context. As a
Christian educator exploring a theological question, it was important that I use a process
that was rooted in the Christian tradition and had a solid educational foundation.
Groome's method is compatible with the Mennonite faith tradition and its Anabaptist
roots because it is based soundly in the Scriptures and demands an active faith response.
The strength of this process is the shared approach to learning from the biblical story. We
Mennonites take a serious view of discipleship and want to be faithful to teachings of
Jesus in our daily living. This method, with its emphasis on Christian community, the
expectation of a lived response, or as it is sometimes termed, *life to Bible to life*,
encourages faithful discipleship.

A second strength of this method for my purposes is that it works well with both
children and adults. In my interviews with the children, I employed Groome's first
movement in order to elicit the child's experience in relationship to God and the church. In
the Freirian method of liberative education, I invited children to be subjects who had
knowledge of their own to share. While I do not suggest that the children in this
congregation are “oppressed,” I must note that they are most often on the receiving end of
information, or are treated as objects in the education process, and have no say in the
affairs of the congregation.

I received a wealth of data as most of the children were eager, willing, and able
to express their present action, to be subjects in the conversation. This data provided the
adult group with *real information from their congregation’s own children*. From my
experience with the children I learned that they are capable of naming and reflecting on
their present action. Thus, they can contribute a voice to the dialogue concerning issues
that affect their participation in congregational life.

The progression from *life to Bible to life* that is defined by five movements is
another strength of Groome’s method. Beginning with the focusing activity, which sets the
context for the learning process, each movement contributes in the process of education or
*transformation* that is expressed in appropriate action. I will examine the strength of each
movement in light of my experience.

*Focusing Activity: An Act of Hospitality.* As an educator I consider the focusing
activity to be a genuine act of hospitality in preparing participants for an optimum learning
experience. With both the children and the adults this activity was important for building
community by establishing a common focus for the topic. I was a stranger for the children
so the focusing activity provided the opportunity for me to interact with them in order to
reduce their anxiety level and to prepare them for the individual time they would have with
me during the interview process. With the adults this activity focused them quickly on the
topic of each session.

Movement 1: Sharing our Stories. Groome’s first movement invites personal
stories. I affirm this as a non-threatening activity which invites children and adults “see”
what is going on in their lives and/or their society and to give expression to what is there.
The adults were engaged by the process of remembering and sharing their experiences of
past and present action.

Adults reflected first on their past action before they named the present action.
This activity was useful for getting beyond the superficial in relationships. While the group
members knew each other as partners in leadership, many did not know of each other’s
church and childhood backgrounds. The sharing of stories from the memories of childhood
church bonded the group, freeing them to be open and accepting of each other during the
entire process. Renee wrote, “Reflecting on our own memories as children growing up in
church and evaluating the role of children in Erb Street’s congregational life were subjects
that were part of our life experience and therefore easy and fun to speak to.”

The strength of movement 1 lies in its basis in personal experience. With their
strong sense of community, Mennonites learn best when they can identify and relate to one
another. When community is strengthened and trust is built among the participants, then
effective learning can take place. Groome’s method allowed this to happen.
Movement 2: Critical Reflection. Groome considers that “critical reflection on present action that is shared in dialogue”\textsuperscript{304} is the most essential activity in the second movement. The dialogue flows out of movement 1 as participants reflect critically and together on the why of their present action. Movement 2 was a crucial factor in helping the group examine its assumptions and practices about theological issues and move them beyond their own experience.

For the group at Erb Street Church, this movement initiated an examination of what is and led to some thinking of what might be. I ascertained that such critical reflection on present action was not an activity in which this group engaged on a regular basis. It seemed easier for the group to name the present action than to critique it. However, both movements are necessary in order to effect change. Without critical reflection on our stories, they remain stories without the potential for transformation. Two key learnings for me from movement 2 were the powerful role of tradition in the life of this congregation and the fact that it may be necessary to train individuals and groups to think and reflect critically about their experiences and practices.

Movement 3: Sharing God's Story and Vision. Engagement with the biblical story is an essential element in the process of transformation. For Groome the Christian Story “reflects God’s historical revelation through God’s covenant encounter with humankind in the people of Israel, in Jesus the Christ, and in the community of Jesus’ disciples since then.”\textsuperscript{305} As a Roman Catholic, Groome places more emphasis on the

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{304} Groome, 188.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., 216.}
doctrines, creeds and liturgies than do Mennonites. This does not invalidate movement 3 for Mennonites. Our emphasis is on *what the Bible says* about a topic more so than the voices of our normative theology or confessional statements. In my presentation on a theology of children, I was intentional in using scripture because of *my* need to base theology firmly in the scriptures and because it was *expected* by the group.

The Christian Vision "is a metaphor of the promises and responsibilities that arise from the Story for the lives of the people who claim it as their own." Vision is also an important element of movement 3. My theology of children invited the participants to reconsider and imagine new ways to be more inclusive of the children.

*Movement 4: My Story in Conversation with God’s Story.* In movement four, Groome asks these questions: "How does this Story/Vision affirm, question, and call us beyond present praxis?" and "How does present praxis affirm and critically appropriate the version of Story/Vision made accessible in movement 3? and "How are we to live more faithfully toward the vision of God’s reign?" The incentive for change comes from an informed, critical dialogue between our practice and God’s Story.

I found that this was not a process that came naturally for the adult participants. It seemed difficult to critique their own practice in light of the Scriptures. Some adults were not able to connect their present action with the Christian Story in any meaningful way. Perhaps it was cultural tradition that prevented them from becoming too visionary in

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306 Ibid., 217.

307 Ibid., 249.
their thinking. Others, like Tom, responded with a creative vision of a new model for a church building that appeared to embrace inclusivity whole-heartedly.

Though I was disappointed that there were no radical shifts in the thinking of the group, I feel that the process of movement 4 is still a good one to engage adults in dialogue with the Christian Story and Vision. Perhaps with time and training, as well as permission to question and challenge and dialogue with the Christian Story, adults will be able to conduct this critical conversation between their story and the Christian Story.

Movement 5: Action Response. This movement invites a decision to “make historical choices about the praxis of Christian faith in the world.”308 The final aspect of shared Christian praxis calls for action, both individually and communally. Not surprisingly I found a reluctance in the group to name specific ways to respond collectively and actively to the topic of inclusivity. Change, even a decision to change, takes time and a certain process for this congregation. In addition, the group members represented a variety of ministries within the congregation. Might it have been different if I had met with the Christian education ministry, the worship ministry, or church council?

I was pleased that most of the participants named places where they would like to change in their personal involvement with children. In addition, some members reported to me that they were raising awareness in their committees for the need to be more inclusive. On a practical level and in limited ways, group members were ready to act.

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308 Ibid., 267.
However, I am not convinced that they are ready to suggest drastic changes in congregational life without careful and due process!

The goal of Groome's five movements is integration for the Christian. His method, then, has an appeal in the ecumenical Christian community. Mennonite leaders would be quick to agree that integration of the Christian Story and Vision with one's life story or present action is critical for Christian maturity and discipleship. This fits very well with our understanding of believers baptism -- a faithful lived response to the gospel incarnated in Jesus and obedient to the will of God. An integrated faith life for Mennonite Christians closely connects my story and our congregation's story with God's Story as revealed particularly in the Scriptures and through the lens of our Mennonite perspective.

Some Questions About Shared Praxis.

Several issues emerged for me concerning the shared praxis approach. What about people who do not participate? What happens when the pastor is one of the participants? How does a facilitator and/or group address forces of resistance to change? I raise these as questions that require further reflection at another time.

The Issue of Non-participation. I used Groome's first movement with the children. The personal interview method worked very well, with the exception of two children. For some reason which I could not discern, Danny (12) did not answer many of my questions. His basic response to each question was, "I don't know," except for a brief
conversation about apocalyptic aspects of the book of Daniel. This unresponsive attitude was also evident during the final session with the adults. Meaghan (5), the youngest child, was too shy and possibly too young to contribute many useful responses to my questions. However, in the final session, it was obvious that she was engaged in the activity, though not verbally.

Groome cautions that one cannot assume that reticent or quiet group members are not participating. He believes that the “educator’s challenge is to be a catalyst for a hospitable environment that respects the participative and learning style of each person.” While I agree with this statement in principle, I was frustrated by the fact that two of the eight children proved to be unresponsive and that, for my research purposes, it was imperative that I gather data from each person. This method seems to assume that all participants, even those who do not contribute verbally, are engaged in the process. What happens when they are not engaged or resist such engagement? It appears that Groome’s shared praxis approach requires some degree of verbal skills that require reasoning and thinking critically. Therefore, this method may not be suitable for children who are too removed from the “formal operations” stage of their cognitive development. Or it may require more attention to non-verbal activities such as drawing to engage the children.

Meaghan’s way of participating raises some issues for me about the ways that children of all ages can be included in church life. I will have to think about the

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309 In the short time that we were together for the interview, I could not discern if he really did not know the answers or if, for whatever reason, he chose to resist responding.

310 Groome, Sharing Faith, 182.
implications for non-verbal, non-rational participation in congregational life. What are the visual, sensory ways that can help children worship and learn alongside the adults?

_The Influence of the Pastor._ Groome’s method calls for a shared experience of learning and suggests an egalitarian participation. What happens when the pastor is part of the group? Since I know that pastors influence congregational leaders to a great extent, I invited Renee to be an active participant in the group. It was interesting to observe the interaction between her and the other group members, all lay people from the congregation. I looked for a sense of power imbalance. I watched for times when the adults appeared to be guarded in what they said. I wondered if there is a danger that the pastor’s voice be heard as “the final word.”

I observed a very collegial relationship between Renee and the group members. She willingly entered the discussions and activities as an equal partner. At no time did I sense deference to her views because she was the pastor. When we talked about the theological roots in Anabaptism, it was clear that she was better informed than others in the group. Her seminary training and sermon preparations would undoubtedly contribute to such knowledge. As “resident theologian,” the pastor is expected to know more and to care more about the theology expressed in congregational life. Her contributions were helpful to myself and the group as we explored a theology of children and its implications.

I have pondered about the reluctance of the group members to change worship patterns. I realize that tradition plays an important role, and that parents who did not have the childhood experience of participating in worship services are pleased that their children are with them. However, I wonder if there was a sense that worship is the “pastor’s
domain" and one should not be too critical of the present practice. On the other hand, Renee may not have wished to initiate any radical suggestions either, based on her sense that the group members who represented the larger congregation were content with the way things were.

Groome’s method invites collegial sharing. This group represented a variety of theological backgrounds and expertise in Mennonite theology and history. Does one’s knowledge, or perceived lack thereof, make a difference in the group dynamics? I wonder what conclusions the group might have reached if the pastor had not been there. From my perspective, Renee offered valuable insights and was effective as a group member. As the primary leader she has the most influence in effecting change and, fortunately, she is willing to act. She wrote, “I think I will be more aware of needing to act as an advocate for children in the congregation. As I think about worship or other congregational events it will be important for me to do my planning through the grid of ‘how will this be experienced by children?’”

Forces of Resistance to Change. I was disappointed that the group was reluctant to consider suggesting that the congregation change its worship practices for the sake of the children. While some were committed to more intergenerational learning activities and events, no one pushed for radical changes in the way the worship services were conducted in order to be more “child-friendly” and inclusive. Perhaps the adult members could not imagine any other way because they themselves have not experienced worship services in other settings or congregations. Or perhaps the worship patterns in this congregation have
become a “sacred tradition” that is not touched. I expect that traditional worship patterns will not be changed without a careful, deliberate, slow process.

How can Groome’s method be effective if a group is unwilling to mess with their sacred traditions? How can a facilitator help a group to see new possibilities for living in God’s Intention when the old ways seem just fine? Can transformation take place in a congregation that prefers change by evolution rather than revolution?

In my role as facilitator of the Groome’s method of shared praxis, I hoped to engage the adults in such a way that the first steps of the journey toward a more intentional inclusivity of children will lead to transformative action.

My Role as Facilitator

My final reflection on the process of education has to do with my own role in facilitating the learning process in the use of Groome’s method. What did I learn about my teaching style? Is this method for a feminist Mennonite Christian educator?

My Teaching Style. As the facilitator I was impressed by the ebb and flow of Groome’s movements through the five session experience. I appreciated the freedom and flexibility with which to guide the learning in each movement. In this way I could find techniques that suited my teaching style and the learning styles of group members. I relied on charts, pictures, small group activities, lecture and total group discussions to examine the content within the method. In reviewing the videotapes and audiotape for clues to my style of leadership, I noted my comfort level in working with both individuals and

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311 The techniques used are outlined in the session plans located in Appendix D.
small groups. I was pleased that the children and adults felt at ease in my presence. I believe that my teaching style is invitational and non-intrusive. I try to engage learners with both humour and illustrations, as well as "hands-on activities" that involve visual and interactive learning styles. I try not to be defensive when confronted or questioned.

My feelings of ambivalence toward the lecture method of presentation were evident in the third session. I felt uncomfortable about the amount of time I spent "dispensing information," yet did not find a way to make my presentation more creative. This, I believe, is indicative of my personal preference to learn in ways other than aural.\footnote{I did not get the sense that people were \emph{not} paying attention during my presentation. The discussion that followed was not particularly animated, though several people participated. My sense was that the group consisted of people who considered themselves to be "practitioners" rather than "theologians." I suspect, in addition, that I overwhelmed some group members with what seemed like a massive amount of information. One member commented later that it might have been helpful if I had distributed this material to the group beforehand and, possibly, earlier in the sessions.}

Though I do not intend to critique the overall process of the action in ministry I note that I would make changes in both content and technique. In the future I will either plan for more sessions or reduce the content in each session. The group consensus seemed to be that "there was probably too much material for the time allotted" and that "we all like to talk and discuss a lot." Sometimes it seemed that I expected too much from the group. Renee reported: "At times I felt we were trying to catch up to where your thinking was taking you and I think it was difficult to 'get on board.'" This caution was warranted. As an educator, it is important that I pay attention to both content and process and consider the needs and limits of the group as I facilitate the learning process.
A Feminist Perspective. Groome’s method fits well with my sense of who I am as a teacher. I feel more comfortable as a facilitator who serves as a guide along the pathway of learning rather than as the “expert” with the knowledge that must be transmitted. As a feminist educator, I believe that the shared praxis method offers an approach that is inclusive, hospitable, and egalitarian. Even children are capable of telling their stories and reflecting on their experiences. They can hear God’s story in light of their experience and they can respond to God’s activity in their lives, just as adults can. This approach invites the voices from the margins to speak; in this particular case it was the children’s voices.

I sensed that the adults felt they had equal voices too, even though they did not contribute equally in the large group discussions. Among the adult group members, women’s voices were heard and respected as much as the men’s contributions. The responsibility for learning and action was taken seriously by both learner and teacher. And, truth be told, in many instances it would have been difficult to separate the two roles. I came to the project for the purpose of learning how real children experience God and the church in a real Mennonite congregation. In my role as researcher-learner I had to became teacher-facilitator. Though I guided the sessions and prepared the content, it was very much a shared learning experience. This is another strength of Groome’s method: all are learners and all are teachers.

This was particularly evident as I met with the children. It was a privilege and an honour to be invited to peer into their souls as they shared their experiences of God and the church. I wished that each child could have felt the close presence of a loving God that several children expressed. This experience of eavesdropping has renewed my passion as a
children's educator to continue to emphasize, especially to adults who serve in children's ministries, that children do have a relationship with God that adults can respect and nurture in gentle, growth-producing ways. My experience with the adult group reminded me that I have to suggest ways to help adults in this nurturing process.

**Conclusions.** As a result of using Groome’s methodology, I am certain that education is one way to effect change regarding age inclusivity in Mennonite congregations. We need to educate adults about children’s spirituality and we need to educate children about church life. Through the process of education, children will learn that they have a firm place in the midst of the congregation and that they have something to contribute to the faith growth of the adults and other children. They can learn how to meet God in worship and that worship is for all God’s children.

As adults learn from and with children, they will understand that children can and do have a meaningful relationship with God from birth and that the journey with God can be recognized by the church not so much with baptism as with a service of consecration at infancy. With this recognition comes the responsibility to nurture the spirit of the child actively and intentionally in all of congregational life.
CHAPTER 11

KEY LEARNINGS: FINDING A PLACE FOR THE CHILDREN

This study has given me the opportunity to explore a variety of pathways in my search for a Mennonite theology that is more inclusive of children. I was surprised by some of the places this exploration took me, for example, to a metaphor of God's playground. I was delighted by the writers — theologians, religious educators, feminist leaders — who accompanied me on the way. I felt honoured to peer into the souls of the children I interviewed as they shared their experiences of God and the church. Finally, it was a privilege to spend time with such a diverse and keen group of leaders from Erb Street Mennonite Church in our shared exploration of a theology of children. All of these conversation partners have been sources of inspiration and companions on my journey.

In this final chapter I highlight the key learnings from this journey. I have learned more in this process than I can include in this document, all of which will serve me well in my vocational ministry as a Christian educator. I identify four arenas in which significant learning has taken place: a framework for a theology of children; distinctive Mennonite issues of theology regarding children; an age-inclusive ecclesiology; and education. In each arena I provide a brief comment on one or more key learnings and hint at the implications that arise from what I learned. This document has laid the foundation for me to explore the practical implications of this research in my future work.
The Framework for a Theology of Children

In my search for a theology of children for the contemporary Mennonite context, I have had many conversation partners. From my Anabaptist and Mennonite faith-parents, from a re-examination of key scripture texts depicting Jesus with children, and from Christian educators and ordinary Christians I learned that if we care about the faith of our children we Mennonites need to recover the radical nature of Christian discipleship.

To be radical in the present context means that the community of faith takes seriously the spirituality of its children in the same way that it cares for the spiritual needs of its adults. To be radical means that we adopt an eschatological view of the church. We are living in the "already-not yet" of God's Intention (reign) and children can be player-participants. This radical way of being God's people in a Mennonite faith tradition today not only includes, invites, and accepts children, but also learns from and with them.

Like the early church of the first century and the radically "reformed" church of sixteenth century Anabaptism, the Mennonite church of the twenty-first century can make a difference in the world if congregations and the denomination re-examine our theology, our traditions, and our assumptions about children within an eschatological framework.

Mennonite Distinctives in Theology

My exploration began with a study of Anabaptist and Mennonite understandings about the faith life of children. Two key issues emerged that demanded my attention: how we define the nature of the children and how we view baptism. Both issues have a distinctive Mennonite theological flavour.
The Nature of Children: Created in Innocence and Loved. Throughout our social history there have been several streams of thought about the nature of children and childhood. In over-simplified terms, children come into the world as depraved sinners in need of immediate salvation or as innocent individuals with a “proclivity” to sin as they become older. There are varying understandings on the continuum between these two theological poles. It is difficult to know how sociological and anthropological factors and theology informed each other about the subject, but it is important to realize that the way in which the church understands the nature of children makes a difference in the way it addresses the issue of faith and nurture with children.

Mennonite theology asserts that children are created in innocence and are safe under Christ’s atonement until they reach the age of accountability. Throughout our faith history we have nurtured children who have not reached this age of accountability so that when they are ready, they will accept the teachings of the church and become Christian and Mennonite disciples. The church’s official theologians and congregational leaders have not paid much attention to the innate spiritual nature of the children and how children relate with the Divine.

My research has convinced me that even young children can have a loving relationship with God and that this relationship can be nurtured in authentic ways within congregational life. I believe that many of us who serve in children’s ministries, including parents, have known that children experience God in a variety of ways. Through our Christian education programs the child’s genuine faith is nurtured through prayer, Bible
study, and experiences of acceptance and belonging. Unfortunately, our worship services have not provided similar nurturing opportunities for children to worship God.

If a congregation accepts that children can have a vibrant relationship with God and that it has a responsibility to nurture that relationship, then children must be included in all aspects of the worshipping community’s life that nurtures faith!

_Baptism: When You Are Ready_. I have discovered in the course of this research that, while Mennonites are adamant about the practice of believers baptism as opposed to infant baptism, we have many different definitions of baptism. The language of repentance and conversion, although still used in the official documents of the church, is not the language used in the more “popular” writings, nor in congregations when they talk of baptism. While I am grateful that congregations interpret baptism using the language of faith appropriation, I prefer that the language of the confessional statements be more in tune with the language of the people, or, at the very least, offer more than one perspective on baptism. There needs to be ongoing dialogue about the meanings of believers baptism.

Marpeck’s theological views were articulated after much theological reflection within a hermeneutic community of Anabaptist Christians seeking God’s word for their context. I offer my tentative view of baptism as _ordination for vocational ministry_ for further dialogue with conversation partners who are looking to discern God’s will as faithful disciples into the new millennium.
An Ecclesiology That is Age-Inclusive

_The Issue of Membership._ Trying to find an ecclesiology within Mennonite theology that is inclusive of the children was a difficult task. With church membership based on believers baptism children are automatically excluded and denied full participation in congregational life. Children feel welcomed and valued by the members of the congregation except perhaps during communion services. If asked, many children would not know that they are not members of the congregation they attend because they experience such a strong sense of community.

I would argue that, if it is community that draws adults and children together and gives all ages a sense of belonging as is the reality for Erb Street Church, then the basis for church membership can be _community_ rather than baptism. Already the congregation welcomes children into its midst with a parent-child dedication service. If this service was strengthened and renamed as a “child consecration ceremony,” it would be an appropriate and meaningful initiation rite into the life of the congregation and give children the right to participate as they are able in the same way that adults participate as they are able.

There are implications for such a drastic shift within Mennonite theology. We do have a precedent in Anabaptist theology for radical, transformational thinking. I think it is time to revision the church in a way that includes all people, and a good place to begin is with the church’s own children. This means that a congregation would need to be more intentional about including the children in worship, in community life, in mission, in education and in conducting the “business” of the church. The most important place to begin is with the ways in which the congregation worships God as a gathered community.
Worship That Nurtures. As a Christian educator, I confess that I have always stressed the importance of education in congregational life and paid less attention to the worship needs of children. This research project has made me acutely aware that worship is a key element in nurturing faith. Worship educates us for living in relationship with God. As Christians our first act of obedience is to love God with our whole being, which means we worship God with heart, soul and strength. Worship can and does nurture in many ways and in places other than a church sanctuary. However, when the faith community gathers together as a whole people of God to worship their Creator with their total selves, something mystical and mysterious occurs, for we are in the presence of the transcendent and immanent One. Children can experience God with adults when given the opportunity and permission to be engaged with all their senses and their whole being. And perhaps they can teach adults how to worship and be in awe of the One who seeks “at-one-ness” with all humanity. When all ages are invited to become fully engaged in worshipping God, I expect there will be fewer complaints from the children that worship is boring. I dream of a day when children and adults together play around as they waste holy time with God in worship.

Being Church Together. An inclusive ecclesiology nurtures faith in all ages and, as much as possible, in intergenerational settings. My belief in intergenerational activity as an important faith-nurturing venue for children was strengthened by my action in ministry at Erb Street Mennonite Church. As our society becomes more fragmented, the church

313 See Deuteronomy 6:5.
can offer an oasis that welcomes people of all ages and families to learn from and with each other.

Children can learn much about relating to God as they interact with seniors, other children's parents, their own parents, youth, and their peers. There are ways to be nurtured in congregational settings besides the traditional age-segregated Sunday school model. In my professional work I am writing curriculum for family-based Bible studies in which several families or intergenerational groupings are encouraged to study and learn together. The home, too, is a critical setting for faith nurture that crosses the age span. A vibrant family faith may contribute to a strengthened communal faith within the congregation.

*An Appropriate Metaphor for Church.* My search for a fitting metaphor for church that includes children led me to the image of *church as children in God’s playground.* The entire process of finding a metaphor has been an enriching learning experience for me. While I see much potential in this metaphor for the contemporary Mennonite context, I realize that, like all metaphors, it has its limitations. The learning for me in the process is that *it is possible to find fitting metaphors* for today's church. I was energized by the engagement of the Erb Street group in interpreting this metaphor for their particular context. I hope to continue to play around this image with colleagues and children. I agree with Nelle Morton that "we live out of our images; not out of our

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314 My colleagues and I are developing foundational materials for an initiative that we call *Opening Doors: Nurturing Faith in the Home and Congregation,* in which we encourage a strong partnership of the home and congregation for strengthening faith.
concepts or ideas." What would a Mennonite congregation look like if it lived out of an image of children in God's playground?

Educating for Transformation

Both the Anabaptist/ Mennonite Christian traditions and cultural traditions influence contemporary congregational life. This became clear as I met with the adult group. I am troubled when a congregation fails to distinguish cultural tradition from the faith tradition. I wonder how much Mennonites have become cultural Christians rather than radical disciples of Jesus, who practiced and preached a counter-cultural message of devotion to God. I am convinced that, in order for Mennonite congregations to be strong, counter-cultural, radical, Christian age-inclusive communities of faith, there needs to be a more intentional educational process to pass on the key tenets of our faith tradition.

_Catechesis in a Mennonite Perspective._ We need to model and teach our children what is important _theologically_. Our current printed curricula effectively communicate the Biblical stories from an Anabaptist Mennonite perspective. However, our children do not learn how to worship as children, nor do they understand what it means to be Mennonite Christians. A clear understanding of baptism would help children know _why_ it is something you do when _you are older._

A key learning for me focuses on the need for a _catechesis_ for children and their parents. In defining catechesis I use Maria Harris' language of "traditioning faith."²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Nelle Morton, _The Journey is Home_, 31.

²¹⁶ Maria Harris, _Fashion Me a People_, 114.
Originally, catechesis was characterized by instruction in the doctrines of the church, moral understandings, and the liturgical or worship life of the community. Mennonites have offered extensive moral instruction to children but have been less faithful in teaching them what it means to be a Mennonite Christian.

I hope to pursue creatively this concept of catechesis for the Mennonite Christian tradition knowing that a written curriculum will not be the best method. I will want to consider the process of theological reflection and/or Groome’s shared praxis approach as possible methods for traditioning faith with Mennonite children.

I am intrigued by the possibilities for curriculum design for congregational life that takes seriously what it means to be children in God’s playground. What educational resources are needed to fit into a metaphor of play and playground? How can one help children and adults to rethink the nature and character of God as One who delights in play and is as vulnerable as a child?

*Educating the Gate-Keepers.* Change in congregational life happens very slowly especially with “sacred traditions.” From my experience at Erb Street Church, I learned that there is a proper process necessary before change is considered. With this in mind it is important for the change-agents to know who wields the real power in a congregation as well as the structural processes for effecting change. Since I am consulted on occasion to help a congregation think outside the box or envision new possibilities for congregational life with children, I need to be aware of both the structures and the gatekeepers of the tradition. Part of my task is to help the leaders identify and include these gatekeepers as conversation partners in addressing issues that demand transformational thinking.
As an idealist and a visionary I must remind myself to be patient, that change
takes time and transformation is a very slow process. I must be satisfied in hoping that I
may have planted seeds for transformation and trusting that God will do the rest!

To Be Continued

As I reflect on this entire process as a learner-researcher, I am both energized and
overwhelmed by the learning that took place. I began my exploration with many questions
about the place of children theologically in contemporary Mennonite church life. I am
satisfied with my discoveries along the way. Since the quest began, however, more new
questions have surfaced that raise new challenges for me.

I realize that I have a responsibility to myself to share my findings and
conclusions with others who are involved in children's ministries within the Mennonite
church. I want to be a strong advocate for the children of the church, to be a voice on
their behalf and to give them a voice. I want the children to know that God loves them and
wants to be in a loving relationship with them. I want to hear their experiences of God and
learn from them what God is like. My prayer for the children is that the faith community of
which they are a part will welcome them as full participants as they walk together with
God as their companion on life's journey.

Contributions of the Study

This study can contribute to the ongoing theological reflection as the Mennonite
Church finds its place of witness in the world of the twenty-first century. I hope that my
theology of children will be a beginning step for congregations to reflect theologically on
the place of children in their midst. This work may guide the thinking of those who need a theological reason for practicing an inclusive ecclesiology. This work may encourage those who need practical suggestions for being more inclusive to dialogue with the children themselves to learn what is needed to contribute to their deepening relationship with God within the faith community.

For me, this work will form the foundation for my ongoing ministry with children and those who care about them. The theological base is now in place for me. I look forward now to offering practical implications that will help congregations to nurture children in faith within a community where they truly belong. I hope to develop rituals and faith markers for children, write articles that promote children’s ministries, consult and encourage Christian educators and congregations play radically in God’s abundant reign. In curriculum writing, I hope to engage learners in exploring the metaphor of church as children in God’s playground. There are implications for training writers of curricular resources in the way they structure sessions and in how they conceptualize God. There are implications for the way education happens within the congregation — how can resources facilitate intergenerational interaction in playful ways? There are implications for children’s books as well as worship resources. For me the metaphor opens up limitless possibilities for new resources and new structures in the denomination and congregations.

This study may also contribute to the ecumenical scene regarding children and church life. I acknowledge that other denominations have struggled with the place of children in their worship life and have come to their own conclusions. However, I have not found that these denominations have considered new images of church. It is my hope that
the newer, fresher image of church as children in God’s playground may lead to revitalized congregational life beyond the Mennonite Church. Perhaps this metaphor can liberate congregations to view children as the main players in congregational life, not relegated to the basement or the margins of the faith community, but in the centre among the adults.

Finally, it is my hope that the process of this study may encourage congregations to consider Groome’s methodology as an effective approach to education that has the potential to transform lives and congregations in their quest to be faithful. As I reflect on the way that I gravitated toward this shared praxis approach, I realize how deeply this methodology is embedded in me as a teacher. This method has served me well even as I developed and wrote my thesis outline. Its natural flow and flexibility has the potential to guide congregations effectively in theological reflection that leads to action.
EPILOGUE

As a final note, I acknowledge that I have not answered all the questions that emerged for me before and during my course of study. Space allows me to name these further queries which, hopefully, will be addressed at some future date.

Theology. Children and communion is a contentious issue in some Mennonite congregations. I believe that to be faithful to our Anabaptist and Mennonite faith heritage and to be relevant in the present age the issue of the Mennonite Church's exclusive view of communion needs to be addressed. A second theological issue that requires further thinking for me is the place of grace in our understanding of baptism, communion, and discipleship.

Playground Metaphor. I want to explore further the metaphor of church as children in God's playground as one possible image of the present and future church. I need to reflect on the place of believers' baptism and other important aspects of our faith in this image. Perhaps a theology of play can be developed to give the metaphor meaning for Christians who subscribe to the "Protestant work ethic." This metaphor has implications for congregational structures, curricula, and programs which will need to be developed at another time.

Feminist issues. I was able to articulate a theology of children in a Mennonite perspective. From my interviews with the children I listened for their understandings of God and the church as children. I would like to explore further if there are differences in
the way girls and boys experience God and the church. Carol Lakey Hess examines gender and educational issues within an image of church as our common house.317

In my quest I was confronted with issues of language on several levels. An important issue is that of language for God, including images we use for God. In an age-inclusive church it is crucial that girls feel included in the language and the leadership of the congregation.

A feminist and liberative approach invites listening to all the voices. I would like to explore with children their understanding of congregational life and their place in it. What can they teach adults about worship, pastoral care, prayer, play, etcetera?

Further implications. It is exciting for me to think of concrete ways for congregations to become more inclusive of the children. This is an energizing task. However, the difficulty lies in convincing leaders to implement changes in congregations, especially where “sacred traditions” such as worship are concerned. How can one be most effective in advocating for change in congregations on behalf of those on the margins? If congregations begin to be more inclusive with their children, will they become aware of the need to be more inclusive of other voiceless or marginalized people?

317 See Carol Lakey Hess, Caretakers of our Common House (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997. In her book she refers to Groome’s shared praxis approach. I like her suggestion that, instead of a focusing activity, the group gathers for deep centering to “recall the presence of the Spirit of God within the process of debate and dissention [sic]. For a fuller description of Groome’s methodology according to Hess, refer to pp. 242-245.
This is just a beginning list of questions. I look forward to further reflection within the context of my own congregation and the Mennonite faith tradition. The cycle of learning continues for me. As I begin to respond in action to my reflection and study, I realize that Groome’s process is deep within my consciousness, for as I celebrate the end of one journey, I am already eager to become engaged in another shared praxis learning experience.
Including Children in the Life of the Congregation: 
A Contemporary Mennonite Exploration

A Doctor of Ministry Thesis Proposal 
Submitted to the 
D.Min. Program Committee 
Toronto School of Theology

by 
Eleanor Snyder 
Emmanuel College

May 27, 1998

Thesis Committee
Thesis Director: Dr. Wenh-In Ng ________________________________
CLG Member: Rev. Barbara Sykes ________________________________
MBG Member: Ilene Bergen ________________________________
1. The Background and Context of Applied Research Thesis

I am employed full time in the ministry of Christian education as the Director of Children’s Education for the General Conference Mennonite Church, a Christian denomination comprised of approximately five hundred congregations located in Canada and the United States. My responsibilities include the provision of training and resources for area conference Christian Education Resource People\(^1\) as well as Christian educators in the congregations. I am also involved in curriculum development, writing and promotion for children’s Christian education resources and programs such as Sunday school, midweek activities and Vacation Bible School.

Two of my colleagues, namely the Director of Youth Education and the Director of Young Adult/Adult Education, are working with me in developing an approach to Christian Education which is more family-oriented than our present age-specific programming. We want to promote the concept that faith is formed first in the home by the parents and primary care-givers. The role of the congregation is to provide training, support, resources and events that will support parents in their responsibility in forming faith in their children. It is hoped that this partnering of the church and the home in the faith formation process will strengthen both the congregation and the family in Christian discipleship.

I am interested in both Christian education and Mennonite theology. As a curriculum writer and an educator of educators in children’s ministry within the context of the Mennonite faith tradition, I want and need to know how our theology is lived out in our ministry with children.

Our Mennonite theological roots are found in sixteenth century Anabaptism, a faith tradition that grew out of Reformation period. Anabaptism was considered the \textit{radical reformation} partially due to its opposition to infant baptism. Mennonite theology is based on believers baptism, a voluntary decision to commit one’s whole life to God as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Because Mennonite theology places high emphasis on discipleship and accountability within the congregation, baptism is tied closely to church membership. And, because the decision to follow Jesus is voluntary based on personal belief, children are neither baptized nor members. Our congregations are committed to nurturing faith in the

\(^1\) Congregations are clustered in eleven geographical regions called area conferences. Each area conference appoints one Christian Education Resource Person to serve as a liaison between local congregations within that area conference and myself as the denominational staff person.
children with the hope that they will choose to be baptized and join the church when they have reached the “age of accountability.”

As I visit congregations and meet with Christian educators, pastors and parents, I am confronted with questions that deal with the congregation’s role in nurturing faith in children from birth until they choose to be baptized and join the church. Sunday school teachers want to know if they should be encouraging children in the junior youth grades to make a decision to be baptized. Parents inquire about children’s participation or non-participation in communion services. There are children and youth who feel excluded from congregational life because they cannot participate in communion. Some congregational leaders want to know how to make worship services more child-affirming and inclusive, while others look for ways to keep children “not seen and not heard” during worship.

Theologian Hans-Reudi Weber expresses the dichotomy that I observe in Mennonite congregations:

There are some churches whose life and worship is one-sidedly “children-centred”, and other churches and Christian action groups who are so deeply involved in the big issues of our time that they forget the children and what Jesus teaches us through them.

What do we do with the children in our congregations that will nurture their faith in hospitable, welcoming ways?

2. **Statement of Research Problem**

There is a growing realization that the traditional ways of Mennonite life will not succeed in keeping the next generation faithful and committed to God and the Mennonite faith tradition. I believe we need to take a serious look at our understandings about children and congregational life in the Mennonite tradition as we prepare for the next

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*2 There is no set age at which a child or youth is held “accountable” or responsible for her/his decision to choose to be baptized. In Mennonite congregations the typical age for baptism is between fourteen and eighteen years.

*3 Traditionally only the baptized can participate in the communion service.

*4 My daughter, as an unbaptized young adult, feels both singled out and excluded from our communion services.

millennium. We need to determine a theology of children that is rooted in Anabaptist theology, yet fits for the Mennonite faith tradition today. As a denominational leader and educator in children's Christian education, I serve as an advocate for children. I want them to live as faithful Christians from a Mennonite faith perspective. In order to facilitate their faith maturing, I want them to be received and welcomed in the congregation in the same way that Jesus appeared to receive and welcome children according to the gospel writings, such as Matthew 18:1-6.

In order to lead Christian educators in our mutual ministry with children, I hope to articulate a theology of children that is rooted solidly in the Anabaptist faith tradition with its emphasis on relationships with God and within a caring faith community, which we call the congregation. Though children are neither baptized nor members, it is my hope that there is a welcoming, inclusive place for them in the midst of the congregation. My research question is framed in this way:

*In light of the Anabaptist faith tradition, how might a Mennonite congregation be more inclusive of children?*

3. **Theoretical Framework and Assumptions**

**Theory at Work in the Study**

*Theological*

Our Anabaptist faith parents spent much time theologizing about the nature of children in relationship to God. They were defending an unpopular position in direct opposition to the Roman Catholic church and the followers of Martin Luther, i.e., that baptism is a voluntary and personal decision and, therefore, infant baptism should be abolished. Anabaptists refuted the doctrine of original sin in theory, believing that children were created in innocence and not in need of repentance and baptism until they could reason and think morally. However, they did not agree on the age when children were no longer innocent. Some believed that children were capable of rational thought around age seven or eight, others maintained that only God knew and humans had no right to judge when children could make the decision for or against God. The debate over the "age of accountability" still continues over five hundred years later.

Pilgram Marpeck was a well-respected Anabaptist leader and theologian who lived in the early half of the sixteenth century. However, the theological writings of Menno Simons, his contemporary, became the orthodox view, that is, the accepted and normative perspective. Menno became the "official" leader of the Anabaptist movement as it solidified and evolved. Strict obedience to God and a literal interpretation of the Scriptures became requirements for those Anabaptist groups who eventually became Mennonite.
In his treatise on "The Nurture of Children," it appears that Menno held closer to the doctrine of original sin than one might expect from an Anabaptist:

We all, no matter who or what, are born with an evil and sinful flesh from Adam. Yes, and in all our desires from our youth are always inclined to the worst...If now the power of this native disposition is to be broken, suppressed and destroyed, it must be accomplished by the pure fear of the Lord."

As much as is possible, I intend to focus on Pilgram Marpeck's view of the nature of children as my Anabaptist theological reference in my attempt to articulate a Mennonite theology of children for the present context. Marpeck, whose less literalist perspective was marginalized, appeared to have a kinder disposition toward children:

Since God ordained that [children] be born in created innocence, God will refrain from accusing this innocence, since sin has its origin in knowledge of good and evil. The children, therefore, cannot be accused of any sin. What kind of state of salvation such infants have, we will allow God to decide since [God] ordered creation in this way."

Few Mennonite writers have attempted to define children in theological terms during the last several decades. Gideon Yoder wrote in reaction to the forces of child evangelism that swept across the United States in the middle of this century. Marlin Jeschke proposed that "appropriation" of faith was a more acceptable term to use with youth who have grown up in the church.

In my view, a theology of children encompasses both an understanding of children's relationship to God and their place within the congregation. Since children are not members within a Mennonite congregation, it is important to know how they are viewed with respect to the congregation. Mennonites have favoured a few metaphors for the church community such as body of Christ and family of God. I hope to explore some more

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9 Marlin Jeschke, Believers Baptism for Children of the Church (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1983). He suggested that a dramatic conversion was not necessary if children were not first generation Christians and were always part of congregational life.
relevant metaphors that would place children more inclusively within Mernonite
ecclesiology-

Biblical
In the Mennonite faith tradition the Bible is held in high esteem It is central to our
theology. Therefore, it is hportant that my research and -ng
is rooted solidly in the
scriptures. There are several hundred references to the chüd or chiidren in the Bible and
many interpretations of these words. 1 have chosen to work primarily with the biblid
texts that iiiustrate the way Jesus related to children (e-g. Matthew 18: 1-6, 19:13-1 5).
Since discipleship is a key ekment in Menwnite fpith and practice, it is appropriate
to examuie Jesus' interactions with chiIdren as a mode1 for his disciples then and now.
Weber wrÎtes:
Contrary to what one rnight expect, the texts on Jesus and the children are difficuit to
understand. A superficial reading of these passages cau, of course, quickly lead to
some general observations about the subject. Yet one risks to be deafand blind to the
partidar nuances which Mark Manhew and Luke each attempted to transmit and
interpret conceniing what happened when Jesus was in the Company of children.
Moreover, a superficiai readhg wïli not reveal that the very hem of the Christian
Gospel is expressed in Jesus' gestures and sayings in relationship to children.1°
1 have chosen to look at the biblicai texts fkom a feminist perspective, listening to and

for the voices of the rnargidked, adopting a hermeneutic of suspicion that may challenge
the interpretation of the texts made by more orthodox the~logians.'~

"

Socioiogical
Our theology does not operate in a vacuum, but emerges w i t h a societal context.
How children are perceived by Society and adults has changed over the centuries. The
children in lesus' day were understood differentiy than the chiidren of sixteenth century
Europe. Today's chiidren are defined in yet another way. Our children are being shaped
today by technology, information, and consumerism. They are our "hurried children."13

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Weber, Jesrcs md the Childen, vüi.

'l I d
lrefer to feminist theologians such as Ehsabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Letty
Russell and Carol Lakey Hess.

Whiie sociological factors are important in understanding the context of children
in society, 1 do not intend to pursue this in detail in this thesis.
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See David E k d , Ine Hzmzed Child Growing Up Too Fàsî Tm Soon @on

(continueci.. -)


Neil Postman writes of the "disappearance of childhood," by which he means that in our present culture the dividing line between childhood and adulthood is eroding. Mennonite families are not immune to these societal forces. Congregational programs are feeling the effects of busy and fragmented families who do not have time or energy to participate and/or volunteer for children's religious education. The socialization process that Mennonites depended on for generations to "raise Mennonite kids" has eroded in the last few decades.\(^{15}\)

**Psychological**

Religious education has been heavily influenced by developmental theorists.\(^{16}\) James Fowler added the "faith" dimension to developmental theory\(^ {17}\) to complement the behavioural, moral, and cognitive understanding of how children develop and mature through ordered stages of life. While developmental theory may not be central to my thesis, I will be acknowledging its influence in shaping how the Mennonite denomination has taught its children and understood children's relationship with God.

**Educational**

Since I am approaching this research project from an educational perspective, I think it is important to note that there is a central educational theory that informs my methodology in religious education. David Kolb developed the "learning cycle," a model of experiential learning that I find helpful and appealing.\(^ {18}\) More recently, I have been

(...continued)


\(^{15}\) This is described and lamented in a number of essays by Mennonite theologians and educators in the book, *Naming the Sheep. Understanding Church Membership* (Winnipeg: Conference of Mennonites in Canada, 1997).

\(^{16}\) Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, and Erik Erikson were most influential in the cognitive, moral and psycho-social theories from a developmental perspective. I am aware of, and informed by, critics of developmental theory, such as Carol Gilligan.


influenced by the work of Howard Gardner, whose "multiple intelligences theory"\textsuperscript{19} emphasizes that there are at least seven intelligences that shape who we are and how we learn and develop. While I acknowledge the importance of educational theory in religious education, my central emphasis will be on the theological and sociological factors.

**Religious Education**

Religious education is primarily an emphasis on the spiritual and emotional dynamics in life. It is not educational theory with religious content, nor is it dependent only upon cognitive learning. While I am familiar with the approaches to religious education by a number of excellent religious educators,\textsuperscript{20} I have chosen to follow the "shared praxis" approach developed by Thomas Groome.\textsuperscript{21} This approach has been influenced by the work of Paulo Freire in liberation theology who paid attention to the marginalized members of society. In addition, Groome developed his methodology while working with a group of children.

**Operative Assumptions**

*Children have a relationship with God from birth.*

There are practices within Mennonite congregations that seem to suggest that baptism alone is one’s initiation into a relationship with God. I believe that such a relationship, initiated by God and nurtured in many practical and mystical ways, exists from birth. Baptism becomes a faith marker that publicly recognizes a deepening relationship with God that is being lived out within the Mennonite faith tradition.

*Children have something to teach adults about how to be church.*

As spiritual beings, loved and accepted by God, children can lead adults in learning about faith and trust and mystery. If we pay attention to the children, if we genuinely listen to their questions, we can learn from them. We can be co-learners in faithful living.


\textsuperscript{20} Much of my work in Christian education has been informed by Maria Harris, John Westerhoff, Sofia Cavalletti, and Jerome Berryman. References to key books by each of these educators are included in the bibliography.

Children can be an integral part of the congregation, even though they are not baptized members.

Church leaders need help in finding ways to include children more fully in congregational life. I believe that there is a need for more ceremonies, rituals, or blessings for children during their childhood and adolescent years before baptism. At present, congregations welcome infants into church life with a parent-child dedication. There are no further markers to acknowledge a growing faith until their baptism.

Many Mennonite congregations do not have a clearly articulated theology of children.

In some congregations it is the theology that informs practice regarding children. However, in many congregations it seems that the operative theology is more informed by practice that is based on tradition or “borrowed” from other faith traditions without a great deal of theological reflection.

There is more than one Mennonite theology.

The dominant or orthodox theology is not always the “right” or “best” theology. We have been influenced heavily by Menno Simons regarding the nature and nurture of children. Perhaps it is time to give attention to a lesser known Anabaptist theologian, namely Pilgram Marpeck, in the hope of finding a theology that is more child-affirming.

What I read and write is from a feminist perspective.

In my capacity as a staff person for the Mennonite denomination, I advocate on behalf of the children and their participation within the life of the congregation. As a feminist woman, I want to be sensitive to all people, but especially the children, who do not have power to effect change or whose voices are not always heard from positions of leadership.

4. Research Methodology Operative in the Study

My research and study will lead me to articulate a theology of children in a Mennonite perspective. In my action in ministry I plan to invite a group of children and adults to reflect with me and give me feedback on my “hunches” about children who are part of Mennonite congregations. This feedback will be gained in the context of religious education. For methodology I will rely on the shared praxis approach to Christian education as articulated by Thomas Groome.

Shared Praxis Approach to Christian Religious Education

In the following concise paragraph, Groome offers his interpretation of shared praxis:

In its complete expression, shared praxis as an approach to education in Christian faith can be enacted by a focusing activity and five subsequent pedagogical movements. I use the term movement intentionally. It implies that shared praxis is a
free-flowing process to be orchestrated, much like the movements of a symphony or dance. The movements have a logical sequence..., but in an actual event they often overlap, recur, and recombine in other sequences.\(^{22}\)

The focusing activity in my action in ministry will be a presentation of my theology of children that I bring to a group of adults for reflection and feedback. During the course of the four sessions, I will incorporate all five movements articulated by Groome.

The first movement has to do with naming and/or expressing the present action. This can be expressed through a variety of ways, according to Groome, “through a recognizable activity, in making and describing, in symbolizing, speaking, writing, gesturing, miming, dancing; that is, through any form of human expression.”\(^{23}\)

The second movement invites critical reflection on the present action, with the intent to “bring participants to a critical consciousness of present praxis.”\(^{24}\)

Movement three makes accessible the Christian Story and Vision. The faith life of the Christian community as expressed through scriptures, traditions, liturgies, etc. is offered, along with the vision that empowers Christians to be faithful to God’s rule in their lives. Here is where I share my vision for children and the church, based on my understanding of the gospel texts depicting Jesus with the children, and our Anabaptist understanding of the nature and nurture of children.

In movement four participants place their critical understanding of present praxis around the Christian Story and Vision and ask how present praxis affirms, questions, challenges us in our present praxis. In this movement participants are encouraged to “appropriate the Story/Vision to their own lives and contexts, to know it for themselves through judgment, and thus to make it their own as agent-subjects in the larger Christian community and in the world.”\(^{25}\)

The fifth and final movement calls for participants to make a decision about how to live out their Christian faith. Decisions can be personal and made by the consensus of the learning community. I am anticipating that faith-action responses will emerge with both individuals and the group.

\(^{22}\) Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 146.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 146-147.

\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
I have chosen Groome’s methodology for various reasons. In my own experience as a teacher in Christian education settings, I have found that shared praxis approach engages adults and children in positive learning experiences. I like the “flow” of the session, as well as the flexibility. The five movements are fluid and do tend to recur, overlap and recombine as in dance steps.

The teacher or facilitator guides the learning in non-intrusive ways, thus inviting participants to trust and share of themselves more openly. In my sessions, I will depend upon honest feedback and critical reflection.

I believe my topic is conducive to this shared praxis approach. As children reflect on their relationship with God and the church community, they can begin to name their vision for an inclusive place in the congregation. As adults remember and reflect on their childhood experiences and hear the voices of the children, they can find authentic ways to be more inclusive of the children in their midst. I believe that this approach offers an opportunity for adults to dialogue with the Story and Vision in light of their past and present experiences and to determine a plan of action that will call for a lived faith response.

5. The Action in Ministry

Purpose
I propose to be in dialogue with a small representative group from Erb Street Mennonite Church about my theology of children and have this group determine specific ways to be more inclusive of the children in their congregation.

I have selected Erb Street Mennonite Church in Waterloo, Ontario because it already has a healthy children’s Christian education program, an excellent part-time Christian education staff person, a pastoral team that cares about children, a special feature for children during the worship service. My hope is that the congregation will find additional ways to further integrate children into church life.

Participants
There are two groups from the congregation who will be involved in my project. The first group consists of up to ten adults to include: the pastor, parents of children between the birth and age sixteen, grandparents, member of the Christian Education committee, Sunday School teachers of children and youth. Some participants may fit more than one category. I expect the participants to be members of the Erb St. Mennonite Church who attend on a regular basis.

The second group will consist of six to eight children, ranging in age from six to sixteen, who are regular attenders at Erb Street Church, but who have not been baptized.
Plan

a. Introduction and Invitation to Participate

**Congregational Leadership**

I will meet with the leadership people in the congregation, namely church council and/or worship and education committees to explain the project. This group will be invited to submit names from the representative groups of parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, Christian education committee members and children. I expect participation from the pastor as one of the key motivators for effecting change in the way children are included in congregational life.

Following this meeting I will distribute information letters to the people selected by Erb St.'s leadership group. A letter will be sent to the children and their parents regarding my intent.

**Volunteer Participants**

I will meet in person or via telephone with the adults whose names were submitted by the congregation's leadership group. After general input in which I share my goals and expectations, along with a brief outline of the project, I will invite these people to indicate if they wish to participate. For those who are interested and available, dates and times of future meetings will be confirmed.

b. Meeting with the Children

With the assistance of the Christian education staff person, I will make arrangements to meet with the children and youth who agreed to participate. What I hope to receive from the children is their personal reflection about their sense of belonging in a Mennonite congregation. How do they understand their relationship to God and the congregation? In what ways do they feel included or excluded from congregational life? What would they want their place in the congregation to be? How would they know that they are being included?

I plan to use the first two movements of Groome's shared praxis approach with the children, inviting them to name their present experience and reflect on what it means to part of a Mennonite congregation. I believe this is in keeping with the feminist perspective as I listen to the voices of the children, who are often marginalized and voiceless in the congregation.

The information gleaned from this process will be shared with the adults during their sessions. I plan to record the interviews and/or conversations with the children by using a video recorder and technician. Children and parents will sign a consent/assent form in order for the children to participate.
c. Group Sessions

Four of the five sessions will explore my topic with the adult group. I will facilitate each session using methodology based on Thomas Groome’s shared praxis approach. Each session will be approximately two hours in length. These sessions will be videotaped using a technician. The final session will bring closure to the project.

Session 1. Group Building, Introductions and Sharing Stories

We will begin with refreshments and time for group members to interact on a social level in order to build relationships and trust for future sessions. I will introduce the group to the purpose of my project and outline the format for the series of sessions. There will be time for questions. Participants will sign the consent form.

The more formal part of this session will give opportunity for group members to recount personal stories and experiences of participation in church life as children. By inviting the participants to reflect on their childhood experiences in the church and their present experience with children, I hope to learn more about their personal theological perspectives on children and the way they are included in congregational life. We will discover together how the church has influenced the socialization process of girls and boys during the recent decades.

Session 2. A Mennonite Theology of Children

In this session I will offer the theoretical framework for including children in congregational life. I hope to use a variety of methods to present the information in an engaging way. There will be time for questions and personal reflection on the information given.

Participants will be given some assignments for further reflection. I will ask them to reflect on the theology of children that I presented in light of their personal experiences, and as they converse with a few children and adults about their experiences. In addition, I will have them review church bulletins from recent worship services to determine how “child-affirming” the service appears to be. Insights gleaned from these assignments will provide the basis for the content of the next session.

Session 3. Dialogue with the Theory

Participants will bring insights from their assignments to the group for shared reflection and discussion. I will bring the comments by the children gleaned from my interviews with them. People will be asked to wrestle with the theory from the bases of their experience, the present cultural context, and the wisdom of the historical theological and biblical tradition. We will look for areas that express consonance, give voice to
dissonance, as well as those that give new awareness and appreciation for the inclusion of children.

**Session 4. Moving Forward**

This session becomes a time to consider practical ways that the congregation can be more inclusive of its children. I will introduce an outline of a child dedication service that I have created as an example of putting the theology of children into practice. The group will be asked to develop or create at least one way in which the congregation can include the children with intentionality and authenticity.

**Session 5. Evaluation, Celebration, Validation**

Participants will reflect on the content and process of the project. I will distribute a one page evaluation form with key questions to guide the participant’s personal, written evaluation. I want to know what learning took place, how thinking was changed by the content and/or group process, and what action will result that will affect children and congregational life at Erb St. Mennonite Church.

The children will be part of this closing celebration, complete with refreshments and notes of appreciation for their participation.

At this time I will make arrangements for validation of the project results by the participants. I propose to have participants read a summary of the analysis I have written and give their approval to any quotes that I have used before I submit my final paper to the thesis committee.

d. Time Line

**June - August, 1998**
- Meet with leaders of Erb Street Mennonite Church to introduce the project and gather names of potential participants.
- Send letter, make contact with participants.
- Invite the participants, both adults and children, to be part of the project.

**September, 1998**
- Interview the children

**October-November, 1998**
- Conduct and facilitate the four sessions.

**December, 1998 to January, 1999**
- Data analysis
- Check my analysis with participants.
- Begin to write thesis.
6. Data Collection and Analysis

In my interviews with the children and youth, I will find out if my “hunches” about a theology of children resonate at all with the children’s experiences of God and the church.

From the adult participants, I will discover if my theology of children makes sense to them in their context, and if it is useful and helpful in finding ways to include children. They will each submit written evaluations of the process, content, and reflections on their learning experience. The ritual or event that the group chooses to design may help me determine if the process of the action in ministry has potential in moving a congregation forward in its practical inclusion of children.

Based on the results of the interaction and dialogue of the participants with my theology of children, I will determine what issues I need to address or rethink, possible implications for congregations, next steps, etc.

Evaluation

The consent forms that I plan to use do not require anonymity. I want the people “in the margins,” especially the children, to have a voice and to be named. In order to take the experience of children seriously, I feel it is important to allow their names to be used. Therefore, I am seeking their permission to share their stories with the broader church community.

7. Risks and Limitations

Risks

The greatest risk is that those who can effect change on behalf of the children will refuse to do so. Some leaders find it difficult to promote change from the traditional ways that their congregation prefers to conduct its worship and/or educational life. Children, then, become the losers when adults refuse to change “the way we always do things” in order to be more inclusive.

Another risk I face is that my voice will not be heard. To speak and write from a feminist perspective on the topic of children and Christian education may be worthy of note, but in the Mennonite church hierarchies, it is not a very important issue to most church leaders. I hope that, though I speak from the margins, there will be some openness from leaders to pay attention to the children. bell hooks, a feminist writer, speaks of the importance of choosing the margin as a space of “radical openness.”

Limitations

In a way I am already working with a "converted" group in a congregation that values children to some extent and wants to find ways to include them. I am not sure that my findings will affect congregations who are satisfied with their practice of children being "seen and not heard" or "not seen at all."

The people who will participate in this project are actively involved in congregational life. The conclusions I draw from my research may be more appropriate for congregations whose children are "churched" and may not fit as well for nominal churchgoers or for children whose parents are not committed to the Mennonite faith tradition.

8. The Contribution of the Study

I believe that there are congregations and church leaders who seek to include children more actively in congregational life, but do not know how to go about it in practical terms. There are others who need a solid theological context for including children, one that combines Anabaptist and contemporary Mennonite theologies with as much integrity as is possible. I hope that the theology of children that I articulate will have a place in the broader Mennonite church context.

I anticipate this research to provide the foundation piece for my ongoing work in children's Christian education at the denominational level. I hope that it will provide the basis for creating rituals and other ways that contribute to the faith formation of children in the context of congregational life. In addition, this research may challenge congregations and church leaders to be more intentional in developing congregational life as an inclusive community of faith for all of God's people, especially those who have been marginalized in the past.
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANTS AND CONSENT FORMS

Participants in Research Project at Erb Street Mennonite Church

In compliance with the consent/assent forms, follow in this appendix, the list of participants includes only first names.

Names of the Children Who Were Interviewed

- Paul, age 14 (grade 9)
- Danny, age 12 (grade 8)
- Brent, age 11 (grade 7)
- Laura, age 10 (grade 5)
- Violeta, age 9 (grade 4)
- Stephen, age 7 (grade 3)
- Seth, age 7 (grade 2)
- Meaghan, age 5 (grade 1)

Names of the Adult Participants

- Joanne
- Tom
- Marianne
- Richard
- Alan
- Sandra
- Don
- Elizabeth
- Jennifer
- Renee
Consent Form for Research Project

As part of my studies in the Doctor of Ministry Programme at Toronto School of Theology I am conducting a research project that has to do with the inclusion of children in Mennonite congregational life. In my reading and research, I have begun to articulate a *theology of children* which is rooted in our Anabaptist faith tradition and attempts to be more inclusive of children and youth than I observe to be the case in most Mennonite congregations today.

This is your invitation to participate in a research group made up of people who have an interest in the way faith is nurtured in the children at Erb St. Mennonite Church. The group will include the pastor, parents of children and/or youth who are not baptized, grandparents, Sunday school teachers and Christian education and worship committee members.

The group will meet five times during October - November, 1998 to grapple with the issue of including children more fully in congregational life. You will be asked to share your experiences of church as a child, your understandings about the nature and nurture of children, and a brief written evaluation of the process. I will present my *theology of children*, and lead the group in discussion and reflection on the subject. It is my hope that, out of this process, the group will be able to move the research along by designing a ritual or event that can be used immediately and long term in the congregation.

Your participation in this research project is voluntary. In order for the research to have validity, it is important that you participate in all five sessions. Sessions will be videotaped using a technician to ensure that I retain accuracy of the process and content of the discussions.

Since dissertations become public documents, I ask your permission to use the information and particular quotes that I gather from you during the sessions. And, since the perspective that I have chosen to operate from values the naming of persons in order to give a voice and personal identity, I will use your first name in my written work. Thus, all your comments, stories, etc., when made public, will be attributable to you.

I plan to verify what I have written with you before I complete my thesis writing. It is important to me that what I have written is validated by the contributors. I am more than willing to share the results of my research with you, either formally or informally, when the thesis is completed.

*I have read the consent form and agree to the terms as they are written.*

Name of participant: ___________________ Signature: ___________________

Name of researcher: Eleanor Snyder Signature: ___________________

Name of witness: ___________________ Signature: ___________________

Date: ___________________
Assent Form for Children

My name is Eleanor Snyder. I am doing a research project on Mennonite children and how they feel about their church. I would like for you to tell me about your experiences of belonging in your congregation. There will be some other children from your church in the group with you. We will spend time getting to know each other before I ask my questions. I plan to use a camcorder to videotape our time together. I will have another adult helping me with the videotape.

I need your permission to tell other people what you said at the meeting. I want to share what you said with a group of adults that I will meet with from your church in a few weeks from now. Also, I need to write up a report of our conversation that will become a document for anyone to read. Can I use your first name and age when I relate what you said in the group? I will check first with you and your parents to see if you agree with what I have written.

If you agree to talk with me and to allow me to use what you said in my writing and talking to other people, please sign your name here.

Name of participant: Signature:

Name of researcher: Eleanor Snyder Signature:

Date:

Consent Form for Parent

I agree to the terms of the assent form and give my permission to have my child participate in this interview. I agree that you can use my child’s name and comments in your dissertation and in other areas appropriate to your work in children’s ministries.

Name of parent: Signature:

Name of researcher: Eleanor Snyder Signature:

Date:
APPENDIX C

SESSION WITH THE CHILDREN

Meeting with Children
October 3, 1998
Erb St. Mennonite Church
9:30 to noon

Selection Process

Children's names were suggested by the pastor, Renee Sauder and the CE director, Sandi Hannigan. Renee sent a memo to the parents with information about the research project, the proposed meeting date, and a notice that I would call with a personal invitation. This memo was placed in the parents' mailboxes at church. A week later I followed up with a telephone call to the parents. At this time I introduced myself, gave particular details about the meeting time and place, reminded parents of the terms of the assent form and the fact that a consent form must be signed by both parent and child. Two children were unable to participate because of the date. Without exception the parents were delighted that their children were considered for this project. One parent shared how her son had been involved in a university research project on sibling relationships a year or so previously. Another parent wanted to be sure to know how his child was quoted in the thesis. Another parent said the date was already on the calendar as soon as she received the memo.

Format

9:00 to 9:30
Set up lounge and interview space. Set out supplies, snacks and drinks for the children. Set up camcorder in lounge and tape recorder in foyer.

9:30 - 9:50
1. Welcome children and parents as they arrive.
2. Have children and parents read the consent/assent form and sign forms.
   - Look at pictures that show two perspectives i.e., old/young woman, native chief/Eskimo, duck/rabbit.
   - View 3-D piece of art: what do you see first?
   Talk about the fact that we experience things differently because we are made with different ways to thinking and seeing and feeling. How we understand God will be different and special for each person.
Reminder that some kids like some things about church and others like other things about church. Some like to sing, others like to act, some like to sit quietly and listen, others like to be active and move around. Some are bored, others are excited about what happens in church. Because you are a unique person, you have different likes and dislikes. Whatever you say about church is OK. We are looking at things about church from different eyes.

Explain the task: Today I want to learn from you, to understand God and church from your eyes. It will help me when I talk to adults about children and church. I will meet with each person alone for 10 to 15 minutes to talk about what you think about God and the church that you are a part of. I am going to ask you to do some thinking and talking with Sandi about this church and maybe you can give her some ideas about what you would like church to be like.

9:50 - 11:20
4. Interviews with Eleanor
   I will spend 10-15 minutes with each child, beginning with the oldest, using the questions written below.

Activities for the Children While Waiting for their Interviews
5. Assignment I (under Sandi’s supervision with Jeff recording)
   • Create a picture of what this church is like to you. You can work alone or with someone else. Think or draw what God is like to you. (It can be a word picture) Bring pictures to the interview.

6. Assignment II : Group activity
   • Take a tour of the church building (sanctuary, pulpit area, Sunday school classrooms, board room, offices)
   • Name the programs of the church - which programs include/exclude children?
   • List on chart paper responses to these questions:
     * If you could change anything about church, what would it be?
     * If you could help out anywhere in the church, what would you do?
     * If you could plan a worship service for kids (and let the adults come), what would you plan?

11:20-12:00
7. Debrief, Snack, and Closure
   Thank the children. Invite further reflections.
   Explain about the final event with the adults and the validation process.

Equipment and Supplies: Camcorder, tripod, videotape, extension cords, tape recorder, blank tapes, chart paper and markers, art paper, pencil crayons, pencils, plasticine, Lego, snacks, assent forms for children and parents.
Interview Questions for Children

1. Tell me about your picture of this church. Where are you in the picture?
2. Tell me what you like about this church.
3. What things make you feel like you belong?
4. Are there times when you feel like you don’t belong? Tell me what happened that made you feel that way.
5. What do you think the church could do to include kids better?
6. Some people say the church is like, say, a family or a body. What would you say this church is most like? I like to think of the church as being a playground, God’s playground. What do you think of the church as a playground?
7. If you were telling a friend what a Christian is, what would you say?
8. Do you think you are a Christian? Why or why not?
9. Do you remember seeing anyone being baptized at this church? What do you think it meant?
10. Tell me a favourite Bible story.
11. What is a favourite song you like to sing or listen to?
12. Tell me about a time you felt really close to God/Jesus.
13. What is God/Jesus like for you?
   (Can draw a picture or describe)
14. Is there anything else you want to tell me about God or church?
APPENDIX D

SESSION OUTLINES FOR ADULT GROUP

Erb Street Mennonite Church
Adult Research Project
October 4, 1998
7:00-9:00 p.m.

Session 1
Advance Preparation
- Coffee, tea, juice and cookies
- Set up lounge for videotaping
- Copies of consent form
- Supplies: chart paper, markers, paper and pencils.

7:00 to 7:45
A. Opening
   As people gather have them complete the chart, marking where they fit in each category. There is no need to give names. I want to get a sense of their expertise and experience in a casual way.

1. I am extroverted.................. introverted.
2. I think best in the morning...... in the evening.
3. My age decade is (circle one) 20s 30s 40s 50s 60s 70s
4. I am a parent of children (circle where appropriate)
   0-5  6-10  11-16  17-21  21-30  30+
5. I am a grandparent of children 0-5  6-10  11-16  17-21  21-30  30+
6. The faith tradition of my childhood was:
   Mennonite  Lutheran  Roman Catholic
   United Church of Canada  other
7. I have served in leadership in these areas:
   worship  Christian education  pastoral team
   church council  pastoral care
8. I am/have been:  Children’s Sunday school teacher  VBS leader
   Club leader  Youth leader  Junior youth leader  Mentor/advocate
B. Introductions
- Introduce Jeff, videotaping technician (necessary for data collection).
- Introduce myself and the project using information given to the Church Council.
- Explain selection process.
- Outline the format for sessions (time frame, use of time, testing of Groome’s shared praxis approach to Christian education).
- Give my expectations of this group
  * full participation
  * attendance at all sessions (must maintain a core group to validate the research)
  * willingness to learn, imagine, critique, challenge
  * ability to participate as a team member with me as team leader (stick with agenda, stretch your learning methods, be willing to ‘think outside the box’, be willing to use right brain, etc.)
- Review consent form.
- Assume confidentiality within this group.
- Questions, comments.

C. Sign consent form if willing to continue

7:45-8:15

D. Sharing Past Experiences

1. Invite participants to think of a memorable childhood experience of congregational (church) life. What comes to mind when you recall your experience of church as a child? Think of church as all of congregational life (not just the worship service as in church versus Sunday school).
   Draw a picture of your memorable experience or write about it before discussion.
   Think about prayers, hymns, people, events you remember. Take 5 minutes in silence to think about what you want to say.

2. Share briefly (one or two minutes).
   As people share write descriptive words on flip chart.

3. Observations: are there common threads around these childhood experiences?
   Is age a factor? What about denominational background?

4. Note how our past experiences may shape the way we think about children and the church. We may either maintain the tradition (“it was good enough for me, it’s good enough for my children”) or try to change the way we experienced church (“I want something better for the children than my experience”).
8:15-8:50  
E. Naming our Present Experience with Children (Groome’s Movement 1)  
   On the continuum mark the degree to which children (up to grade 8) are included in  
   Erb Street’s congregational life [not included .........full participants]  
   Work in three group (see chart).  
   Post results on larger chart. Compare the decisions of the three groups.  

F. Discussion  
   How does the present reality of the children’s participation in church life compare to  
   your own experiences as children? What might be reasons for the differences? How  
   do you feel about the present participation of children in Erb Street’s congregational  
   life? What questions or comments do you have?  

G. Closing  
   Next session we will look at some of the thinking and research I did on children,  
   faith, and the congregation. Between sessions think about the children observe them,  
   consider what might be your theology of children (their nature, relationship with  
   God, status in the congregation, ways the church helps them to become Christian).  

   Set next meeting dates for sessions 2 through 5.
Naming our Present Experience with Children

Mark the degree to which children (up to grade 8) are included in Erb Street’s congregational life.

Traditional worship service
excluded/no participation .................................................. included as full participants
Comments:

Leading worship
excluded/no participation .................................................. included as full participants
Comments:

Communion service
excluded/no participation .................................................. included as full participants
Comments:

Formal Christian education
excluded/no participation .................................................. included as full participants
Comments:

Pastoral Care
excluded/no participation .................................................. included as full participants
Comments:

Committee/ministry groups
excluded/no participation .................................................. included as full participants
Comments:
Service events
excluded/no participation .......................................................... included as full participants
Comments:

All-church events
excluded/no participation .......................................................... included as full participants
Comments:

Special Non-traditional services (healing, anointing, advent or lent)
excluded/no participation .......................................................... included as full participants
Comments:

Additional comments, areas of inclusion/exclusion of children.
Session 2
Advance Preparation
- Coffee, tea, orange juice, squares
- set up lounge for videotaping
- post newsprint, set out markers, pencils and pens
- handouts

7:30 - 8:25 p.m. - Part I
A. Opening
   1. Introduce Nicholas as video technician.
   2. Outline agenda for this session.
   3. Invite people to share thoughts or insights from session 1.

B. Focusing Activity
   1. Review discussion and chart regarding the inclusion of children
   2. Distribute handout of where groups made their choices.
   3. Try to reach a consensus on the place of children for each aspect.
      Begin with personal reflection, place sticker on the continuum, group sharing.

C. Personal Reflection on the place of children (Groome's movement 2)
   1. Distribute handout.
   2. Review questions and purpose.
   3. Determine how to work on this based on personal style:
      * think alone or work in small groups
      * if small groups are chosen, give participants choice of group:
         Group A - questions 1,2
         Group B - question 3
         Group C - question 5,6
      * the whole group will tackle question 4
   4. Distribute chart paper and markers to each group.

D. Shared Group Reflection
   Each group will share their thinking from small group discussion. I will contribute
   information from historical, theological, Anabaptist, sociological perspectives if or
   when appropriate.

E. Break - 10 minutes
Naming our Present Experience with Children

Mark the degree to which children (up to grade 8) are included in Erb St.'s congregational life:

Traditional worship service
excluded*...x...y...z...included

Leading worship
excluded...x...y...z...included

Communion service
excluded...x...y...z...included

Formal Christian education
excluded..........................zyx..included

Pastoral Care
excluded...x...z...y...included

Committee/ministry groups
excluded...xyz..........................included

Service events
excluded...x...y...z...included

All-church events
excluded...z...y...x...included

Special Non-Traditional Services (healing, anointing, advent or lent)
excluded...x...z...y...included

* the original document for the left of the continuum read “exclusion/no participation”
* the original document for the right of the continuum read “included/full participation”
x = group 1 response (plum dot) on chart paper
y = group 2 response (brown dot) on chart paper
z = group 3 response (green x ) on chart paper

Considering the broad spectrum of congregational life at Erb St Church as you understand it, to what degree would you say children are full participants?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>no participation</th>
<th>44</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>88</th>
<th>9999</th>
<th>full participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Critical Reflection on Present Action
of
Including Children in Congregational Life

1. Why do you think the children are included so well in some aspects of congregational life (Christian education, all-church events, and traditional worship services)?

2. What are the reasons for children not participating in some aspects of congregational life (leading worship, communion, committees, and service events)?

3. What assumptions do we bring about children's place in congregational life
   A. from our childhood and youth experience?
   B. from our Mennonite history and tradition?
   C. from societal values and understandings about children?

4. A. Who exercises the power that most influences the present practices regarding children?
   B. To whose benefit is the power employed?
   C. To whose loss is the power employed?

5. What might be some long-term consequences of the present practice for the congregation?

6. In your view, what aspects, if any, of your present practice with children could use some creative imagination in order to be more inclusive of children?
8:30 - 9:15  Part II: Sharing the Story and Vision (Groome’s Movement 3)

A. Present my Theology of Children in an Anabaptist Perspective

As the first criterion of hermeneutics in movement 3, “reign of God” means that educators approach every particular expression of Christian Story/Vision with the bedrock conviction that God is a God of life and love who intends freedom, peace, and justice for all, who is active in history to realize God’s “goodwill” and calls people into covenant to so live. (Groome, Sharing Faith, 229).

1. Introduction
   - Distribute handout pages, “Toward a Theology of Children…”
   - Review Marpeck’s role, theology, ecclesiology.
   - Inform the group regarding the importance of metaphor, how it shapes our understanding of church.

2. Outline the Points of my Theological Stance
   - Go through this point by point, checking scriptural references for some
   - Distribute Bibles, share scripture reading assignments.
   - After each point, ask for questions for clarification, quotes, explanations

3. Initial Responses (we will spend more time next week with the theory)
   - how does this fit with your understanding of children in the Mennonite context?
   - how does this fit in light of personal experience as a child, parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle, single adult in the church?
   - are there areas with which you totally disagree?

9:15-9:30

B. Assignment for Next Session (optional)
   - Interview children and adults about place of children.
   - How inclusive do people in your church feel your church is toward children?
   - How do other Mennonite adults (those not in your church) say their church includes children in church life and how they feel about it.
   - Make notes, think, pray about children and their place in congregational life.
Eleanor Snyder  
Doctor of Ministry Research Group (handout)  
Erb Street Mennonite Church  
October 18, 1998

**Toward a Theology of Children in a Mennonite Perspective**  
(not for sharing outside the group)

A. Pilgram Marpeck’s Theology as it Relates to Children  
- Children are blessed by God.  
- Children are not born in sin.  
- Children are innocent, and not in need of baptism.  
- Children are not held accountable for sin.  
- Children are incapable of understanding the meaning of baptism.  
- Children do not participate in the Lord’s Supper.  
- Children are to be consecrated to God.

In capsule form, Marpeck believed that children are holy, innocent, under God’s grace, loved by God, incapable of sinning because they had no knowledge of sin, yet with a proclivity to sin. Just as Jesus welcomed the children into God’s reign so must the church honour and respect the innocence and faith of its children. Eventually, when children reached the age of discretion, and that age “God only knew,” they lost their privileged “status of grace.” At that time, when they acknowledged their need for God and committed their lives to God, they could voluntarily join the community of saints through believers baptism. Until then, they were nurtured and accepted in the congregation.

B. Pilgram Marpeck’s Ecclesiology as it Relates to Children  
- The church was strongly christocentric (Body of Christ was a favourite metaphor).  
- Scriptures were foundational.  
- Baptism was one’s entrance into the church.  
- The holy church was a community of believers (community of saints).

Children did not have a firm place within the early Anabaptist church, though they were named and consecrated before a congregation and parents were expected to nurture them so that when they were older they would choose to join the “community of saints.”

C. Anabaptist and Mennonite Metaphors for the Church  
- Body of Christ  
- Community of Saints  
- Family of God
D. Biblical Foundations

1. Psalm 139:13-16
2. Jeremiah 1:4,5
3. Matthew 18:1-5**
4. Matthew 19:13-15*
5. Mark 9:33-37**
6. Mark 10:13-16*
8. Luke 18:15-17*
9. Matthew 11:16-17
10. Zechariah 8:3-5

* similar theme from 3 gospels
** same theme from 3 gospels

E. My Emerging Theology of Children

Based on Marpeck’s theology regarding children and the spirit in which he developed his theology and ecclesiology, and based on biblical references to Jesus’ association with real children, I offer the following as statements of my emerging theology of children:

1. Children are spiritual beings created by God.

2. Children have a relationship with God from birth.

3. Children are blessed by Jesus and welcomed in God’s reign.
4. Children can teach adults about how to be “church.”

5. Faith is a journey with God in community that begins in childhood.

6. For children of the church, faith *appropriation* language is more appropriate than *repentance and conversion* language.

7. Baptism marks one’s ordination to vocational ministry.


9. Children are nurtured in faith through active participation in church life.

10. Children’s faith is nurtured as they witness a holistic spirituality in adults.

11. An appropriate metaphor for the church that includes children is: *church as children in God’s playground.*
Session 3
Advance Preparation
- coffee, tea, juice, cake
- set up board room for video taping
- newsprint, markers, coloured stickers

7:00 - 7:20
A. Focusing Activity
- As people gather, direct them to the board room.
- Assignment: Either alone or in groups of two or three, create a playground or a park where people gather to play. What equipment, activities would you include? Using a variety of coloured stickers place the children and adults in your scene. When finished, set aside for use later.

7:20 - 8:20
B. Input: “Toward a Theology of Children in a Mennonite Perspective” (handout)
- Reminder of task: help me think through understanding of children’s relationship to God and the church, i.e. congregation. My thinking is based on writings of Marpeck, the Mennonite confessional statements, a new look at some scriptures that include references to real children, all in the context of being church on the edge of a new century in a postmodern age. Invite group to think with me, and hope none of us has to be defensive.

- Outline of process for this session
  Overview of my theology, sharing my vision of the children’s place in the Mennonite Christian story, hear your questions, comments, add to my vision, generally be engaged in the process of exploring a theology of children.

- Anabaptist understanding of children
  - note catholic view (depraved sinners)
  - debates about infant baptism
  - redefining childhood
  - 16th century society was different than now (adult at 6 or 7) - socialization process different

- Anabaptist understanding of faith
  - believers’ baptism as a corrective to corrupt institution
  - view of church is pure, holy, committed, adult
- metaphors for church: body of Christ, community of saints.
- children did not fit in as believers

• Changes in society and the church through the centuries.
  - not first generation Christians
  - what is same? different?
  - what is non-negotiable as a faith tenet?
  - what is based on tradition without "faith value"
  - what needs to be changed for our present experience in order to make faith and church relevant for our children?

• My understanding of theology as it relates to children

  Relationship to God
  • Read texts 1 and 2 about relationship with God: Psalm, Jeremiah.
  • Read texts 3-8 that have to do with Jesus and children.
  • Read what children had to say from interviews (questions 12, 13).

Time for response, feelings, affirmations, questions.

• Relationship of children with the congregation
  • Read texts 4 and 9 (Jesus uses examples of children)
  Based on Jesus’ example and teaching to the disciples, I believe children belong, are included, teach us about God and the meaning of church, and should not be marginalized.
  • Review points 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.

  What the children said about belonging
  • Read responses to interview questions #2, #3, #4

Time for response, feelings, affirmations, questions.

Break

8:30 - 9:30

C. A Contemporary Metaphor for Church/Congregational Life
  • Refer to our pictures.
  • Show pictures I used with children (family, playground).
  • Share my metaphor (Zechariah 8), see ecclesiology paper
  • Share responses by children (interview question #1, #6)
  • Envision this metaphor together - what affirmations? What limitations?
  • Can we imagine church in a new way that more fully includes children?
  • Add or create a playground that would be intergenerational, inclusive, etc.
D. **Summary**
Sharing the story and vision of God's reign that includes even the children and moves them in a faith relationship that is vibrant and holistic.

Next session we will discuss:
* what does/might this mean for Erb Street.
* what are the strengths of this theology?
* where are there weaknesses?
* what affirms what we are doing already?
* what questions does this raise for how we “do church”? (implications)
* how are we to be faithful in nurturing faith in our children in these times?
* what are specific ways we can work at inclusivity?

Refer to interview question #5 for children's ideas.
* your questions.
Erb Street Mennonite Church
Adult Research Project
November 15, 1998
7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Session 4
Advance Preparation
• coffee, tea, juice
• video taping equipment
• newsprint, markers, chart paper
• playground drawings, continuum from previous sessions

7:00 - 8:00
A. Outline and introduction
   Briefly outline what happens in Groome’s Movement 4
   How does my understanding of children’s place in the church, based on Marpeck’s theology, the scriptures, and our present Mennonite context, affirm, question and call us as church leaders beyond our present praxis (or our present way of understanding and treating children)? What did we learn that might show us how we are to live more faithfully toward the vision of God’s reign? (Refer to, Sharing Faith p.250) or, to put it simply, what are you thinking now about children and the church?

   In this dialogue with the vision presented last week, what are your questions? What resonates for you? What doesn’t fit in your thinking or is problematic? What stretches you and/or excites you? What do you find true? What does this information tell you about how you are to live the Christian faith? How do you really think and feel about what you heard? Is it true for you? What consequences do you perceive and why? (See Groome, 251,252)

   Remind the group that it is acceptable to disagree with me and each other.

B. Small Group Dialogue
   1. Distribute copies of my theological points with questions for pondering (same handout from previous session).
   2. Take 5 minutes to write down your thoughts, questions, etc. on some or all questions.
   3. Form into groups (assign three questions per group)- record points

C. Total Group Discussion
   1. Report on the discussion questions chosen.
   2. Add to comments by the rest of the group.
   3. What counsel does the group want to give me on my work so far?
4. My question: what language might we find that describes the children’s place in the church in a positive manner?

5. Thank the group, gather the papers.

8:00 to 9:00
C. Implications for Erb Street Church
1. Read responses by children to interview questions 4, 5.
2. Distribute my child consecration service draft as my example
3. Divide into groups to pursue implications of my vision for children in specific ways.
   - Group A: What adjustments, changes might you make in worship experiences?
   - Group B: What adjustments, changes might you make in congregational life, other than worship? (pastoral care, committee, intergenerational, service, communion) Note: Groups A and B can be brainstorming sessions.
   - Group C: Using newsprint and markers, what might Erb St Mennonite church look like if you took seriously my metaphor of church as children in God’s playground? (Refer to your playground pictures, imagine, draw, create a vision for congregation life as “godly play”)

4. Report to larger group.
5. Invite the group to think/talk about what they could or would like to implement as a result of the discussion/ideas. What can they take ownership of? What process is needed?

D. Closing
Next and last session: November 29 from 12:30 to 2:00 with the children.
I will provide lunch.
Evaluation and validation process..
Eleanor Snyder  
Research Project (handout)  
Erb St. Mennonite Church  
November 15, 1998

Group Participants:

Questions

*Does this statement fit with your understanding about children (is it true for you)*
*How do you feel about this statement?*
*What resonates for you?*
*What questions or difficulties do you have with it?*

Other comments:

1. Children are spiritual beings created by God.

2. Children have a relationship with God from birth.

3. Children are blessed by Jesus and welcomed in God's reign.
Eleanor Snyder  
Research Project  
Erb St. Mennonite Church  
November 15, 1998  

Group Participants:  

Questions  
Does this statement fit with your understanding about children (is it true for you)  
How do you feel about this statement?  
What resonates for you?  
What questions or difficulties do you have with it?  
Other comments:  

4. Children can teach adults about how to be “church.”  

5. Faith is a journey with God in community that begins in childhood.  

6. For children of the church, faith *appropriation* language is more appropriate than *repentance and conversion* language.  

7. Baptism marks one’s ordination to vocational ministry.
Group Participants:

Questions

Does this statement fit with your understanding about children (is it true for you)?
How do you feel about this statement?
What resonates for you?
What questions or difficulties do you have with it?
Other comments:


9. Children are nurtured in faith through active participation in church life.

10. Children’s faith is nurtured as they witness a holistic spirituality in adults.
WELCOMING THE CHILD INTO THE FAITH COMMUNITY:
A SERVICE OF CONSECRATION

Visual Items (placed on communion table)
- A silk rosebud
- Banner that symbolizes congregational life
- Consecration Blanket
- Faith chest

Hymn:
"For the beauty of the earth" (HWB, 89)

Scripture texts:
- Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Mark 10:13-16

Minister:
Today is a special day in the life of this congregation as we celebrate the gift of a new life that has joined our community of faith. Each new life is a miracle, a unique expression of the handiwork of our loving Creator. In this service of consecration of baby __________ and her/his parent(s), we offer our praise and thanksgiving to God, acknowledging the relationship that already exists with this new life and the One who loves us from the very beginning, and who has called us by name into a lifelong relationship. Today, in hope and trust, we receive a new life, precious in God’s eyes and given the name, __________.

I invite the parent(s) and siblings of this child to come forward as an act of dedication to God.

Parent(s):
As Christian parents we present our child, __________, to God in the presence of our faith community here at __________. Today we dedicate our child back to God, recognizing that she/he does not belong to us alone, she/he also belongs to God. We believe that the home is the primary setting for faith to unfold and grow in our daughter/son, and we commit ourselves to nurturing her/him in the values and spirit of Christian love, faith and service. We welcome the support of our families, friends and this congregation as together we raise our child(ren), whom has entrusted to our love and protection.

Minister:
I invite extended family, close friends, faith sponsors or godparents, to surround the family to indicate your willingness to participate in this family’s faith nurture.

Extended Family, etc.
We know that we have a special relationship with __________ (parents) and this child, __________ (name additional children, too). We want to share responsibility
for her/his nurture and care. We are prepared to support this family with our love, encouragement and prayers, and are willing to assist them in the nurture of this new member, __________. We promise to enfold them all with Christian love and acceptance.

Minister:
To show your support and responsibility in the care of this child and her/his family, would the congregation please stand.

Congregation:
As members of your congregation, we are the faith community into which __________ has been born. Your children are our children and we share in your joy of this new life and your willingness to dedicate her/him to the strong and tender providence of God. We commit ourselves to provide a hospitable environment in which __________ can grow and flourish. We promise to support you in passing on the Christian faith to your child(ren) through our prayers, encouragement, worship and education ministries, pastoral care, and by providing unconditional love and acceptance. We pray that our shared life and witness will nurture __________ to continue to respond to the grace and love of God as revealed in Jesus. With open arms, we welcome and receive this new life, the smallest and most vulnerable gift that now belongs here with us.

Prayer (unison):
Gracious God:
like a father who nurtures his children
you have cared for us:
like a mother you have called us by name
and claimed us as your own;
you have loved us into being,
placed us in human families,
and blessed us on our journey.
By the presence of your Spirit
consecrate this child and parent(s)
for their journey together through life,
through Jesus Christ. Amen (taken from Minister's Manual, p.124)

Minister (invites extended family to lay hands on the parents and child(ren) as she/he offers this blessing:

__________, may the God of love who has entrusted you with this child, grant you abundant love in raising her/him. May God give you a life of faithfulness to the gospel before your children so that they, too, will know the ways of God.

Minister (wraps child in the blanket, offering this blessing as she/he lays hands on the child’s head)

__________, may God, your loving Friend, bless you and keep you;
May the very face of God shine upon you; and be gracious to you. May God’s presence embrace you and give you peace. Amen.

Hymn: Child of blessing, child of promise HWB, 620
(During the song the minister walks amidst the congregation with the child, giving adults, youth and children permission to touch and bless.)

Offering of Gifts
Minister:
As a symbol of the congregation’s partnership with this family in nurturing her/his relationship with God, we present you with this “Faith Chest.” In this chest are some items for the journey of faith that is beginning now in this community. These are reminders that this child, that came from God, belongs to God and has been entrusted to our care.
(Contents can include a certificate, rosebud, copy of bulletin/service, picture of child taken after the service, tape of hymns, prayers or Bible story books)

Blessing (unison)

__________, may the love of God, the gracious Spirit of Christ, and the fellowship of God’s people bless your life. Amen.

Sources
Session 5
Advance Preparation
- coffee, tea, juice, milk, sugar, cups
- order pizza, pop
- video taping equipment
- evaluation forms for adult group

12:30 - 1:30 Gathering and Eating Time
Children involved in interviews are invited for first hour.

A. Eat
Pizza, pop, brownies.

B. Introductions and Sharing our Stories and Dreams
1. Pair up adults and children by numbering each group, then finding partner with the same number.
2. Talk together and find out about each other (name, hobbies or pastimes).
3. Quick introductions. Tell the partner’s name and one thing about them (use a baton - the person with the baton has the “floor,” beginning with #1)
4. Adults tell story from childhood (when the same age as the child partner).
5. Children tell something they would like to do when they are as old as the adult partner.

C. Intergenerational Learning Activity
1. Form groups of 4 (2 groups together)
2. Show Tom’s picture of church as “children in God’s playground.”
3. Put out floor model (my enlarged version of Tom’s picture).
4. Distribute markers, pens, post-it notes, scissors, and construction paper.
5. Think together about ways that adults and children can learn to know God together. Each group is encouraged to think of one or two things they would do with big and little people that helps them to relate to God, to show that they love God and that God loves them.
   [Sunday morning experience or during the week - if need help give ideas such as singing together, read scripture, visit sick person, make a gift to give away, usher]
6. Cut out pictures or symbols of ideas/plans (or write ideas on paper) place in appropriate places on the floor model.
7. Give opportunity for groups to share their ideas with entire group
8. **Debrief:** Celebrate ideas that were given, encourage people to continue to talk together and continue to think of ways that you can be with God together.

D. **Closing**
   1. Form a circle for closing celebration.
   2. Assign 3 groupings to say the refrain for the psalm - OK. Uh Huh. Amen!
   3. Read Psalm 103 (my adapted version)
   4. Blessing to Go: *God's love go with you... and also with you!*
      Shake hands, high five, hug, etc.

1:30 - 2:00 p.m.

E. **Evaluation with Adults (Movement Five)**
   ...the content of what people express as their chosen response may be their convictions, beliefs, sights, attitudes, sentiments, emotions, resolves, intentions, commitments, strategies, and so on, to be historically realized on personal, interpersonal, and social/political levels, individually and/or as a group, within and/or outside the pedagogical event (Sharing Faith, 273).

   1. Review the purpose of this session: get feedback on process and to determine if participants' thinking on the subject has changed.
   2. Feedback from intergenerational activity time.
      How did you feel about being with the children?
      What did you learn about yourself or the children from interaction with them?
   3. Group Action Response
      As a result of time together, our time with children and the comments they contributed, what do you think you as a group might be ready to do in order to integrate or include children more fully into congregational life?
   4. Distribute Evaluation Form (handout)
      Allow ample time to write comments.
      Give opportunity to record their answers on videotape if they would rather not write or if speaking comes easier. Suggest that videotaping be with me, alone, or with someone else.
   5. Outline Next Steps
      - Process and analyze the data.
      - Bring information to the group in January (SS hour or evening or by phone)
      - Questions, comments

F. **Closing**
   Thank group for their participation during the sessions.
Eleanor Snyder  
Research Project  
Erb St. Mennonite Church  
November 29, 1998

A Psalm of Celebration: Psalm 103 - God is Love  
(Child in Our Hands Conference, July 1998)

Leader:  All Right!  
Group 1:    OK!  
Group 2:    Uh Huh!  
Group 3:    Amen!

Bless God, O my soul,  
Bless God’s holy name, all that is in me!  
Bless God, O my soul,  
and remember God’s faithfulness.  
Response:

Remember God’s faithfulness -  
in forgiving all your sins,  
in healing all your diseases,  
in saving your life from being destroyed,  
in crowning you with love and compassion,  
in filling your years with good things,  
in renewing your youth like an eagle’s.  
Response:

God does justice  
and always takes the side of the oppressed.  
God is merciful and forgiving,  
slow to anger, rich in love;  
God’s anger does not last forever;  
it exists a short time only.  
Response:

As high as the heaven over earth  
is the greatness of God’s faithful love  
for those who fear God.  
As tenderly as parents treat their children  
so God cares for those who fear God.  
Response:

God’s faithful love for those who fear God  
lasts from all eternity and forever,  
so too God’s justice to their children’s children,  
as long as they keep the covenant  
and remember to obey its precepts.  
Response:

Bless God, all angels,  
mighty in strength to enforce God’s word,  
attentive to every command.  
Bless God, all nations, servants who do  
God’s will  
Bless God, all creatures  
in every part of the world.  
Bless God, O my soul.  
Response:
Evaluation by Adult Participants

Research Question: In light of the Anabaptist faith tradition, how might a Mennonite congregation be more inclusive of children?

1. As a result of the sessions based on this subject, what has stayed the same and what has changed in your thinking about children and this congregation?

2. How will this study affect what you do in your position of leadership and/or as a member of this congregation?

3. Please comment on the process used to explore this subject. What helped you to become engaged in the topic? What prevented you from interacting more with the topic?

4. What further counsel or wisdom do you wish to share with Eleanor regarding her research project?
APPENDIX E

TOM'S MODEL OF CHURCH

The model pictured on the next page was drawn by Tom during session four as a response to the invitation to take seriously the metaphor of church as children in God's playground in the context of Erb Street Mennonite Church.

In presenting his picture of Erb Street Church as playground he offered a description of the various parts of the church:

- the worship area is in the middle of everything - it is central to congregational life
- the worship area is in an oval or circular shape so that everyone is closer to the pulpit and closer to each other
- there are moveable chairs or pews
- quiet rooms are located at the back, and they are not just for children
- the worship area is surrounded by hallway
- recreation area and fellowship areas are there to build community and encourage interaction as the congregation celebrates its togetherness
- kitchen
- the classrooms are different sizes
- the library is an important centre for learning
- outside play areas for children of varying areas (swings, climbing apparatus, sports, sand and water
- an amphitheatre for outdoor worship services
- trees and benches
- picnic areas
- the parking lot surrounds the entire area

During session five additional suggestions were given:

- showers and change rooms
- cross country ski trail
- place for movies and videos
- comfortable sitting area for reading in the library
- computers
- plays and dramas for all ages in the worship area
- animals to enjoy
- fireplace in the fellowship area
- listening centre for music
- stained glass windows in the worship area
- quilt and comforter learning centre
- play house centre
- soup kitchen for the homeless
- low housing complex around the property
Car Parking
amphitheatre
Outdoor gardens or forest
Classroom
Classroom
Classroom
walkway
walkway
Fellowship Hall
walkway
walkway
Library
children's play area
walkway
Classroom
Classroom
Classroom
Hallway
pulpit
movable chairs
walkway
walkway
walkway
Kitchen
water/sand play
Nature area
Recreation
Recreation

Tom
Nov 15/98
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