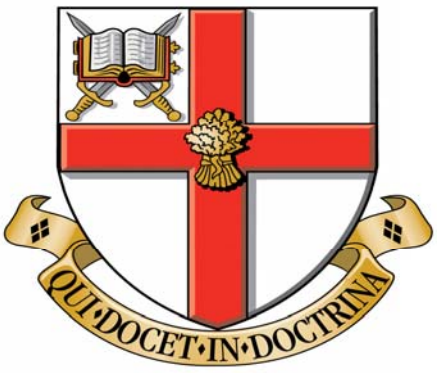

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Author(s): Stephen William Dixon

Title: In the light of a child: Adults discerning the gift of being

Date: June 2012

Originally published as: University of Chester DProf thesis

Example citation: Dixon, S. W. (2012). *In the light of a child: Adults discerning the gift of being*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Chester, United Kingdom.

Version of item: Submitted version

Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10034/253596

IN THE LIGHT OF A CHILD:

Adults discerning the gift of being

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements
of the University of Chester for the degree of
Doctor of Professional Studies in Practical Theology

by

Stephen William Dixon

June 2012

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the support of the following:

The *Weavers* both young and old, and my interview participants.

My supervisors, Professor Elaine Graham and Dr Rebecca Nye; other staff and fellow members of the DProf programmes.

Writers in the field: Jerome Berryman, Marcia Bunge, John Pridmore, Keith White and Howard Worsley.

Colleagues past and present at the Diocese of Manchester Department of Education; Northern Region Diocesan Children's Work Advisers past and present especially Richard Burge and Judith Sadler; the national network of Children's Work Advisers especially the National Officer Mary Hawes.

My proof readers, Marion Kaufman and Becky Ashwell.

My wife Jane and sons Jacob and Gabriel, my local Christian community, and my spiritual director Brenda Wall.

For financial support: the Governors of the St Christopher's Educational Trust, and the Anglican Dioceses of Manchester and Wakefield.

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In the Light of a Child: Adults discerning the gift of being

Stephen W Dixon

Abstract

The researcher is a diocesan adviser for Children's Ministry, charged with promoting the importance of children for the Church, and the study examines issues arising from this professional responsibility. Children's advocates often suggest that adults have much to learn from them in the Church. It is commonly assumed that this learning will derive from their presumed characteristics such as 'innocence', or 'playfulness'. However, these characteristics are not exclusive to or universal among children. The aim of this study is to investigate the 'specialness' of children and discover if there is something peculiar to childhood that would merit Jesus placing a child in the midst of his disciples as a signpost to the kingdom of heaven.

The primary data source is the researcher's journal of his experience as a member of a multi-generational church group, and the study employs a qualitative methodology drawing on Grounded Theory and some of the practices of autoethnography. The importance of a relationship between experience and theology for Practical Theology is noted and the influence of experience on theologians explored with reference to Schleiermacher, Miller-McLemore and the theological reflection of 'ordinary' Christians. The analysis of the researcher's journal is developed as an example of experience-grounded personal theological reflection.

The results achieved by the study show that the most powerful personal effects of the multi-generational group on the researcher did not reflect the children's attributes *per se* but rather his own characteristics as revealed in relationship with the children. Interviews with the other adult members of the group, and Christian adults who work with children in contrasting situations, support the view that the effect of children on adults is influenced by the individuals concerned. The personal factors influencing the adults' experience are thematised, and the questions these themes evoke are seen as indicating the theological potential of reflection on the adult/child interface.

The study concludes that one aspect of the 'specialness' of children arises from their vulnerability and the nature of the relationship this creates with adults. The 'special value' of children to the life of the Church, it is suggested, includes the opportunity they give adults to view their own 'being' as God-given 'gift' by exploring how it can serve God's purposes in promoting the flourishing of the vulnerable. The possibility of promoting such exploration among individual Christians and Church communities is considered. The findings of the study are seen as having implications for a less romanticised portrayal of children's importance in the Church; for promoting better intergenerational relationships; for grounded theological conversation within and beyond the Church; for recruitment to Children's Ministry; and for the researcher's professional practice.

Summary of Portfolio

The starting point of my research journey was a Literature Review in which I examined the theories of children's spiritual development in the latter part of the 20th century in order to position the key voices most commonly cited in my professional field, Fowler and Westerhoff, and to establish the trajectory of thinking subsequent to their major period of output in the 1980s. I identified a progression from orderly and to some extent prescriptive approaches based on cognitive development in the tradition of Piaget, leading to a 'readiness' model drawn from Goldman, to a more fluid understanding. The latter was based on the experience of teachers and parents and those, such as Berryman, who took seriously other ways of knowing and thinking. My conclusion was that spiritual development was a shared activity across the age range and that children, rather than being at the foot of a developmental ladder, were at the centre of a seeking community.

This accorded with my own sense, as a Children's Ministry adviser, that children have much to contribute to the faith community, not least in the way their faith development is fostered. I explored this latter point further in my Publishable Article by examining the links between good practice in Children's Ministry and recent approaches to evangelism among adults in the wake of the 1990s 'Decade of Evangelism'. I found analysts were advocating an approach to adult evangelism that mirrored the open, creative, explorative and non-didactic approaches currently seen as best practice with children. These adult evangelists did not, however, expect to be taught by their 'evangelees'; whereas there is an expectation that children's ministers may learn from their children.

This expectation raises the possibility that children might have the potential to shape theology. My Reflection on Practice considered this possibility in a practical context. I reflected on the process of developing non-directive material for use with children as I designed and led a training session for children's ministers on producing their own 'discipleship' resources. The session presented participants with a process rather than a product – and not a process for developing a programme that expressed the ministers' priorities, but one that enabled children to identify questions of their own.

The Literature Review concluded with the *Child Theology Movement,* which puts a child at the centre of theological issues, following the example of Jesus. The Article suggested the Church might learn from child-orientated methods of faith exploration, and the Reflection suggested the theological potential of children's own concerns. These three projects supported the view, often expressed in my professional context, that children have a special status in the faith community. However, the unique nature of this 'specialness' remained open to question. My Research Proposal outlined a final project designed to address this fundamental, unresolved issue by investigating the effect that spending time with children had upon the adults who worked with them. The findings of that project are presented in the Thesis, which is the final piece in my Portfolio.

PART ONE – THE QUEST

An exploration takes time, resources, dedication and effort. If the explorer is to maintain the motivation to complete it with enthusiasm, it will need a powerful impetus. To have such motivational power, this impetus must be a matter of real concern and personal significance (see Herr and Anderson, 2005, 72). It will need to possess the qualities of a quest. Part 1 of this thesis will indicate the nature of the exploration that it documents, and the sense of quest that motivated the researcher. Chapter 1 will describe the professional background to the research question, and the data sources to be investigated. Chapter 2 will give details of the research methodology and methods to be used. Chapter 3 will establish the theological methodology of the project.

CHAPTER ONE
AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

> While respecting the experiences and opinions of others, do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value.
>
> Advices and Queries, No5
> Religious Society of Friends

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

I am employed by the Church of England as a diocesan adviser for ministry among children and my research arises from this professional context. The story of that research begins in this opening chapter, which sets the scene in terms of professional assumptions and an unanswered question they pose about the relationship between adults and children. A consideration of literature fails to provide suitable data to address the issue and so a research question is proposed to set the course of an exploration into new territory. Data sources – the areas for exploration – are described and justified. The map that this research seeks to produce is theological and so the scene-setting concludes by indicating how the proposed areas for exploration can be mapped in a theological way. The chapter concludes by previewing the structure of the research story, as it will unfold in the ensuing thesis.

1. THE EMERGENCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This section will describe the professional context from which the research question arose, and indicate the contribution to knowledge the research is intended to make in the professional field.

Professional assumptions

It is a commonplace within the Church's ministry among children to claim that adults should expect to learn from the children with whom they work (see Van Ness, 1991, 43). A recent development from this theme is the sense that

adults and children are, or should be, intentionally part of an all-age community in the Church (see Mounstephen and Martin, 2004). This multi-generational agenda proposes not that adults might learn from being with children as a by-product, but rather that all ages should work together intentionally on a shared project of discovery.

Part of my professional role is to introduce Children's Ministry volunteers to resources and approaches for nurturing children's spiritual life and Christian faith. I do this by inviting the adults to undertake activities designed for use with children. They do not pretend to be children, but sample the activities as adults. My experience has frequently been that after such a session many adults report having gained personal spiritual benefit from the activities[1].

One of my professional responsibilities is the promotion of admission to Holy Communion on the basis of baptism rather than confirmation. Among the arguments I use to advocate this practice, one is the experience of adults kneeling at the altar rail beside children, both holding up their hands to be fed with the same spiritual food and drink. Here adult and child are equals, and the adults receive a powerful reminder that they too are children before God.

Several well-known scriptural references to Jesus and children are frequently used by diocesan children's work advisers and other children's advocates to emphasise the important place that children should have in the Church. The most commonly cited is the scene in which Jesus places a child by his side at the centre of the adult disciples to settle a dispute about greatness in the kingdom of heaven[2]. John Pridmore, reflecting on this scene, wrote (CGMC, 1976, 17):

> Children are a gift to the Church. The Lord of the Church sets them in the midst of the Church, today as in Galilee, not as objects of benevolence, nor even as recipients of instruction, but in the last analysis as patterns of discipleship.

This reflection has become widely used in my professional network and draws together the assumptions outlined above: that adults sharing time with

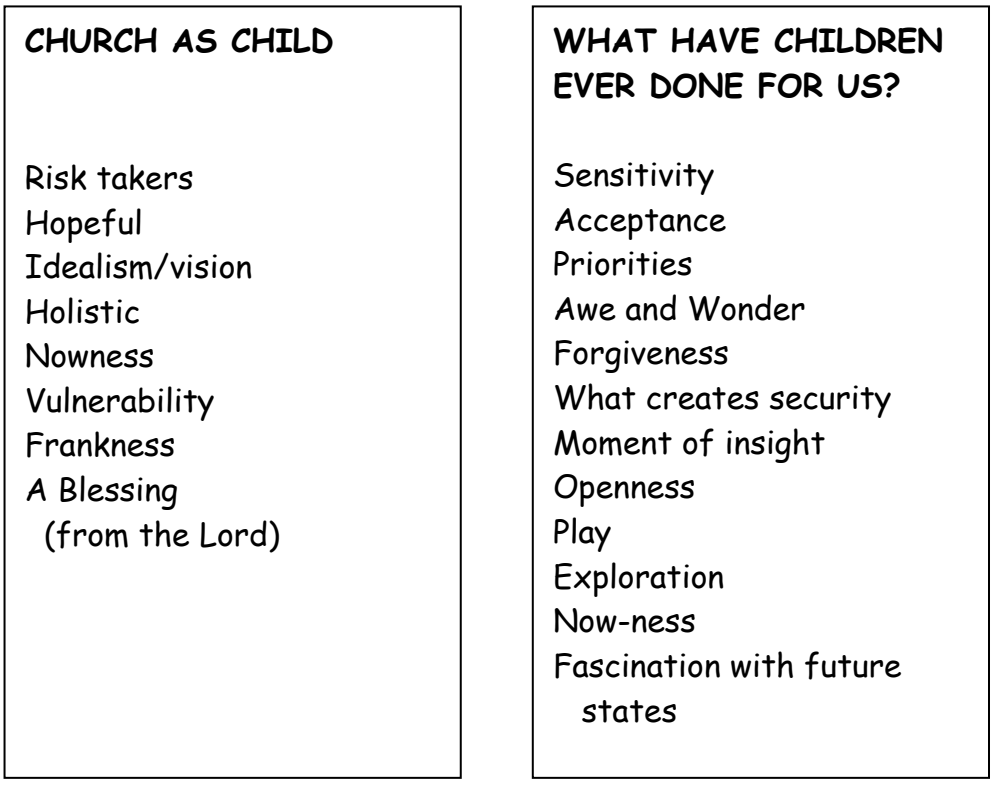
[1] I examined one implication of this in the publishable article element of my Part 1 portfolio (see Summary of Portfolio).
[2] Matthew 18: 1-5; Mark 9: 33-37; Luke 9: 46-48.

children can learn from, with and as their young companions, and be reminded that they themselves are children of a shared heavenly Father.

A question arises

These professional assumptions have led to a conviction that children are 'special' members of the Christian community. It could be argued, however, that such 'specialness' has been proclaimed uncritically by children's advocates. This matter was opened for debate in 2004 at a Northern Region gathering of Church of England children's work advisers that I attended. The group asked why children should be singled out as 'patterns of discipleship'. Why were they better patterns than faithful adults? In short, what was so special about children? The group collected suggestions on flip charts (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



On other sheets graphics were produced – for example circles with the words 'adult' and 'child' in the centre and arrows going in and out of the circles – which ultimately portrayed continuing uncertainty as to what differentiated the two stages. Although the words on the sheets were often

associated with children, none could be claimed as exclusive to them – clearly there are children who do not exhibit such characteristics, and there are adults who do. Indeed, Collicutt cites Galatians 5: 3, 4 and 12 as examples of Paul exhibiting a playfulness often associated with children (2009, 96-97).

Judith Sadler, then Children's Work Adviser for the Diocese of Newcastle, offered this reflection in an email sent after the gathering:

> It occurs to me that people at the extremes of life's journey might exhibit more *transparently* certain human characteristics that are sometimes less evident between times! Children and the elderly do not have a monopoly on these qualities, they simply tend to exhibit them more – maybe because the nature of their responsibilities is different?

This was the nearest we came to responding to the question about children's distinctiveness. But neither this nor the earlier discussion wholly satisfied me. It was clear that an important question for my profession had been raised but not answered.

Turning to literature

The literature review with which I began the portfolio of research into my professional context was concerned with approaches to children's spiritual nurture (see Summary of Portfolio). It concluded by considering the work of the *Child Theology Movement,* a group that bases its theological methodology on the gospel scenes of 'the child in the midst' of the disciples (see White and Willmer, 2006). This returned me to the unanswered question raised by the Northern Advisers regarding the 'specialness' of children and how they could provide 'patterns of discipleship'. It was this area that I therefore determined to investigate in my research project.

Writers on practice such as Van Ness might indicate that adults should expect to learn from children, but they do not give examples; and even an academic reference such as Allen's contribution to *Children's Spirituality* (2004, 270) is similarly lacking in detail, simply suggesting that in an inter-generational setting adults can "discover the blessings for adults and children who participate in each other's spiritual lives". And Hood, contributing to the same volume, only takes us a little further when she notes that, in the course

of exploring ideas about God held by kindergarten children, one of the mothers "was moved" by her daughter's insights (2004, 243). Practitioners writing on aspects of children's ministry may cite occasional instances of an anecdotal nature, such as Harris' examples of children illustrating their theological thinking by playing with soft toys or nativity figures – which, as an adult, she characterises as "profound and privileged moments with young children" (2009, 5). However, these do not amount to detailed investigations or a coherent body of evidence. Collicutt's observations on Paul's playfulness (2009, 96-97) are part of her reflection on preaching the word, prompted by children, within a recent collection of essays, *Through the Eyes of a Child* (Richards and Privett, 2009). This collection begins to explore adult responses to children in more detail; however, enquiries among my colleagues in the National Children's Work Advisers' Network did not produce any more extensive sources of evidence on which the profession could draw. This together with the inconclusive discussion among Northern Advisers on children's 'specialness' indicated that there remains a gap in knowledge within my professional field.

The experience of motherhood as spiritual awakening is treated briefly by Slee (2004, 125-126) as part of a much larger study on women's faith development; but it is far more likely that one will find an extended investigation of the effect of children on adults in secular, semi-medicalised literature such as *The Birth of a Mother: How the motherhood experience changes you forever* (Stern and Bruschweiler-Stern, 1998). Imaginative secular literature, from *Silas Marner* (Eliot, 1861) to *About a Boy* (Hornby, 1998), is replete with tales of positive adult transformation in the company of children; and contemporary 'misery lit', such as *A Child Called 'It'* (Pelzer, 1995) gives ample real-life examples of adult/child relationships that have had the opposite effect.

One major 20th century theologian has, however, made a significant if brief contribution, directly exploring the adult/child relationship. The influence of Karl Rahner's essay *Ideas for a Theology of Childhood* (1971) is demonstrated by the fact that it is cited by all the theologians Jerome Berryman identifies as contributors to 'today's conversation' in his *Children*

and the Theologians (Berryman, 2009a, 168-195). The essay has three sections. The first, *The Unsurpassable Value of Childhood,* as its title suggests, champions the value of childhood in its own right. Catholic 'natalism' tended to concentrate on the blessing of birth rather than the subsequent childhood (see Hinsdale, 2001, 412). Rahner redresses this emphasis but claims that it is insufficient to value the period after birth as a series of stages, each preparing for and disappearing into its successor (1971, 34). Instead, he celebrates the unique fruits of childhood as valuable in their own right, as persisting in our lives, and being carried into eternity (*ibid,* 35-36). In this sense, we move towards rather than away from our childhood. Hinsdale summarises his position thus: "The goal towards which we advance (eternal life) is not 'something added on' to this life. It is a gathering up of the *totality* of one's life, a gathering up in which one finds oneself" (2001, 422).

In his second section, *The Christian Awareness of Childhood,* Rahner reminds us that a child is fully human from the start: we do not grow into our humanity, but rather grow into the realization of what we already are (1971, 37). It is as receivers that Jesus holds children up as examples, not as innocents. For Rahner (*ibid*), this receptivity lies behind Jesus' remark that "of such is the kingdom of heaven"[3]. The features Rahner emphasises as distinctive of childhood are its openness and receptivity; ability to play; and the acceptance of greater powers and submission to their benevolent purposes (*ibid,* 42). We should seek to preserve these attributes into adulthood, he claims; and at the end of life we will finally understand the full significance of our childhood (*ibid,* 43).

In the final section, *The Fullness of Childhood Consists in Being Children of God,* Rahner develops his view that we move towards rather than away from childhood, and that the full significance of childhood is only apparent at the end of life. He does this by exploring the link between the human child/parent and the divine child/parent relationships, saying that one is not simply a metaphor for the other but that the latter is the fulfilment or perfection of the former (*ibid,* 48). He speaks of "the mature childhood of the

[3] Matthew 19: 14; Mark 10: 14; Luke 18: 16.

adult" (*ibid*) and claims that if we carry the spirit of childhood with us throughout life we will find God. For Rahner, this sheds light on Matthew 18: 3, which suggests that to become as a child is to enter the kingdom of heaven (*ibid*).

Rahner's essay may give a more sustained treatment of the issue in question. However, it is speculative with little reference to the concrete experiences of growing up, or raising children. Indeed he makes clear that the essay is not about practical advice (*ibid,* 33) and he acknowledges his metaphorical and theological use of the terms 'child' and 'childhood' in addition to their natural usage (*ibid,* 43). For this reason his contribution, though influential in promoting a theoretical importance for childhood, remains distanced from everyday experience. It is a 'theology of childhood' rather than a theological reflection on being with children.

The child as 'theological concept' rather than theologically potent experience is to be found again in Hans Urs von Balthasar's meditation *Unless You Become Like This Child* ([1988] 1991). He makes a link with Jesus as the "archetypical Child" who always "dwells" in the Father (*ibid,* 10) – a reading that could be said to offer Jesus as the supreme example of Rahner's "mature childhood". However von Balthasar was no more concerned than Rahner to ground his insights in specific human experience.

It is to Howard Worsley that we must turn for an experiential approach to the effect of children on adults within theology. Like Rahner he examines 'the child within the adult', but from a slightly different perspective. The focus for Worsley is not on 'mature childhood' but rather on 'the inner child'. His work is also distinguished from Rahner's in that it involves research with human participants and at least an inner experience of childhood. In his contribution to *Through the Eyes of a Child* (2009a, 264) he contends that children's voices:

> offer a way back into a more imaginative understanding of faith and the means for adults to grow up as they listen to them and reclaim a former simplicity. This paradox is that of Ricoeur's second naiveté: the mark of a fully integrated adult who can embrace their inner child as well as their previous childhood experiences.

He had earlier (2002a) characterised his view of the 'inner child' as a development of the 'free child' of Berne's 'Transactional Analysis' (see Harris, 1970) and discussed reclaiming this 'inner child' as a resource for faith development by regression, drawing on models taken from psychology and psychoanalysis. The significance of positive childhood experience, and the importance of engaging an individual's 'inner child' with the world in order to promote their adult faith development were also examined (2002b).

In addition to his work on the 'inner child' – a development of his doctoral research (2000) – Worsley has also reported on the direct experience of parents reading and discussing prescribed Bible stories with their children (2009b). However, over half the experiences described could be characterised as concerned with a 'parent as teacher – child as pupil' interaction in which the parent was most frequently concerned about the child's level of engagement with the material. The comments relating to the parents' more personal experience were often of a general nature, with few relating clearly to the adults' own faith development, and of those that did only two were a direct consequence of a child's insight. It is therefore hard to see the evidence presented as supporting the suggestion that adults had benefited significantly from children's insights.

Establishing the research question

In my quest for an answer to the question 'what makes children so special?' Rahner and von Balthasar only gave theoretical responses; and while Worsley provided some evidenced investigation of two specific ways in which adults can be influenced by children this was conducted in circumstances specially designed for research purposes. If an account of children's 'specialness' were to speak convincingly to the volunteers in parish children's ministry with whom I work, it would have to be more clearly grounded in ordinary experience. And rather than being gathered by probing specific possibilities through specially designed interfaces, evidence would be more powerful if it arose from reflection on the 'everyday' activities of an ordinary parish in which adults and children were regularly in each other's company with a broad agenda. The issue of children's scripturally indicated importance

for adults, exemplified in the everyday experience of the Christian community, therefore emerged as the conceptual framework of my study.

I discerned the need for a body of practical detail to support my work as an adviser, and also to contribute to knowledge within my professional network. To answer this need, I determined that I would explore the effects adults experienced from being with children in an ordinary context of Christian nurture. To avoid the outcome of my enquiry being influenced by the existing assumptions of my profession, I sought a research question that was not specific about the effects to be recorded and reflected upon. Not only did I hope that a variety of effects would emerge, but I also wanted to remain open to the possibility of negative effects or indeed a 'nil result' for children as 'patterns of discipleship'. The research question I therefore developed to achieve these ends was: *What personal effects do adult Christians experience when they explore the Christian faith in company with children?*

To pursue an enquiry into the 'specialness' of children, and to frame a research question in the above terms necessitates a distinction between 'child' and 'adult'. However, as the graphics produced by the Northern Advisers illustrated (page 5, above) such a distinction is problematic. The suggestion made by historian Philippe Ariès (1962) that childhood was a 17th century 'discovery' has subsequently been reappraised, but its legacy has been the lasting recognition that 'childhood' is a 'social construct' rather than a clearly definable absolute (see Carter, 2007, 3-5; Miller-McLemore, 2003, 2-3; Brooks, 2006, 5-6). Class, gender and culture combined with historical period will have their effect on how childhood is defined, and such definitions may well shed as much light on the society that makes them as on the overall issue of what distinguishes an adult from a child (see Brooks, 2006, 18).

A developmental approach might be seen as free from 'constructions'. However this is far from the case. The range of developmental factors is wide (see CGMC, 2006, 28-32) and though physical growth may be measurable, the measurement of development in other human attributes is dependent on constructed criteria (see White, 2008b, 38). Even physical growth is not a simple matter since the human body is in continual change throughout life and, some have suggested that compared to other primates, the human

species never reaches maturity (Asbridge, 2009, 6). Even if physical development can be measured, the point in the continuum at which 'child' becomes 'adult' is contestable and influenced by cultural interpretations. To regard the onset of puberty as a benchmark, for example, represents a cultural judgement regarding the significance of this event; and many 'adults' never attain reproductive capability or having done so, do not exercise it for a variety of reasons.

Other commonly used indicators of the change from 'child' to 'adult' are even more clearly dependent on context. Historically, a prominent marker has been the issue of economic rather than biological productivity. However, as Miller-McLemore outlines (2003, 2-6), in the passage from pre-modern to post-modern times younger members have moved from becoming contributors to the family economy from an early age to being economic burdens on it until significantly later in life. If financial dependence or independence is constructed as the benchmark of distinction between adults and children it is therefore not a constant; furthermore, without full employment in a society, some members would never become 'adult'.

A powerful influence in shifting the economic benchmark has been the introduction of labour laws (*ibid,* 4). These and other laws relating to age formalise a society's construction of what constitutes a child. Asbridge characterises them as largely concerning what individuals are permitted to do with and to their bodies, showing how the minimum ages differ across countries and times (2009, 2-3). The concept of an 'age of responsibility' is an important factor in setting legal benchmarks, but it also appears in contexts which do not have a formal, legal standing. The fact that some Christians identify an 'age of accountability' after which individuals are answerable to God for their beliefs (Bell, 2011, 4) is a reminder that faith, too, has its constructs, some of which are formalised in rites of passage, again variable across faiths and traditions.

Status as a member or even 'possession' of a family is a further indicator of 'childness' (Asbridge, 2009*,* 4-5; Carter, 2007, 25) – though not unequivocally so, in view of the variety of family structures and the number of young people without such membership. The role of parent invites a consideration of the adult's responsibility for the child and Miller-McLemore,

writing as a mother, maintains that although its nature is constantly open to re-examination this responsibility remains and entails an "obligation to oversee children's safety and development" (2003, 21). Williams expands the latter in terms of adult responsibility "for the nurture and induction into human society of new human subjects in process of formation" (2000, 31). The legal imposition of education represented the state as 'corporate adult' taking on this responsibility, and as well as removing the younger members of society from employment, provided another constructed definition of 'child' as a person in statutory education (see Asbridge, 2009, 15-16). Families are a combination of the statutory and voluntary – they have a legal responsibility for their children's education but they also have a voluntary role in 'inducting' their children into society, according to their views and values. In a religious context, this involves the ancient injunction to provide nurture in the faith (see Carter, 2007, 80-81).

If the adult/child distinction is accepted as a construct rather than an absolute, then any enquiry using these terms must place them in a context and clarify the criteria for their construction. In this study, the context is a professional one – that of my role as a Children's Ministry adviser in the Church of England. The forgoing snapshot indicates the variety of factors that can be used to construct adult/child distinctions and these are often combined as in the legal model, where age and specific activities are brought together. In my professional context, the criteria for constructing a distinction are a combination of age and the responsibilities for "safety and development" identified by Miller-McLemore (2003, 21). In terms of age, the Church of England uses the legal benchmark of 18 years for those authorised to take on formal adult responsibility for the safety of its children and their nurture in faith. My professional role is to advise those over 18 concerning such responsibilities to those under that age. For the purposes of this study, then, the distinction of 'adult' and 'child' combines the current legal definition concerning age with a responsibility for safety and nurture, and its constructed nature is acknowledged.

2. IDENTIFYING DATA SOURCES

In this section, data sources are introduced and the question of their theological relevance is raised. (A full description of data gathering and analysis procedures will be given in Chapter 2, and the theological significance of experience explored at length in Chapter 3).

Knowing by heart – primary data source

Edward Robinson, drawing on adults' recollections of childhood spiritual experiences, tells of one respondent who recalls standing up in church as a girl and taking issue with the view of God expounded by the preacher because it did not accord with her own experience (1977, 101). And Ellen Clark-King (2004), comparing feminist academics with working-class church-going women, finds that both groups cherish images of God that arise from their experience. As a result, she acknowledges a need for "the acceptance that our own spirituality is limited by our own particular experiences and understanding" (*ibid,* 87).

Clark-King's use of the word 'limited' implies a negativity, but one might equally say that our experiences and understanding make our spirituality real to us. An important part of my own spiritual experience has been a long association with the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and a 'Quakerly' approach informs my research methodology and methods. The founder of the Society, George Fox, sought validity for his beliefs in his own spiritual experience (see Religious Society of Friends, 1995, 19.02); and when I began attending Quaker meetings for worship I did so, after a period of personal 'seeking after truth', in a similar spirit – although my view of what constitutes religious or spiritual experience was more mundane than Fox's (see Chapter 3). Having grown up in the Church and learned its stories and doctrines, I left for university unsure what, if any of it, I believed and determined not to be constrained in my seeking by the requirements of any formal religious body. My attendance at Quaker meeting, after ten years of this 'solo seeking' was strictly on the basis that I would believe nothing that I did not feel in the experience of my heart to be true. This is an approach that I have maintained ever since.

I understand experience as internal, subjective sense-making that may be evoked by external events but is not those events nor even an objective representation of them, since human perceptive is always from a point of view (Collicutt, 2008, 92). I also accept Clark-King's *caveat* that in the light of postmodernism "experience is no longer understood as something the subject has direct and unencumbered access to, but as something that is always already qualified by the subject's view of him or herself and the world" (2004, 17). Nonetheless, my experience, thus understood, remains the foundation of my claim to know anything to be true. Intellectually, I can accept an abstract argument is true in logic; sympathetically, I can believe that an account is true in another's experience; but ultimately I can only say I *know* something to be true if I have experienced it for myself. With Hay (1987, 213) I would regard it as "living the greatest of all lies" to be coerced by the expectations of a religious institution into acceptance of "something that does not correspond with the truth of our personal experience."

The unanswered question about children's 'specialness' was one to which I wanted answers I could believe in wholeheartedly. As a professional I need that degree of conviction if I am to speak with integrity. And so, when considering where to look for data with which to explore my research question I knew that, in the first instance at least, I could only be satisfied with the evidence of my own experience. At the same time I was considering how best to gain concentrated experience of working with children, the church where I am an assistant priest was planning a new group for young people. With the agreement of the rest of the ministry team, the Parochial Church Council (PCC), and the parents and children concerned, I helped form this group – which became known as the *Weavers* – and my personal experience of involvement in it became my primary data source.

Knowing by resonance – secondary data source

I was, however, concerned to obtain views from other adults involved in the nurture of children, principally to place my experience in a wider context so that it could either be supported or challenged. The Quaker way is to share insights, concerns and leadings with the gathered meeting to 'test' them by providing spiritual triangulation. Experience is thereby seen as foundational

but not beyond challenge, and this was the way I wished to view my own experience in the parish group. I therefore asked the other three adults involved in the group to be co-researchers, gathering their own reflections and sharing them with me. After a full briefing on the project, they all agreed to this.

Another reason for seeking the experience of other adults was that the parish situation from which I was drawing information was limited by being exclusively white; mostly middle-class; working with a restricted age range of children; and set in a comfortable, rural church with a 'middle of the road' theology. Indeed, the fact that it was parish based was itself a limitation. I therefore decided to seek information from a small number of adults involved in the nurture of children in settings that would contrast with that of my parish group, and with a broader age range. The practical limits of my project meant that the sample would be too small to provide a comprehensive picture, but it would constitute a "purposive sample" (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, 45) indicating whether my experience and that of the other adults involved in the parish group was echoed in diverse settings, as well as "demonstrat[ing] some interesting and varied responses" (Gibbs, 2007, 100).

The settings I explored were:

- A multi-generational family, in which grandparents (in their 60s) were in close daily contact with their adult children and grandchildren, often acting as carers for the latter. All three generations were involved in a suburban United Reformed Church and its Junior Church.
- An Anglican priest in her 40s, serving an urban parish, who is also a childminder, mother, and former Sunday School teacher.
- Grandparents, in their 70s – the husband, a former Scripture Union children's evangelist; the wife a long-time Sunday School teacher – who for a number of years had run 'houseparty' weekends for their grandchildren exploring the Christian faith together.

- A member of an Eden Network team, in his 20s, working with young people in a multi-cultural area of urban deprivation.
- Two Sunday School teachers (female in her 40s and male in his 50s) from an inner city Pentecostal congregation of predominantly Caribbean heritage.
- A teacher and RE coordinator in her 50s in an urban Church of England school with 94% Muslim children.

Experiential data and theology

Although by referring simply to 'effects' I was broad in framing my research question, my investigation was theological in origin and the question was designed to provide a response to a theological concern. It was therefore necessary to establish links between the experience-based data sources and a theological approach related to the specific area of my investigation – the relationship between adults and children.

Marcia Bunge's work in editing *The Child in Christian Thought* (2001) has provided a widely used and respected reference point for all those investigating the range of theological voices dealing with children. Indeed, Jerome Berryman, in his more recent *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the way for Grace* (2009a), acknowledges his debt to her for his choice of theologians. From key voices identified by Bunge and Berryman, I selected Friedrich Schleiermacher and Bonnie Miller-McLemore as indicative of the possible relationship between experience and theology in my field of study. Not only do they write theologically about the adult/child interface but in different ways they also demonstrate links between personal experience and theology.

In addition to these specific voices, as analysis of my data proceeded I identified a particular approach in Practical Theology with which my developing thinking resonated. This was the 'Ordinary Theology' proposed by Jeff Astley (2002, and (with Ann Christie), 2007), of which I took Clark-King's *Theology by Heart: Women, the Church and God* (2004) as an example. My developing analysis suggested that the adult/child interface might provide a resource for theological reflection outside the academy and Astley

characterises Ordinary Theology as a way to "take seriously the beliefs of 'non-theologically educated' churchgoers and other Christian believers and of those outside the churches" (2002, viii).

The connections between theology and experience are explored in detail, with reference to the above writers, in Chapter 3.

3. THESIS STRUCTURE

In this section, the structure of the thesis is given.

Chapters 2 and 3 complete the introduction and preparations for the research, which is the subject of Part 1 of the thesis.

Part 2 contains an interpretation of my data in relation to the research question identified in the current chapter. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of my personal *Weavers* group data, leading to the suggestion that the effects experienced by adults in the company of children are not uniform but a reflection of the individuals involved. The chapter relates the personal effects I experienced as part of the *Weavers* to aspects of my personality and background, and describes a process by which this material was developed into a personal theological reflection.

The following two chapters explore further the relationship between the individuality of the adults concerned and the effects they record from their interfaces with children. Chapter 5 analyses and contrasts the experiences of all four *Weavers* adults, showing that they had different perspectives on the same events and establishing some common themes. The experiences of the individuals who participated in the six interviews I conducted in different nurture settings are analysed in Chapter 6 by relating them to the common themes of Chapter 5. This material extends the reflection arising from encounters with children and also suggests its theological potential. Taken together, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 show not only that adults sharing time with children experience varied effects, but also that a revealing light can thereby be shed on the individual adult, producing theologically significant insights.

Part 3 of the thesis considers the implications of the findings in Part 2. The possibility that personal reflection arising from spending time with children could make a contribution to theology is tested and the application of the research findings considered. The argument returns to the 'specialness' of children and locates one aspect of this in their vulnerability and the relationship it creates with adults. The thesis concludes by turning back to my professional context and assessing the implications of my findings for the advocacy of children's importance in the life of the Church.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted the professional assumption held by those involved in the Church's ministry among children that children have qualities from which adults can benefit. It has noted the lack of experience-based clarity regarding the 'specialness' in children that might cause this effect. The motivating 'quest' of the research project has been identified as the search for such clarity – a search that will contribute to knowledge in the professional field by providing new understandings of this issue, and identifying new areas for investigation (see Trafford and Leshem, 2008, 16-17).

In order to set an initial direction for the exploration, a research question has been proposed:

> *What personal effects do adult Christians experience when they explore the Christian faith in company with children?*

The territory in which the exploration will take place has been defined by the chosen data sources: the researcher's personal experience of an inter-generational group; the experiences of other adults in the group; and the experiences of adults relating to children in a variety of other nurture situations.

A geographic exploration can be mapped according to a variety of criteria – physical, political, economic, demographic. The ‘mapping’ criteria for this exploration of the adult/child interface have been identified as theological – specifically the kind of theology shaped by everyday experience.

The structure of the thesis that documents this exploration, its findings and their significance has been outlined.

The scene has now been set, and in the following two chapters the story of the research moves from the drawing board to the practicalities of equipping and undertaking the expedition. In Chapters 2 and 3 the necessary resources will be gathered. They will be assessed to determine whether they are suitable and reliable, and finally they will be tested in the field.

CHAPTER TWO
EQUIPPING THE EXPEDITION

> Do you consider difficult questions with an informed mind as well as a generous and loving spirit?
>
> Advices and Queries, No15
> Religious Society of Friends

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

The story now moves from planning to action. This chapter describes the collection of tools for the research task ahead. In the 'shopping mall' of the academy, I visit the Practical Theology 'store' and look in its methodology 'departments' for a suitable set of methods to use in my expedition. As I assess the options on offer I consider the requirements of my project and the kind of tools others have used in similar circumstances. I also note the ethics issues involved.

The second section of the chapter brings the tools together with the materials. It describes in detail the two areas of investigation – the *Weavers* group and the interviews – and explains how my chosen research tools were used to collect and analyse data from them.

1. DISCIPLINE, METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This section will locate the study within an academic discipline and research methodology, then give details of the methods used.

Discipline

This study is offered as a contribution to the discipline of Practical Theology. Ruard Ganzevoort, in his presidential address to the International Academy of Practical Theology (2009), gave an overview of the field, which I will use to place my study within this discipline.

Ganzevoort suggests that the common ground of Practical Theology is "the hermeneutics of lived religion". Religion he defines as "the relation with the sacred" and hermeneutics as the attempt to understand that encounter. My study explores a particular aspect of experience – the adult/child interface – and how it can be seen as part of humanity's relationship with the divine. I interpret "lived religion" as including not only experience immediately recognised as religious, but also experience subsequently understood in that light (see Chapter 3). With this gloss, my study reflects Ganzevoort's description of Practical Theology as it is clearly 'lived' (based on experience), 'religious' (viewing that experience in the context of human/divine relationship), and 'hermeneutic' (seeking to understand how human experience can illuminate relationship with the divine).

Ganzevoort accounts for Practical Theology's diversity by proposing four "forks in the road" taken by practical theologians while "tracing the sacred". These forks occur when choices are made regarding the **object** and **method** of study, the role of the **researcher**, and the study's **audience**. My research can be located more clearly within Ganzevoort's description by noting its relationship to these 'forks'.

Of the **objects** for study he suggests, my research relates to 'culture', as it examines an aspect of experience that has cultural importance and interprets it in religious terms; and also 'society' since my findings (Chapter 7) have social implications. Of Ganzevoort's choices regarding **method** my study uses "praxis [as] the source of inductive practical theology". Ganzevoort employs sports analogies for the roles of the **researcher**. Of these, I have taken the role of 'player' – 'engaged' with the activity under examination. The choice of **audience**, Ganzevoort sees as a matter of 'inclination' towards 'academy', 'church' or 'society'. My 'inclination' is to 'church' – as that is my professional context – but this thesis is addressed to an academic audience, and also there are social links.

Methodology

The methodological foundations for my study derive from its academic discipline (see above); the nature of its research question (Chapter 1); and its experiential epistemology and consequent sources of data (*ibid*).

Since my research contributes to Practical Theology, it is placed "within the **interpretative** paradigm, identified by Swinton and Mowat (2006, 76) as the area of methodology in which Practical Theology is located" (Research Proposal – see Summary of Portfolio). It is **qualitative** since: it proposes an open research question and so seeks emergent theory, rather than tests a hypothesis; it uses a small sample (see Cryer 2000, 78); and it employs "the 'human-as-instrument' for the collection and analysis of data" (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, 26). My concern to 'ground' knowing in the reality of my experience also commends the methodology of **grounded theory** (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 25). In view of the personal nature of the primary data and investigation, **autoethnography** provides a further methodological point of reference (see Ellis, 2004 and Etherington, 2004, 140).

Methods

The methods chosen were determined by the requirements, limitations and ethos of the project; and by the background and aptitudes of the researcher. They reflect common practices in the relevant fields.

Requirements of my project

To collect my own experience as part of the *Weavers* suggested **participant observation** as a method (see Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, 69-70). **Journaling** is an important part of my Quaker and wider Christian heritage. It is also an important feature of the reflexive practice, central to the recording of my observations (see Etherington, 2004, 127-129). I therefore elected to keep a journal reflecting on my experience as an observing participant during the first two years of the *Weavers* meetings. This record is my primary data. It is not seen as definitive of the effects children have on adults but as indicative of how adults can be affected.

The **creative writing** practices associated with autoethnography (Ellis, 2004, 169-180 and Richardson, 2003) offered a way of utilising my skills as a published novelist in making an experience 'real' to the reader. I used a story-writing approach in presenting the experience of the *Weavers* (Chapter 4) since readers would be better able to understand my subsequent analysis,

both affectively and cognitively, if they could share my experience of the group. I also used creative writing approaches in my theological reflection on the journal, in one case as a means of generating further data for personal exploration and in another a means of 'convening' a conversation between different perspectives: both time-honoured investigative uses of the imagination.

The natural method of sharing experiences with the other adult *Weavers* was through conversation after sessions. A formal development of this was therefore used to gather reflective material from my co-researchers. One term into the second year of the *Weavers*, a **group interview** was held with all the adult members, including myself, contributing to interactive discussion (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, 103). This was **unstructured** to give opportunities for the emergence of a broad range of issues, determined by my co-researchers as much as by myself (May, 1997, 112).

My project's parameters in time and scale dictated a more restricted method of collecting further secondary data. I therefore conducted a limited number of **in-depth interviews** (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, 66). These were **semi-structured** using a guide rather than a schedule, allowing me to probe for clarification (May, 1997, 111) and the interview to follow emerging areas of interest.

Figure 2

Summary of methodology and data collection methods

Methodology

Qualitative, drawing on Grounded Theory and Autoethnography, within the interpretative paradigm

Primary data source collection

- Participant observation
- Journaling
- Creative writing

Secondary data source collection

- 1 x group conversation-style interview (unstructured)
- 6 x in-depth interviews (semi-structured)

Ethics

As the research concerned effects experienced by adults, children were not its subjects. Nevertheless, informed consent to participation was sought from the children involved in the *Weavers* and their parents/carers, as well as from the adults involved in the group and the in-depth interviews. Only individuals from whom consent had been obtained were mentioned in analyses, and all such references were pseudonymous. A risk assessment for all aspects of the project was conducted and appropriate action taken. The Parochial Church Council gave consent to the use of *Weavers* for research. A full statement on ethics was made in the Research Proposal included in Part 1 of my portfolio (see Summary of Portfolio). This was submitted to the appropriate University Research Ethics Committee and received approval.

Cross-reference to the field

Practical Theology

The suitability of the methods chosen was confirmed by reference to the work of other practical theologians. Features of my study to be found in their work are shown in bold type, below.

Of the models of theological reflection described by Graham, Walton and Ward in their comprehensive collection (2005, 2007), the one to which my research most clearly relates is 'Theology By Heart – The Living Human Document' (for further detail, see Chapter 4). In offering methods for this model the authors note the use of **journaling** for spiritual investigation and the role of **intuition** in identifying matters of special significance (2005, 31-33). They also introduce **creative writing** as a means of fostering increased awareness (*ibid*, 39-41; see also Richardson, 2003, in the context of writing as research). Autoethnography indicates the appropriateness of using **autobiographical** material in social science research – 'Theology by Heart' gives it a prominent place within the theological reflection associated with Practical Theology.

Ordinary Theology provides a specific example of Practical Theology to which my project relates through its examination of personal beliefs. Astley

claims "**Ethnographic** research is particularly relevant to the study of ordinary theology in that it presents religions as they are perceived and lived by their adherents, rather than as abstract systems of beliefs" (2002, 113). In pursuing such research he advocates **participant observation** together with **unstructured** or **semi-structured interviews** as the best ways of providing the descriptions and understandings required for Ordinary Theology, reserving quantitative approaches for use with larger samples or in hypothesis testing – neither of which is the purpose of my study (*ibid*, 98). He also notes that a questionnaire approach presents difficulties arising from differing interpretations of questions (*ibid*, 101; see also 2007, 8). Astley is wary of defining a research question too early (*ibid*, 99) and notes the role of **grounded theory** in allowing the question to be adapted as analysis proceeds (*ibid*, 100) – a feature that matched my need to move from a broad opening question to a focus developed in response to emerging findings.

Clark-King (2004 – see Chapter 3, below) whose work contrasts the beliefs of 'ordinary' Christians with those of academics, relates her **personal background** to her study in the interests of **reflexivity** (*ibid,* 6-7). She uses **semi-structured** interviews to allow flexibility, conducted **in participants' homes** to minimise power differentials (*ibid,* 9-10). Her emphasis is on listening to human **experience** to access divine revelation (14-15). In exploring the faith development of women, Slee (2004 – also a point of reference in Chapter 3) begins by locating her study in her **personal and professional context** (*ibid,* 2-3) and espouses a **qualitative** methodology, (*ibid,* 8). She used an "open ended, loosely focused, **semi-structured interview**" which took place in the **home setting** (*ibid,* 54).

Children's Ministry

My professional field, Children's Ministry, has its own research literature. This is focused on investigations with children, while my study concerns adults. Nonetheless, I referred to this literature for confirmation of my methods. I considered this justified since: some of the literature concerns faith development across the whole age range; some of the writers have worked with adults, and draw their approaches from researching them (Hay with Nye, 1998, 86); and the ethos of my Part 1 portfolio was to link children and adults,

and the approaches used with both groups. In addition to surveying approaches drawn from my Literature Review (see Summary of Portfolio), the majority of which come from the last century, I sought 21st century examples by reference to *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications* (Ratcliff, 2004). This collection is mostly adapted from presentations at a major conference held in Chicago in 2003 to examine "the research and theory of children's characteristics, growth and experiences of a spiritual nature … from a wide variety of theological and denominational backgrounds" (*ibid,* 8). The section entitled 'Definitions, Theologies, Theories and Methods of Research' provided a representative selection of recent approaches.

The key characteristics of my study to be found in my survey of methods used in the field of children's spirituality are shown in bold type, below.

The overwhelming majority of the examples I reviewed were representative of **qualitative methodology**. For many of the 'key voices' in my Literature Review, **interviews** were an important source of data and were generally **semi-structured** or of an **unstructured** conversational nature rather than the standardised interview approach adopted by Ronald Goldman (1964, 36, 39), or the detailed interview guide used by James Fowler ([1981] 1995, 310-312). A key objection to such tightly controlled approaches is exemplified by Slee's observation (1986, 90) that Goldman's specific research concern with developmental thinking influenced the interview questions, which presupposed certain kinds of answer. **Conversation** was central to Nye's research method in *The Spirit of The Child* (Hay with Nye, 1998, 83); and her analysis of the material generated used **grounded theory** (*ibid,* 113). In an area such as spirituality, where definition is problematic, she finds this approach particularly helpful (Nye, 2004, 105 and 106).

Stories recounting **experience** provided material for comment and analysis. Robinson's *The Original Vision* grew from responses to a public appeal for stories of experiences in which they had been affected by "some power greater than themselves" (1977, 11). And vignettes of congregational life were used by Westerhoff to exemplify his thoughts on 'Hope for the

Future' ([1976] 2000, 105-125). He also considered it important to give his **biography** in some detail (*ibid,* xv). Berryman, one of the most notable current examples of the reflective practitioner in the field of children's ministry, also includes his own story in writing about his work. His influential *Godly Play: An imaginative approach to Religious Education* ([1991] 1995), demonstrates an approach to research that might be described as **participant observation**, and makes strong use of **narrative** in presenting evidence.

Turning to *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications* (Ratcliff, 2004), Boyatzis and Newman's brief survey of a number of studies in children's spirituality points to the importance of a multi-method approach in exploring such a complex subject. **Variety in data** types, collection methods and approaches to analysis is advocated (2004, 166). Examples of data collection approaches given include: **conversations**, **discussion**, **semi-structured interviews**, (*ibid*, 168-170); and **participant observation** (*ibid*, 175-176). Also noted are the need for **active participation** on the part of those contributing to the research, and a sense of trust in and rapport with an interviewer (*ibid*, 169 and 170).

The above cross-reference to areas of research related to my project confirms that my chosen methods are representative of those commonly used for its intended purposes.

2. THE PROJECT IN ACTION

In this section, the primary and secondary sources of data will be described in detail, together with the processes used in collecting the two sets of data and the procedures employed in their analysis.

Primary data source: multi-generational group – 'The Weavers'

The group aims, ethos and operation

My aim in making the multi-generational parish group[4] my primary source of data was to enable me, and the other adult co-researchers, to have as full an experience as possible of 'the company of children'. In order to have this full experience, I paid careful attention to the ethos of the group. Sunny Tan, of *The Child Theology Movement* speaks of the need to encounter children "as they are" in order for them to exert a theological influence (2007, 13). In the light of this claim, and following my own intuition, I promoted a group ethos in which adult members would exert as little influence as possible. This would enable the children to 'be themselves' and also distance the adults from the quasi-professional teacher/pupil concerns that featured in Worsley's study (2009b).

A key feature of the *Weavers* group, therefore, was an egalitarian approach in which the adult members were not seen as leaders of a group for young people but as fellow members of an all-age group. This entailed shared decision-making regarding the format of activities, the topics to be addressed and the methods of exploration. I aimed to progress from adult-initiated activity to a balance with activity initiated by children (see Miller, 2003, 7). At the first meeting the group was invited to choose its own name and a young member chose *Weavers,* deriving from a visual image that one of the adults had provided to represent the group and its ethos – a wicker pyramidal frame in which each member wove a strip of cloth to signify their participation.

The sessions ran from 6.00pm to 7.30pm, roughly fortnightly excluding school holidays, and were generally held at the vicarage. There were 29 meetings during the two years I was gathering data. Within the first few meetings a general method of operation was established which continued throughout the research and beyond. The adults took a lead in raising practical issues that needed addressing, but decisions emerged by

[4] Originally comprising six children and four adults.

negotiation and consensus. The sessions began with a game, chosen by a young member. At a halfway point there was a refreshment break, the snacks being provided by members, either younger or older. Towards the end, volunteers to decide on the game and provide the snack for the next session were agreed. The sessions concluded with everyone holding hands in a circle and saying The Grace.

The subject matter to be covered by the group arose from an early session at which James[5], the vicar, asked group members to write down single words or phrases to express 'what Church means to me'. Over the next year the group used the results as topics for sessions. Having chosen a topic, the group would brainstorm aspects of it, which would be collected on a flipchart sheet. The group would then divide into four, with one adult in each subgroup. If one of the adults was absent, the oldest of the younger members – Emma, a young teenager – would deputise. Each subgroup would choose an aspect of the overall topic and explore it in detail, deciding how to present their findings to the whole group at the next meeting. The rhythm of the group therefore settled into a two-session cycle – a 'planning' session, then a 'presentation' session.

It can be seen from this sketch that the adults maintained a form of leadership role, in that each sub-group usually contained one adult. This was originally done, at my suggestion, to ensure that each sub-group was multi-generational, but it was also seen as providing someone who would keep each sub-group on task and ensure a result. However, on the occasions when a sub-group was composed entirely of younger members, the tasks were performed well. The major problem in terms of younger members taking a lead was that as *Weavers* met every fortnight, by the time we came to the 'presentation' they had often forgotten what they had agreed to do or bring, or were prevented from attending. In such circumstances, the adult member of the sub-group would recap or redesign what had been agreed. However, it should be noted that adult members also sometimes forgot what had been decided and what they had agreed to do.

[5] All names of *Weavers*, apart from the researcher's, are pseudonyms.

During the course of the first year of the *Weavers* a reflective resource for use with young people was introduced[6]. Use of the resource was sporadic, but sometimes provided a young member with a pre-planned activity they could lead. When a new intake of youngsters joined the group in its second year, use of the resource was relaunched in a more consistent way.

The aim of moving to a leadership predominantly coming from younger members was not fully met over the research period. However, the young *Weavers* made a significant contribution to the way the group worked and the positive atmosphere that developed; and they valued sharing in decision-making. *Weavers* has proved to be very popular and has established itself as a part of parish life that Junior Church members look forward to joining when they are old enough. A lower age limit of 8-9 years old was operated, and Emma stopped attending at about 15-16 years of age. At the close of the research period, there were ten young members of the group alongside the four adults.

The one area in which the question of leadership was most problematic was behaviour management. At the outset my aim was to allow the young people, as far as was safe, to establish their own order and self-discipline. The behaviour of the young people was never seriously problematic or dangerous, but 'low level disruption' to group activities was an ongoing frustration. Consequently, as the project progressed, I reassessed the importance of adult non-intervention to the aim of 'experiencing the children's company'. Early in the second year I suggested we hold a session to establish a 'code of practice' for the group. In accordance with the *Weavers* ethos, this was developed as a shared enterprise, rather than imposed. The 'code' was based on the commandment to love our neighbours as ourselves, and subsequently the adults drew group members' attention to it when necessary.

[6] *Roots, Together, Further: Getting to know God* (SGM Lifewords, 2006).

Method of recording reflections on the *Weavers* – the journal

I kept a hand-written journal in an A5 notebook, which over the two years provided 116 pages of text. My records generally accorded with the advice given by a group of Jennifer Moon's students in terms of being personal, informal, attempting to be honest and 'dig deeper', being flexible, selective, and written as soon as possible after a session or event (Moon, [1999] 2002*,* 85-86). The journal contains descriptive material, detailing 'what we did' session by session in order to give context, but the heart of the document is a record of the personal effects I experienced as a *Weaver*. This concentrates on my emotional responses, but also includes any new insights – Christian, or general – gained either directly or indirectly from the sessions. Occasionally connections with my reading or other external sources were included, together with reflections from my professional life where these were directly evoked by the *Weavers* experience. I also included a small number of references to feelings evoked by encounters with *Weavers* outside the context of group sessions. Reflections by adult *Weavers*, shared during or after the sessions, were also included, together with my own responses to working with the other adults in the context of the *Weavers*.

A key element of my reflective process was not to review earlier journal entries, nor even recall and make connections with earlier events and thoughts – although the latter is to some extent unavoidable as a natural part of reflection. I placed such restrictions on myself to avoid any influence that a premature emergence of themes might have on the personal effects I was recording. I wanted to keep 'what I'm looking for' as open as possible until I began the formal process of analysis.

Secondary data source: the interviews

One group conversation-style interview took place involving myself and the other three adult *Weavers.* In addition, six interviews were conducted with adults nurturing children in contrasting circumstances, involving a total of nine individuals. In addition to myself, 12 other adult voices therefore contributed to my investigation.

A good rapport with interviewees can facilitate the collection of data (Ball, 1993, 39) and give interviewees the confidence to speak as candidly as possible (May, 1997, 118-119). With this in mind, three of the six interviews were conducted with people I already knew. The multi-generational family and the childminder were long-standing friends, and I had established a rapport with the husband of the 'houseparty' couple at a conference. The other three interviews were all with people to whom I was introduced by mutual acquaintances. In order to enhance a relaxed atmosphere, to shift the power as much as possible towards the interviewees, and to minimise any distortions caused by an unfamiliar environment the interviews were conducted on the interviewees' 'home territory' – either in their home setting, or their work environment (Ball, 1993, 38).

The other adult *Weavers* were ministerial colleagues and long-standing friends. The group interview with them was unstructured, to facilitate the contribution of unexpected perspectives (Fielding and Thomas, 2001, 142). I began by asking what effects the experience of being a member of *Weavers* had had, and let the conversation take its own course from there (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, 81-83). The six interviews in other contexts were semi-structured, making use of an interview guide but allowing for probe questions to seek clarification and elaboration (May, 1997, 111), and also to allow me to take the interview into any newly emerging areas of interest (Roberts-Holmes, 2005, 110). To foster a sense of informality the questions were not scripted, but the following areas were covered:

- What the interviewees valued in children's company
- Whether there were any surprises in the experience
- What things had been challenging
- Whether spending time with children changed the interviewees
- Any new thoughts, insights or perspectives resulting from the experience
- Thoughts on sharing the Christian faith with children, and any impact on the adult's faith of being with children.

The interview procedure varied depending on the circumstances and developed in the light of experience. Extra questions were added for specific situations, and in later interviews, I asked for details of age, background, theological leanings and the context of the children's work. All the interviews lasted about 80 minutes, were recorded on mini-discs, and were transcribed as soon as possible after the event. They were transcribed in full to promote the beginning of analytic thought, and also due to the small size of the sample (Fielding and Thomas, 2001, 135).

Data analysis

The *Weavers* journal

The first entries were written almost two years before I began the analysis. As I had deliberately not reviewed earlier sections while keeping the journal (see above), I began by reading the complete journal, both to reacquaint myself with its content and to start seeing it as a whole. I then began to analyse. As my project aimed to generate theory rather than test a hypothesis, I required a procedure to "code up" from the data, rather than "code down" using categories derived from a pre-existing theory (Fielding, 2001, 236). I therefore based my procedure on the version of the 'Constant Comparative Method' derived from Lincoln and Guba (1985) by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, 134-144), since this provided a well-tried model for such inductive analysis and is often associated with the grounded theory that forms part of the methodological background to my project (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 62).

I worked through the journal in detail, identifying 'units of meaning' (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994*,* 129) and grouping them in provisional categories (*ibid,* 136). I developed a 'rule for inclusion' for each category, framed as a propositional statement (*ibid*, 139). Material within categories was also arranged into subcategories. As the provisional categories and subcategories stabilised, I reviewed the category rules for inclusion, rewriting them and sometimes reallocating units as a result. I also wrote rules for inclusion for the subcategories. My approach to grouping units of meaning in categories according to 'feel' and subsequently developing rules to define the

categories is a version of 'open coding' and was adopted as a way of allowing the data to drive the eventual theory, rather than producing a 'code book' before going to the data (Gibbs, 2007, 44-46). This approach is consonant with grounded theory (*ibid,* 50).

Although I did not follow grounded theory procedure in establishing a causal relationship between the categories, the final phases of my procedure echoed elements of Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach: 'axial coding', in which I established relational connections between my categories (1990, 96); and 'selective coding' whereby I established a 'core category' to which all others relate (*ibid,* 116). To achieve the relationship between categories, I developed a 'hierarchy' (following Gibbs, 2007, 73-74). This hierarchy and the propositional 'rules for inclusion' that supported each of its categories provided the basis for the reflection on and interpretation of my experience as an adult member of the *Weavers* given in Chapter 4.

I kept a diary of the analysis process, and this proved helpful in charting the development of my thinking and pinpointing particular moments of insight.

Figure 3

Summary of journal analysis process

Stage 1 – Identify 'units of meaning' in the journal text

Stage 2 – Highlight summarising phrase(s) in each unit

Stage 3 – Produce analysis structure:

- assign units to subcategories and categories
- develop rules for inclusion
- relate categories to each other
- relate all categories to core category

Stage 4 – Present analysis (illustrations and commentary)

See Appendix (page 155) for worked examples of this process.

The interviews

I transcribed each recording myself, both to preserve confidentiality and also to enhance my familiarity with the material and begin the reflective process. About 300 pages of material were produced. In the transcript all paralinguistic features were preserved. However, for ease of reading I 'tidied up' any quotations in the thesis, removing hesitations, stutters and false starts that did not contribute to meaning, but retaining colloquial grammar (Gibbs, 2007, 14; Slee, 2004, 57). All proper names were changed. I checked each transcription back against the recording and indicated any uncertain or unintelligible passages. I summarised each transcription, and if there was more than one contributor to the interview, I produced independent summaries of each individual's contribution with additional contextual information where this was necessary to preserve the sense.

I had completed my journal analysis and interpretation before I began work on the interviews and so my journal findings were an unavoidable background to the analysis of the interviews. Nevertheless, I sought to interpret each interview independently of other findings. The separate points made by interview participants and listed in the interview summaries were used as 'units of meaning'. However, informed by the procedures of Narrative Analysis (see Riessman, 1993, 2008; Earthy and Cronin, 2008), I was concerned not to distort data by taking it out of context and frequently referred back to the full texts of interviews and to the complete summaries, to interpret these 'units' within the flow of conversation. As I was dealing with a much smaller quantity of data in each interview than in my *Weavers* journal, the units were analysed using a slightly abridged version of the procedure I employed with the journal to produce a hierarchy and rules for category inclusion. The hierarchy and rules were used to produce a written interpretation of each interview.

To complete the process I re-contacted the interviewees and invited them to meet me again and comment on my analysis, thus providing "respondent validation" (Gibbs, 2007, 95). Prior to this meeting, the interviewees were sent the summary of the interview and my interpretation. They were also offered a full transcript. All the interviewees endorsed my

interpretations. Two wished to clarify quotations, conceding that the words had been said but expressing concern that they misrepresented their true sentiments. I included these clarifications in the record. One interviewee corrected a mistaken assumption on my part, and another wished for some details to be omitted to preserve anonymity: I amended the record accordingly. By the time I revisited the interviewees, the development of the thinking behind my thesis was well advanced and I shared the main points with them, inviting comment. They all supported the direction of my thought and many were enthusiastic and interested.

My analysis of the *Weavers* group conversation followed the pattern outlined above to provide an interpretation of each individual's contribution. However, in view of the finding emerging from my journal analysis that personal factors influenced my experiences of children, I made use of the opportunity to compare four individuals' reflections on the same events by also producing a "cell table" (Gibbs, 2007, 78-86). I identified three sequential themes in the conversation and represented them by three rows in the table. I then entered the four participants' contributions to these themes in individual columns. Reading along the rows, it was therefore possible to compare the four contributions to each theme.

The adult *Weavers* were also offered the opportunity to read and comment on my analyses of their contributions. One questioned the accuracy of an assessment I had made of her, and I accepted her comments since they portrayed her less positively than I had done and were clearly made in the interests of veracity. They did not materially affect the overall analysis. I shared the general outline of my thesis with the adult *Weavers* and they too endorsed my thinking. I also asked them to comment on my 'composite' versions of two *Weavers* sessions (see Chapter 4). All three were enthusiastic about these accounts and had enjoyed reading them as accurate evocations of the experience (see Ellis, 2004,140-143). The fact that *Weavers* adults and other interviewees were prepared to challenge aspects of my analyses or ask for amendments to my records indicates a level of independence that lends credibility to their support for the broad findings of the analyses.

All interview participants were given a final draft of the thesis chapters in which their contributions played a part and were invited to comment on factual accuracy. No amendments were requested.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the research 'practicalities' – the logistics – of the expedition. However, one major practical consideration has not yet been fully addressed. Explorations are undertaken in the name of every discipline, and one territory can be examined and 'mapped' from many academic perspectives. The current chapter began by identifying this project as a contribution to Practical Theology in general terms, since it reflected Ganzevoort's description of the discipline as "the hermeneutics of lived religion" (2009). The description of data sources given in this chapter provides ample evidence that the territory of my research is 'lived'. However, the 'religious' and 'hermeneutic' elements of Ganzevoort's description require further consideration. The following chapter will complete the preparations for my research exploration by showing how the territory can be charted to produce a Practical Theology map.

CHAPTER THREE
MAPPING THE FINDINGS

> Be aware of the spirit of God at work in the ordinary activities and experience of your daily life.
>
> Advices and Queries, No7
> Religious Society of Friends

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 described the research methodology and methods for my project, but they could be applied to a variety of disciplines. How can they contribute to a theological investigation? The current chapter addresses this question by providing a theological methodology to 'map' my findings, derived from Ganzevoort's description of Practical Theology as "the hermeneutics of lived religion" (2009).

The chapter outlines an understanding of a "relation with the sacred"[7] in the 'lived experience' of everyday life by examining the work of the theologians cited in Chapter 1 (page 17) as demonstrating links between experiential data and theology. In addition to providing a theological methodology for my project, the chapter concludes by outlining the methods of theological reflection I used to seek an understanding of the "relation with the sacred"[8] in my own lived experience.

1. THEOLOGIANS AND EXPERIENCE

This section will explore the relationship between lived experience and theology in the context of theological writing about children. Historically, sustained theological writing of this nature has been scarce. In his survey of *Children and the Theologians* (2009a) Berryman does not identify significant

[7] This relation being Ganzevoort's definition of 'religion'.
[8] Such an understanding being Ganzevoort's description of 'hermeneutics'.

contributions until the 19th century, and even then attention to the effect of children on adults is sparse. Friedrich Schleiermacher and Bonnie Miller-McLemore, whose work is considered in this section, are exceptions. Both have explored the relationship between children and adults, and demonstrate different ways in which experience can impact on theology.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834): experience shapes theology

By comparing aspects of Schleiermacher's lived experience with some features of his theological writing on the adult/child interface, relationships between the two can be discerned. These relationships indicate a fundamental connection between lived experience and theology that will be found in my own theological approach (see section 3, below).

Lived Experience

Formational experience encompasses the political, social, intellectual and cultural **spirit of the age** in which an individual matures. It also includes **childhood experiences** of upbringing, education and faith development, together with influential **encounters and relationships**, shaped by the **characteristics of the individual**. A brief survey of such factors in Schleiermacher's life will enable a consideration of the influence that lived experience had upon his theological writing about children.

The turn of the 18th century to the 19th was a dramatic time for Europe. The Enlightenment provided an intellectual framework with which any investigation of humanity, including the theological, was obliged to engage. The Romantic Movement, emphasising freedom and creativity, offered one alternative approach. It promoted a view of childhood as "innocent and uncorrupted" (Berryman, 2009a, 148) and even inspired and inspiring[9]. Politically, Napoleon was changing the map of Europe. Socially there was a new interest in the family within German culture as a refuge in turbulent times (Berryman, 2009a, 149; see also DeVries, 2001, 332-333). Froebel's

[9] See Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality* (Hutchinson, 1969, 461).

kindergarten, a flowering of children's literature, and the production of toys also emerged (Berryman, 2009a, 149-150).

Schleiermacher's personal story was profoundly influenced by the Moravian boarding school and seminary where he spent his adolescence (Clements, 1987, 15). Of particular note are the Moravian Pietist emphasis on the family as a little church and the locus for early religious formation (DeVries, 2001, 333), and the importance of play (Berryman, 2009a, 147) – an importance recognised by Schleiermacher's mother (DeVries, 2001, 343, note 40).

The personal qualities arising from this background included a tendency towards the affective. Schleiermacher was a relational person, finding solitude intolerable (Clements, 1987, 38). He saw membership of a 'circle' as an important spiritual aspect of life (*ibid,* 20) and fellowship as vital to religion. He counted both men and women among his friends, but placed a particular value on the female friendships that allowed him to share feelings in a way he found impossible with men (*ibid*, 22).

Schleiermacher also placed a high value on children's company (DeVries, 2001, 348) and although he had none of his own for the first half of his adult life, this value was not abstract. As well as preaching, writing and lecturing, he had also worked as a private tutor, a catechist, and a teacher in an orphanage (DeVries, 2001, 330; Sykes, 1971, 7).

A settled family life was a 'circle' to which Schleiermacher aspired. However, his matrimonial efforts were problematic. He was 40 before he finally achieved marriage. His wife, a widow, had two children already and was to have four more with Schleiermacher, giving him ample familial experience of children (Sykes, 1971, 14). And this was engaged experience: Berryman claims, "[Schleiermacher] knew about children, because he had allowed himself to become deeply involved with his own children" (2009a, 150).

Theological writing

The influence of the life experiences sketched above on Schleiermacher's theology will now be explored in relation to his key writings on adults in the

company of children: *Soliloquies* (1800), the novella *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the incarnation* (1806)[10] and *Sermons on the Christian Household* (1818).

The spirit of the age

The political background to Schleiermacher's writing can be glimpsed in *Christmas Eve.* Its reference to the "Great forces of destiny … stamping about our neighbourhood" ([1806] 1826/1967, 49) is a reminder of the turbulent backdrop from which the family was seen as a refuge. Prussia fell to Napoleon the year after *Christmas Eve* was written, and Schleiermacher's view of Prussia as the national 'family' adds an extra resonance to the domestic setting chosen for his novella (see Clements, 1987, 28) – a setting which reflects contemporary social concerns with the importance of the family. Cultural influences are also evident in the prominence given to a young girl's playroom, toys and creative storytelling at a time of growing interest in children's toys and literature.

A powerful cultural and intellectual influence of the time was the European Romantic Movement, and its impact can be discerned in Schleiermacher's first sustained exploration of youth, found in the *Soliloquies* (DeVries, 2001, 335). The fifth of these, on 'Youth and Age' ([1800] 1926/1979, 89-103), considers the adult/child interface. It does so, however, by emphasising the relationship between these two phases of life within one individual. In this Schleiermacher echoes a Romantic theme, to be found in Wordsworth's *My Heart Leaps Up* ([1802] in Hutchinson, 1969, 62), with its celebrated conclusion:

> The Child is father of the Man;
> And I could wish my days to be
> Bound each to each by natural piety.

A far more pervasive Romantic influence can, however, be found in *Christmas Eve.* This piece is not a sermon, essay or treatise but a novella – a fiction set on Christmas Eve in which things seen, heard and done are as

[10] Reissued in 1826, with only slight revision, thus continuing to be valued by Schleiermacher as a contribution to his theology after the preaching of the *Sermons* (see Tice, 1967, 8).

important as dialogue. The novella tells the story of a well-to-do Prussian family gathering on Christmas Eve at which friends give presents, socialise, listen to music and converse. In the first part of the story Sophie, the young daughter of the hosts, plays her Christmas gift of music on the piano and sings for the adults, then invites them to the nursery to see a diorama she has created of the birth and life of Christ. This experience forms the backdrop to the remainder of the evening, during which the adults chat, tell stories, debate and listen to music. Sophie drifts in and out, but at the end it is suggested she sing to the adults so that they can all "sing something religious and joyful!" ([1806] 1826/1967, 86).

The Romantic approach to thought is evident in *Christmas Eve* – its reflections on the significance of Christmas proceed not through logic alone, but also through the imagination. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who had visited Germany at the close of the 18th century, exemplifies the influence that a poet could have on the world of philosophy (Blackburn, 1996, 67); and Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), in which the author uses an imaginative format to expound his view of education, was in Schleiermacher's library (Berryman, 2009a, 150). Although an Enlightenment sceptic is to be found among the cast of *Christmas Eve* and there is intellectual discourse, this is set against the telling of stories, the hearing of music, and the experience of a child's creative and emotional response to Christmas.

Characteristics of the individual

Schleiermacher published the *Soliloquies* in his early 30s – halfway through his life – and so was hardly a youth reluctant to relinquish its qualities, when he wrote, "shall not my imagination always contemplate beauty? … Can I not always count on buoyancy of spirit, responsiveness to good, and warmth of heart?" ([1800] 1926/1979, 90). By reflecting on the coexistence of youth and age within his own adult life, Schleiermacher was drawing on his personal characteristics as well as reflecting the Romantic 'spirit of the age'. He asks, "why should I not by sheer force of will cling to youth's dear divinity until my last breath is drawn?" (*ibid*) but "sheer force of will" rarely prevails without an underlying natural inclination. To declare in one's 30s, "I pledge myself to

eternal Youth" (*ibid,* 94) suggests an inherent disposition to value youth's qualities. Indeed, he acknowledges a constitutional inability to do otherwise:

> There was a time when I myself believed the privileges of youth did not befit manhood; I thought to conduct myself quietly and prudently, preparing for years more drab by a wise resolve of renunciation. My spirit however, would not content itself within such narrow bounds. (*ibid,* 89)

A tendency to the affective in Schleiermacher's nature has been noted above, and *Christmas Eve* embodies the emphasis on feeling that was one feature of his approach in countering Enlightenment rationalism (Hoffecker, 1993, 451). Schleiermacher valued female companions, with whom he could share his feelings, and a preference for the female can be discerned in *Christmas Eve*: in addition to Sophie, two younger boys are present at the gathering but they play no significant part in the story. Relationships, irrespective of gender, were important to Schleiermacher and the social setting of *Christmas Eve* reflects this characteristic.

Childhood experiences

The effect of Schleiermacher's Moravian Pietist upbringing can be traced in the high value he placed on social gatherings in general as the locus for theological exploration and on the family in particular as the place for Christian nurture – both features of *Christmas Eve,* and the latter prominent in the *Sermons.* The emphasis on feeling and experience found in *Christmas Eve* can also be traced to Pietist insights (Lane, 2006, 238).

In Sophie's creative approach to Christmas we see the value of play, learned through Schleiermacher's upbringing both with the Moravians and his mother (DeVries, 2001, 343). It is by playing with images and ideas that Sophie associates her own mother with the Mother of Christ, and expresses the wish to include a rainbow in her diorama ([1806] 1826/1967*,* 33)[11]. And the very idea of reflecting on the Incarnation through writing a novella amounts to Schleiermacher himself 'playing with ideas'.

[11] An approach currently found in the serious 'playing' with religious concepts and imagery at the heart of Godly Play (Berryman, ([1991] 1995).

Encounters and relationships

In the following passage from the *Soliloquies* it is possible to see the influence of one of Schleiermacher's early relationships:

> The excellencies of old age cannot conflict with those of youth, for not only do the qualities esteemed in old age develop in youth, but old age in its turn nourishes the young and tender life. It is generally conceded that youth fares better when ripe old age takes an interest in it.
> ([1800] 1926/1979*,* 97)

Schleiermacher became estranged from his father over abandoning his seminary education to study theology at Halle University. Here he was taken in by his uncle, who provided support and advice through a difficult time (Sykes, 1971, 6-7). More than a decade before the *Soliloquies,* therefore, Schleiermacher had experienced the benefits youth can draw from the benevolent interest of age.

Several personal themes are identifiable in *Christmas Eve* beyond the stated objective of exploring the Incarnation. The relations between men and women, love, marriage, the home, and the importance of the communal (Tice, 1967, 16) are themes that can be linked to Schleiermacher's own encounters and relationships.

Schleiermacher longed for the sort of comfortable domestic life he imagined in the novella (Clements, 1987, 39). His friends were having children (Tice, 1967, 9-10) and he had hoped soon to find such a life himself in marriage. But some months before writing *Christmas Eve,* those hopes were dashed (*ibid*, 7-8 and 10; Clements, 1987, 26). The connection between *Christmas Eve* and his marital aspirations is further indicated by the fact that subsequent to its publication his correspondence to his eventual wife reflects the ideas in the novella (Tice, 1967, 12).

The nine *Sermons on the Christian Household* were informed by nearly a decade's experience of the relationships involved in married life (Berryman, 2009a, 150). Although he does not draw on it in detail, Schleiermacher lays claim to this experience, speaking of "we husbands" ([1818] 1890, 139) and "us who are parents" (*ibid,* 155). And the authority of experience can be recognised in Schleiermacher's acknowledgement that although parents can

receive from youth (*ibid,* 149), nevertheless children are not spotless messengers of higher truth (DeVries, 2001, 341). The realism of experience can also be discerned behind the encouragement Schleiermacher gives to parents when noting children's ability to forget occasional parental harshness ([1818] 1890, 161-2).

Rather than distracting from devotion and piety, Schleiermacher maintains that familial relationships and the concerns of daily life gain their real meaning from being seen as part of the Christian pursuit of holiness ([1818] 1890*,* 131). He notes the "confusion and vice" caused by those who turn their back on marriage in this pursuit (*ibid,* 136), and also rejects the notion that a couple might marry but then withdraw from the world in the hope of spiritual development (*ibid,* 137-8).

Mutuality is a key theme of Schleiermacher's view of marriage and in expounding Ephesians 5: 22-31 he seeks to minimise the 'headship' of the husband by emphasising the power vested in the wife by the requirement that her 'yes' to marriage be freely given – a reflection of his own difficulties in evoking such a response.

Mutuality is also central to Schleiermacher's approach to the nurture of children. Two of the verses he uses[12] emphasise the need for parents to treat their children kindly, as well as for children to obey their parents. Only in this mutuality can old and young grow together. If this understanding arises from engagement with his children (see Berryman, 2009a, 150), it may also be influenced by a memory of parental anger when Schleiermacher left the seminary where his father had placed him (Clements, 1987, 16-17). In his fourth sermon, Schleiermacher criticises the selfishness of parents trying to make children into copies of themselves ([1818] 1890, 164). This was seen as "an un-Christian exercise of authority" (*ibid,* 170); rather, children should be taught to consider the service of God in developing their gifts (*ibid,* 170-1).

We can see in the above comparison of Schleiermacher's theological writing with his lived experience that the latter can influence the former. However, for Schleiermacher, this influence remains an unacknowledged background to

[12] Colossians 3: 21 (Sermon Three) and Ephesians 6: 4 (Sermon Four).

his work. We now move to the consideration of a more recent theologian for whom the influence of experience is acknowledged and in the foreground.

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore: experience <u>is</u> theology

Bonnie Miller-McLemore is one of six theologians Berryman identifies as contributors to "today's conversation" on the Church's informal doctrine of children (2009a, 174-176). She brings expertise in the fields of psychology and feminism as well as theology to the consideration of adults relating to children in a Christian context. But most importantly for the purposes of this study, she brings her own experience as a mother of three children. She is the final writer in Marcia Bunge's *The Child in Christian Thought* (2001), contributing a chapter exploring 'Contemporary Feminist Theologians on Children'. In it she claims that the significant contributions of feminist theologians in considering families, mothers and children include the realization that "birthing and parenting are full of religious potential both for adult spiritual development and for renewal of God imagery" (Miller-McLemore, 2001, 473). It is this realization that leads us on from claiming that experience *shapes* theology, to saying that experience can be the *material* of theology. In Miller-McLemore's work, her own experience not only shapes her writing, but is also fully acknowledged and becomes the subject of her reflections. Thus her contribution takes us a step further in developing a theological methodology for my project by demonstrating how adult reflections on the effect of being with children, such as those found in my study, can bring lived experience into "relation with the sacred" (Ganzevoort, 2009).

<u>A trilogy on mothers, children and parenting</u>

Miller-McLemore has produced three books – *Also a Mother: Work and family as theological dilemma* (1994); *Let the Children Come: Reimagining childhood from a Christian perspective* (2003); and *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for children as spiritual practice* (2007) – that elaborate and develop themes to be found in her contribution to Bunge's volume. Looking back in 2011 on what she has come to call "a trilogy on mothers, children and parenting" (Miller-McLemore, 2011,1) she notes that each volume

corresponds to the situation she found herself in as another child was added to the family. In this way her developing experience is reflected in her developing thought.

The project that became *Also a Mother* started as an academic exercise but when she became pregnant and had her first child, Miller-McLemore recounts that it took on a new life and became personal (1994, 21). The resulting book portrays her struggle as a woman with the competing demands of child rearing and maintaining her professional vocation. But it also has a theological dimension, asking, “What do people learn existentially and theologically from relating intimately to a child?” (*ibid,* 25).

In *Let the Children Come* Miller-McLemore looks beyond the domestic struggle of family demands versus paid vocation to the issue of society’s view of children, and its expectations of them and their parents. Her main thesis is the proposition that “children must be fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, and viewed as agents” (2003, xxiii). In her 2011 retrospective essay she considers that this book “reflects the welcome of a second son and a turn of subject matter from adults to children” (2011, 2). In her earlier work she had contested the view that feminism was ‘anti-child’ but in *Let the Children Come* she goes further by identifying a commonality between women and children – both marginalized, and demonised while also idealised. And in considering not only the relationship between children and adults but also the benefits that adults can receive from children, this book, as well as its predecessor, contributes to Miller-McLemore’s continuing theological reflection on the adult/child interface.

In the final book of the trilogy, *In the Midst of Chaos,* Miller-McLemore personalises again. The spiritual potential of caring for children had formed part of the material in her earlier work, but she now makes this the whole topic of a book that, with the arrival of a third child, “springs from the confusion of finding ourselves outnumbered as parents” (Miller-McLemore, 2011, 2). She argues that a spiritual life can be found as well, and perhaps better, in the ‘chaos’ of parenting as it can in silence and retreat. Her claim that “Parents raise children. But raising children also raises adults” (2007, xv) relates clearly to the effect of children on adults; and her broad definition of

'parent' as "anyone who cares for kids and is changed by it" (*ibid,* xvii) widens the relevance of her reflections for my study.

Four themes

A survey of these three works reveals four major themes that demonstrate the way that the experience of 'parenting' children – in the broad sense in which Miller-McLemore ultimately defines it – can bring lived experience into "relation with the sacred" (Ganzevoort, 2009). The four themes are: self-sacrifice, values, children's agency, and the spirituality of the mundane.

Self-sacrifice

Starting from the proposition that an uncritical acceptance of self-sacrifice as a virtue has fostered the oppression of women, Miller-McLemore (1994) reminds us of the two-fold nature of Jesus' second great commandment, linking love of others to love of self, and characterises a self-denial that denies a woman's, or anyone's, fulfilment as a temptation to break this commandment in its second part.

She concludes that the quest for a 'mutuality' "that includes but does not idealise sacrifice, is more fundamental to the Christian message" (2003, 126). This mutuality is something to be sought not only between the partners rearing a child, but also between carer and child. She advocates 'pitching-in' households where everyone is expected to do their share, and proposes that this 'spreading the load' approach should extend to a communal responsibility for 'mothering'.

Miller-McLemore (2007) outlines criteria to be used in determining whether sacrifice is 'salvageable' in any given situation. These include whether choice or imposition, fear or love are operating; and the question, "Does the sacrificial loss actually count as a gain in some deeper way and enrich life rather than destroy it?" (*ibid*, 93). She also notes that in terms of self-sacrifice parents always fall short and feel guilt. Consequently, she suggests the practice of mutual confession in families, to promote self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others.

Values

Miller-McLemore's original concern (1994) for equity in childcare led to a re-evaluation of human productivity. She contrasts the economic productivity traditionally seen as male with a generativity involving procreation, relationship and nurture that has more commonly been associated with women. While seeking ways to facilitate women's involvement in the former, she also calls for a revaluing of the latter and an encouragement of male involvement in it. The conflict between market values and the values of procreation and nurture became more focused when she considered market approaches to children, along with the aggressively competitive version of child rearing adopted by some parents (2003).

The promotion of a communal approach to childcare emerged from a concern to 'spread the load' of child rearing. Further reflections on this (2003) led her to suggest the relationship was two-way and that caring for others in the family could encourage caring for others in the wider community. Furthermore, "giving birth and caring for an infant can elicit a new way of seeing each person as someone else's child" (*ibid,* 169).

She notes (2007) that parents are obliged to assess their own values as they face choices with regard to their children's school, church, or place of residence. She considers that bringing up children can be an aid to social justice by extending 'care for neighbour' beyond the family where it was learned, to all children and to all neighbours. In addition "Adults raise their own social awareness as they strive to raise socially aware children" (*ibid,*121) and they teach justice by acting justly towards their children, their partners, and the world.

Children's agency

This theme might appear to concern children rather than their effect on adults. However, in any relationship an increase in the agency of one party necessarily affects the other. Facilitating greater agency among children therefore impacts on the adults' attitudes to power and control in the relationship. The greater agency of children also enables them to exert a more powerful influence on the adults around them, thus increasing the opportunities for adults to benefit from their company.

Miller-McLemore (2003) suggests that a denial of their agency leads to a view of children as morally neutral. By reintroducing the subject of sin in relation to children she sees the opportunity to provide a language for dealing with human brokenness and imperfectability. She seeks to find a new way of thinking about children that characterises them as neither depraved nor innocent but rather as 'knowing' – a complexified view that has implications for adults' view of themselves and for the definition of sin in general.

Miller-McLemore (2007) reminds us that although the Church no longer generally sees children as tainted with original sin, this has had the negative effect of making them seem spiritually null. To counter this, she claims that children are made in God's image and can have a vocation in the Church that is not about cuteness or naivety. For Miller-McLemore, children are companions in faith whose thinking has a perception and simple profundity, and whose faith has a vitality and sense of awe often lost by adults. She advocates play as a practice that can foster children's agency[13]. In expressing their faith exploration through play, she claims children can become spiritual companions to adults and thus be spiritual agents.

Spirituality of the mundane

Miller McLemore (1994) points to the spiritual potential of the bodily experience and mundane activity associated with birthing and rearing children. Her examples include: learning to move at the pace of children; experiencing their *joie de vivre* and life in the present; facing their challenging questions; and witnessing their religious awe at, respect for, and fascination with creation. The empathy of mothering, she suggests, can also extend to other children and all people, revealing the face of God in all. The process of birthing and nurturing also entails a heightened awareness of mortality and vulnerability. Turning specifically to 'reimagining' childhood (2003), Miller-McLemore details more of the active contributions of children: they see what adults miss, and they speak as they find. In addition, she notes how giving birth to a child can also give birth to a mother; how issues with one's own

[13] Citing Godly Play (Berryman, [1991] 1995) as a practice that makes use of play in a faith context.

parents can be addressed through parenting; and how ultimately entrusting children to God and letting them go are spiritual disciplines.

When she examines the 'chaos' of everyday family life, Miller-McLemore (2007) not only contests the traditional view that spirituality requires a withdrawal from ordinary life, and family life in particular, but also questions those who advocate seeking peace in the midst of chaos by inner withdrawal. It is in the chaos itself – the condition for God's creativity – that wisdom and God's presence can be found. She claims that in her own experience as mother and theologian she may achieve a greater volume of work in solitude, but not a greater depth.

She reminds us that chaos is the norm for ordinary people, and so to suggest spirituality is impossible in chaos sets up ordinary people to fail. While recognising that the mundane does not always uplift, and that service can lead to exploitation, Miller-McLemore sees daily family life as an embodied practice of faith – a vocation, with privations providing their own kind of asceticism: "a means of learning patience, charity, endurance in fidelity, receptivity to the other, long suffering and humility" (*ibid*, 31).

In summary

Schleiermacher, in *Christmas Eve,* imagined the effect of children on adults in a theological context; Miller-McLemore, in her trilogy, writes of that effect from her experience. For Schleiermacher, experience was an unacknowledged influence on his work; Miller-McLemore does not simply acknowledge her experience, but makes it the substance of her theological reflections. Schleiermacher records the effects the adults in his story experience when they observe a child's behaviour and approach to a theological subject; Miller-McLemore lists some of the theological benefits of observing children's approaches to life in general, but she also explores the effects of bearing, rearing and relating to children – effects that depend on the existence of the children as part of a relationship, as much as on their inherent characteristics. Most significantly of all, Schleiermacher portrays a sedate and well-ordered scene; whereas for Miller-McLemore the 'chaos' of family life, unmediated by 'below-stairs' domestic staff, is the locus for spiritual growth. Within that dynamic and very ordinary setting, Miller-

McLemore manages to reflect on a variety of 'headline' theological issues – self-sacrifice; the commandments of love; justice; sin, confession and forgiveness – thus demonstrating the theological potential of the ordinary, experiential data used in my research.

2. EXPERIENCE AND ORDINARY CHRISTIANS

By intentionally bringing lived experience into "relation with the sacred" (Ganzevoort, 2009) Miller-McLemore's work makes an important contribution to developing a methodology to equip my research 'expedition'. There remains, however, one more step to take. Miller-McLemore is a renowned professional theologian, as was Schleiermacher. However, my study is concerned to explore the effects of being with children on 'ordinary' Christian adults, not professional theologians.

This section of the chapter will explore the possibility of 'ordinary' Christians establishing a relationship between the sacred and their lived experience by considering an approach to theology that is informed by the experience of 'ordinary' believers rather than professional theologians. It will also address the question of who is 'ordinary' and what, in the context of a theological investigation, counts as 'experience'.

Jeff Astley: <u>whose</u> experience is theology?

Like Miller-McLemore, Astley holds that ordinary life experience can have significance for theology (2002, 51). What he adds, from the point of view of my project, is his concept of 'Ordinary Theology' as a practice that draws on ordinary life and crucially is done not by academics but by 'ordinary' Christians – that is, those who have had no formal theological training (Astley 2002; Astley and Christie, 2007). My study is ultimately concerned with the effects of children on such Christians and my quest is for results that can be held to have theological significance.

But is it theology?

Ordinary people might reflect on ordinary things in the light of faith, and ordinary people might reflect on items of Christian doctrine in the light of their experience and perceived needs. Such material is clearly theological but can it be deemed to have significance for and contribute to academic theology? Astley maintains that it can. He sees the difference between Ordinary Theology and academic theology as a difference in degree rather than kind. He suggests that Ordinary Theology is actually where all theology begins, and that inside every academic theologian is a hidden ordinary theologian (2002,148). He uses the image of ripples in a pond to explain: close to the splash is Ordinary Theology; nearer the margins is academic theology; the change from one to the other is hard to pinpoint (*ibid,* 86-87).

Nonetheless, Astley anticipates a variety of objections to the inclusion of reflections from ordinary people on ordinary things within academic theology. It might be suggested that the material is too varied, incoherent and unsystematic, concrete and anthropomorphic, biographical, personal, subjective, relative, or superstitious. However, he takes each of these objections and demonstrates how they could either be applied to accepted aspects of traditional theology (for example, Ordinary Theology might be varied but then so is scripture itself), or be refuted (for example, the apparently superstitious could be interpreted as ritualised expressions of feeling) (*ibid,* 123-138). To the ultimate academic objection that Ordinary Theology is uncritical, Astley replies robustly that most believers *do* engage in critical reflection on the problems of faith and life, and moreover "the intellectual challenges that people face up to are real ones" such as the suffering inherent in ordinary life (*ibid,* 139). He also suggests that ordinary people might be better equipped than academics in using their imaginations in critical reflection (*ibid,*143-144; and see Pattison, 2000, 143).

Ordinary but unorthodox

One anticipated objection to Ordinary Theology is, however, more controversial. It concerns the relationship between Ordinary Theology and orthodoxy. *Taking Ordinary Theology Seriously* (Astley and Christie, 2007) is a report resulting from interviews with 45 regular churchgoers and provides

some striking examples of the clash between orthodox and ordinary theological agendas and beliefs. The report opens by noting that one interview participant was "puzzled by many of the controversies that engulf the churches, but which hardly mattered at all in most people's lives" (*ibid,* 3). Rather than spending time and energy on worrying about other faiths, sexuality, evolution, miracles or the authority of scripture, she thought the Church should concentrate on love, justice, truth "and quietly seeking the presence of God". She seemed disappointed that sermons paid so little attention to her "big issues" (*ibid,* 4).

As a result of in-depth conversations about their beliefs, Astley and Christie produced surveys of these ordinary Christians' approaches to two themes that are 'big issues' in the orthodox agenda – christology and soteriology. In both, the ordinary churchgoers displayed a variety of beliefs, only some of which were orthodox. For example, three main strands of "ordinary christology" emerged (*ibid,* 8-13), only one of which affirmed Jesus as God. In contrast, some of the sample were sceptical of the miraculous and denied that Jesus was God in any way, while the majority saw Jesus not as God but rather as God's agent.

In their account of "ordinary soteriology" Astley and Christie record that just over a quarter of the participants did not link Jesus' death to atonement but rather saw it as a martyrdom in the cause of his teaching (*ibid,* 15-16). And a third of the sample were confused by the idea that Jesus had to die, seeing a God who would require this as sadistic. For some of this group 'salvation' had little meaning, prompting the question, "Saved from what?" (*ibid,* 19).

When it appears that orthodox Christian doctrines are not universally held, or even held by the majority among ordinary Christians (Astley and Christie, 2007, 26) one must ask whether this invalidates the 'ordinary' view as Christian theology? Does Ordinary Theology need 'correcting' in some cases? Or, bearing in mind that the Christian tradition already contains variety (*ibid,* 23) and that orthodoxy is not static but has shifted over time (Astley, 2002, 156) should the Church accept that Ordinary Theology might rather provide a 'corrective' to orthodoxy (Astley and Christie, 2007, 23)?

However, if the latter is the case, on what authority could Ordinary Theology claim such a function?

A question of authority

If ordinary theologians have developed their beliefs by reflecting on experience rather than through formal study, does this make those beliefs any less valid? Ellen Clark-King has conducted research with working class Christian women that could be seen as an example of Ordinary Theology. She concludes (2004, 179) that the main differences between the views of these women and those of academic feminist theologians are not to do with sophistication but rather with differing experiences – of life and death, and of social and spiritual environments (*ibid,* 55).

The placing of feminist theologians on a par with working class women in this way demonstrates that the importance of experience is not limited to those who have had no formal education. Astley notes (2002, 14) that when he asks students what has shaped their faith, they do not refer to reason, the revelation of scripture, or the teaching of tradition, but rather to "people, sermons and services, and significant events and periods in their own and others' lives."

Nicola Slee, working with ordinary experience if not ordinary theologians, records a similar effect in her study of women's faith development (2004). Her sample of interview participants contained a high proportion of well-educated women. However, when asked to reflect on their understanding of faith and influences that had shaped it, what Slee calls "conceptual faithing" did not predominate (*ibid*, 74). Instead, other forms of faithing were favoured in which can be seen a mixture of the experiential and one of its key components – the affective (*ibid,* 62-79). The 'patterns' of women's faith development that Slee identifies are similarly grounded in ordinary aspects of life. The lived experience of family, relationships, class, sexual orientation, race and gender conflicts, and mental breakdown are present (*ibid,* 81-104); as are moves, journeys, relationships, motherhood, experiences of suffering, and discovery of gifts (*ibid,* 121-132). Spirituality was often found in the activities of the domestic setting, while relationship with God was mediated through relationship with others (*ibid,* 143).

In his exposition of Ordinary Theology, Astley points to the power of experience and reflection upon it to effect change (2002, 19-20). The dramatic effect that suffering can have on faith is well recognised, but the powerful effect of more positive human experiences such as parenting is also significant (*ibid,* 21-24). Generally, Astley observes, we do not choose what to believe in: our beliefs are "too *personal*, too much part of us, for that" (*ibid,* 44). Indeed, he suggests that one cannot claim fully to understand a Christian doctrine or belief without having had the appropriate feelings (*ibid,* 7).

Ordinary Theology has two key elements – ordinary people and ordinary experience. We have seen above that ordinary experience is not a poor relation to academic thought but is foundational for the belief of academic and ordinary Christians alike. The distinction between the academic and the ordinary theologian is not one of differing levels of authority, but rather of different experience.

If its experiential base does not detract from the authority of Ordinary Theology, its other key ingredient – the ordinary Christians on whose experience it draws – can be seen to add to it. Astley notes that the traditionally accepted view that the faith should be defined as 'that which has always been believed everywhere by everyone' takes a narrow approach to what constitutes 'everyone' – restricting it to the approved teachers of the Church (2002*,* 157-158). This narrowness has produced a distorted picture of what constitutes the faith of the Church.

Clark-King points to the critiques of feminism that claim it is distorted by its concentration on white, middle-class women's concerns. And Nicola Slee notes (2004*,* 165-167) that a failure to take proper account of women's experience in general has caused distortions in developmental models such as Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' ([1981] 1995). Both writers therefore give specific examples of Astley's general point that restricting the range of voices heard restricts the validity of the model produced. Clark-King concludes her study by proposing a 'choral theology' to which the voices of feminist theologians and ordinary Christian women can contribute (2004, 187-188). This reflects the overarching concern of Astley's Ordinary Theology, that the theological voice of ordinary Christians be heard; and that in shaping what is

held to be 'the belief of the Church', their voice have a weight reflecting the fact that they *are* the Church – comprising, as they do, the vast majority of its membership.

On the strength of the above, Ordinary Theology can claim to offer a legitimate corrective to orthodoxy, not only on the authority of its experiential base but also because it can correct the distortions produced when too narrow a range of voices is permitted to be heard.

Who is 'ordinary' and what is 'experience'?

'Ordinary'?

The professional background to my research question is a concern with advocating the importance of children in the Church. Such advocacy is largely directed to the ordinary Christians who, as Astley points out, constitute the Church and locally determine the value it gives to children. It is therefore my intention to offer the findings of my study to 'ordinary' Christians as an indication of the value children can have as a theological catalyst within the faith community.

However, there is a problem in using my experience as data for such a project. Ordinary Theology, as described and practised by Astley, is not quite as 'ordinary' as it might seem since it is still being conducted by trained theologians. The same is true of Clark-King's research. And as an individual who has received Christian ministerial training and whose current study is part of a doctoral programme in Practical Theology, I am disqualified under Astley's definition from being an ordinary theologian. My research might therefore be inapplicable to 'ordinary' Christians. To address this concern we must ask: for the purposes of this study, what constitutes being 'ordinary'?

Perhaps the work of Nicola Slee, alluded to above, can help. Her study was not designed as a contribution to Ordinary Theology, but it shares some of Ordinary Theology's characteristics: it draws on the reflections of those who are not trained in theology to illuminate the life of faith; it is based in experience and feelings; and it relates to the needs of the participants at different stages of their lives. What it contributes to the picture of Ordinary Theology is a broadening of what 'ordinary' might mean. There is a tendency

to view 'ordinary' people as those who have not received a high level of education. However, Slee interviewed women who were well educated (2004, 52-53) and her study might remind us that, in so far as their beliefs are shaped by experience, the highly educated are not necessarily excluded from being 'ordinary' people.

However, there is another aspect of Slee's sample that must be considered. Eight of the 30 women included were ordained (*ibid,* 52) and we might ask whether those with a theological training can be regarded as 'ordinary' Christians if they approach their theological reflection in an 'ordinary' way. In other words, what is done and how, rather than educational experience, become the key indicators of 'ordinariness'. In the light of this observation, I am able to offer my research as a project conducted in an 'ordinary' manner, and therefore applicable in an ordinary parish setting.

To work 'in an ordinary manner' will require a commitment to equality within the Body of Christ – a conviction that the reflections of an ordained priest are not inherently of more weight than those of a lay individual. The example of the storytelling circle in Godly Play might be of help here (Berryman, 2009b, 37-38): all who are gathered round a story from the faith are regarded as equal before it and their 'wondering' reflections on it are of equal importance. To this foundational assumption of equality will be added an approach that favours the experiential as evidence, the affective and imaginative as thought processes, and story as an important form of expression. Theology done in this 'ordinary manner' will not start from the categories of the Christian theological tradition but from the concerns of everyday life and so will offer the possibility of suggesting new theological priorities on the authority of divine revelation through God's ordinary people.

'Experience'?

The importance of experience has been stressed throughout this chapter. However, it is important to be clear about my use of the word in a theological context. John Wesley's heart being 'strangely warmed' and the 'openings' that George Fox records are examples of what might commonly be understood as 'religious experiences'. And when Alister Hardy began his survey research into 'religious experience' it was the experience of a

"presence", "power", or "spiritual force" that was the subject of interest (see Hay, 1987, 118). Indeed, when recalling this work David Hay notes (*ibid*, 117) that the project was not primarily concerned with the view that "all experience is religious". However, Hay concedes that the descriptions of religious experience he went on to collect in later work were "not particularly spectacular" (*ibid,* 165). And the fact that Miller-McLemore (2007) can equate the everyday business of child rearing with spiritual practice, while Slee's participants (2004) cite everyday experiences as key to their faith development, alerts us to the possibility of a wider view of 'religious experience' than the headline-grabbing mystical experiences of tradition. Indeed, it has been observed that M K Gandhi "never had a mystic experience" or any "recognized experience of God" (Fischer, 1954, 109) and yet he 'moved mountains' with his 'Soul Force' (*ibid,* 35-40) and provided worldwide spiritual inspiration. It would be difficult to claim that his daily life, from the domestic to the political, was not a religious experience. The 'everyday' is the experience with which my study is concerned. It will be viewed as 'religious' experience by relating it to the sacred.

If it is important to be clear about the experiences I intend to consider as religious, it is also important to understand the direction in which I shall seek to establish relationships between lived experience and the sacred. In Astley and Christie's work (2007) and in that of Clark-King (2004) 'ordinary' participants were asked to give their experience of certain Christian doctrines. Inevitably this involved the linking of lived experience with the sacred, but here the starting point was the 'given' of a particular Christian issue. In contrast, the contents page of *Under Fives – Alive!* (Farley, Goddard and Jarvis, 1997) – a Christian nurture resource for young children – contains such items as "Where we live", "Parties" and "Supermarkets". From such everyday starting points in the children's experience, connections are made to Christian themes.

Taking mundane experience as the starting point for theological reflection is an approach adults might appropriate from children's ministry since it represents an ancient strand of spirituality for all ages. The lighting of the morning fire, leading to a prayer that "A flame of love to my neighbour"

may be kindled in the speaker's heart (Allchin and De Waal, 1986, 20) is an example of Celtic spirituality (see Pritchard, 2002, 59) that follows the direction of relationship found in *Under Fives – Alive!* And this is a tradition that finds voice in Michel Quoist's *Prayers of Life,* where common occurrences lead to prayerful meditations, such as the curtailed telephone conversation which becomes a reflection on human connectedness ([1954], 1963, 11). Quoist introduces his book with these words (*ibid,* 10):

> If only we knew how to look at life as God sees it,
> we should realize that nothing is secular in the world,
> but that everything contributes to the building of the kingdom
> of God. To have faith is not only to raise
> one's eyes to God to contemplate him; it is also to look at
> this world – but with Christ's eyes.

Although open to exceptional and revelatory experience, and to trains of thought leading from the Christian tradition to experiential instances, the 'experience' upon which this study is grounded is primarily the experience of Quoist's interrupted phone call; the experience of the anonymous Celtic fire lighter; the experience of Slee's participant reflecting on leaving home. Not the experience of a once in a lifetime 'event' with a measurable and often brief duration (Hay, 1987, 148) but a lifelong awareness that renders daily experience 'religious' because viewed, if not necessarily with Christ's eyes, at least with the eyes of faith.

3. THEOLOGY AND MY EXPERIENCE

This section will indicate how the researcher's theological approach, like Schleiermacher's, relates to his 'life and times'. It also relates to the other writers in the chapter and provides the theological methodology for the research project. The section concludes by indicating the consequent methods of theological reflection the project will use.

A reflexive note on theological methodology

I am a child of the 1960s – an age which strove to be egalitarian, put aside old ways, trust to its own experience, and explore new perspectives in every

area of life. It was the age of the 'working class hero' and 'kitchen sink drama' when the ordinary was deemed worthy of serious attention. During my 60s adolescence my developing faith was influenced by a minister who frequently quoted Quoist, and in this environment I came to see everyday life as the stuff of faith. Miller-McLemore (2007) criticised the exclusivity of claiming that a withdrawal from life, even an inner withdrawal, was necessary to be 'spiritual'. To make this claim, she maintained, would be to deny most of humanity a spiritual life. I have a similar reservation in my view of theologically significant experience. If only transcendent experiences or those that reflect traditional theological concerns are admitted as 'religious', then this is exclusive. My egalitarian sympathies incline me to promote approaches to both religious experience and spiritual life that are open to all. I take the scripture in which Jesus gives thanks that things hidden to "the wise and intelligent" have been revealed to "infants"[14] not as a criticism of wisdom and intelligence *per se* but rather as an indication that the things of God are open to all.

The soundtrack of my youth was Bob Dylan's 'The Times they are a Changing'. The 'spirit of the age' captured in this song has made me more interested in new roads than old, and in my own experiences and those of my peers than those that have been handed down. I am also a child of the age in which the social sciences became popular, and understanding of what it means to be human expanded. Insights from these fields, and from reflections on my life in the light of them are foundational to my theological sensibilities. My religious understanding has also been formed in a multi-cultural and multi-faith world that invites a reassessment of traditional Christian approaches, most obviously to the exclusivity of the Christian faith.

Although an experiential sense of the reality of God is the foundation of my faith, it is the experience of the whole of my life that is the object of my theological interest. That interest is expressed by viewing my life through the eyes of faith. To extend the visual metaphor, I regard the 'eyes' as a human given (see Hay, 1987, 198-201 on innate religious awareness). However, my membership of a Christian tradition within a multi-faith society has furnished

[14] Matthew 11: 25; Luke 10: 21.

lenses of a particular tint through which to view my experience. These metaphors express my theological approach – a way of seeing, and describing rather than an attempt to discern or impose patterns. It is an approach, therefore, that does not attempt to make systematic sense of the whole, but rather seeks theological understanding of the part experienced.

The above is 'my' approach, shaped by what life has made me. It values the ordinary; seeks a spirituality open to all; favours new insights; and sees religious experience as the lived experience of everyday brought into "relation with the sacred" (Ganzevoort, 2009) by being viewed through the lens of my faith story. However, the relation of theology to experience found in the work of writers examined in this chapter shows that my approach is not idiosyncratic, but 'harmonises' with others whose voices contribute to Clark-King's theological 'chorus'. It is the approach that provides the theological methodology of this project.

A note on reflective methods

This chapter began with Ganzevoort's description of Practical Theology as "the hermeneutics of lived religion" (2009). So far it has been concerned primarily with 'lived religion', seen as the relationship between lived experience and the sacred. We must now turn to the hermeneutic element of the description. The research methods described in Chapter 2 will provide data and analysis procedures from which themes will arise regarding the adult/child interface. However, to turn that 'lived experience' into 'lived religion' and to perform the hermeneutic task of interpreting it theologically will require theological reflection on those themes.

My method of theological reflection, like my overall methodology, arises from my background and experience. It is used and offered, not as definitive for this kind of investigation, but as personally efficacious. As one might be advised, "Pray as you can, not as you can't" (Chapman, [1935] 2003) so, in seeking theological understanding, the approaches that successfully make meaning may differ between individuals. Indeed, in suggesting that my findings may provide a theological resource for the Church it will be necessary to indicate a variety of possible approaches to reflection and encourage individual Christians to seek the method that best

enables them to interrogate their experience and bring it into relationship with their faith story.

The nature of the project located my theological reflection within the general model of "The Living Human Document" (Graham, Walton and Ward, 2005, 18-46; 2007, 51-88); and suggested the commonly used 'quadrilateral' approach, involving a conversation between scripture, tradition, reason and experience[15]. However, the particulars of the process used related specifically to my interest and skill in creative writing, and my early academic background in the study of literature.

A more detailed description of my reflective process is given in Chapter 4, but in outline my procedure was as follows. Rather than leaving my personal background unacknowledged, as in the case of Schleiermacher, I sought to interrogate the surface themes emerging from my data analysis by associating them imaginatively with my life history. I used creative writing to recreate the incidents thereby evoked, and literary techniques to analyse the resulting texts. The deeper themes that emerged then provided the subject of a 'quadrilateral' conversation. Friends and ministerial colleagues provided comments from the four perspectives, but the eventual 'conversation' was convened in my imagination, and I scripted a dialogue between the points of view. My Quaker background made it natural to seek theological understanding of the 'lived religion' thus derived from my experience by finally taking the imagined conversation into silent reflection and prayer.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter has indicated, through the example of Friedrich Schleiermacher's writing on children, that experience affects theology even though its influence may be unacknowledged. It has used Miller-McLemore's parenting 'trilogy' to show that experience can also become a rich

[15] Broadly defined, as in the second section of this chapter.

acknowledged source for theology. Astley's defence of Ordinary Theology was employed to emphasise the theological validity of an 'ordinary' approach, grounded in experience, that gives equal weight to 'ordinary' believers alongside academic theologians, is open to new insights, and is not driven by traditional categories. The chapter used the examples cited by Miller-McLemore and Slee, together with the tradition of Celtic spirituality to show that 'religious' experience includes everyday events viewed from a religious perspective. Finally, the theological methodology and methods of the project were outlined, drawing on the arguments of the chapter and the researcher's own lived experience.

The preparations for the exploration are now complete. The equipment has been gathered, and some of it has already been used as the research expedition moved into the areas identified for data collection. Setting up camp in these areas and collecting data is not, however, the exploration itself but only the final act of preparation for it. The true exploration is the analysis of what was collected. Part 2 of the thesis tells the story of this analysis and the new understandings to which it leads.

PART TWO – EXPLORATION

What personal effects do adult Christians experience when they explore the Christian faith in company with children?

Part 2 of the thesis seeks a theological response to this question by exploring three areas: the experience of the researcher as an adult Christian sharing time with children in the *Weavers* multi-generational parish group (Chapter 4); a comparison of all four adult *Weavers'* experiences (Chapter 5); the experience of other adult Christians in different nurturing situations with children (Chapter 6).

Part 1 described the sense of quest that instigated this project. However, once an expedition has set out, new discoveries broaden the scope and influence the interests of the exploration (see Herr and Anderson, 2005, 70). Part 2 will tell the story of such developments in this phase of the research journey.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE RESEARCHER'S EXPERIENCE

> Are you ready both to learn from [children and young people] and to accept your responsibilities towards them?
>
> Advices and Queries, No19
> Religious Society of Friends

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

The real research exploration begins with the analysis of the principal data source – the *Weavers* journal. This was a journey in itself and Chapter 4 charts its progress. It begins by outlining the analytic process, which produced two main themes. To give a 'feel' for the experiences that gave rise to these themes they are illustrated by two narratives – 'composite' *Weavers* sessions, created from journal material recorded on various occasions. They are also illustrated in chart form, and explored in commentaries.

My research methodology was informed by grounded theory and so findings were expected to be emergent. Accordingly, the analysis of the journal proved to be only the first stage of the research exploration. The second stage concerned the theological significance of the analysis findings and is recorded in section 2. Chapter 3 briefly outlined my methods of theological reflection, and in the current chapter I describe in detail the creative process I developed to reflect theologically on my journal analysis results.

1. ANALYSIS OF THE *WEAVERS* JOURNAL

This section describes the first part of the research process, in which findings emerge from the analysis of data.

Establishing an analysis structure

There are common assumptions among those concerned with children's nurture in the Church about the effects that sharing time with children will have on adults. It is assumed that adults will be refreshed and challenged in their faith: by the characteristic approaches of children to exploration through active, creative, participatory means; by children's openness, honesty and unembarrassed curiosity; by their hopefulness, 'living in the moment', sense of awe and wonder, and unguarded love; by their dependence and vulnerability; and by their untutored and unusual interpretations of faith issues. I tried to ignore these assumptions when journaling. My criterion for journal entries was not that observations exemplified assumptions about children, but rather that experiences had had strong effects on me. I used a 'rule of heart' not a 'rule of head': aspects of a session were recorded that were emotionally potent rather than intellectually 'interesting'. A similar 'rule of heart' was applied in arranging the resultant journal material: the structure of my analysis had to make emotional sense.

This approach is founded on a conviction that in matters of faith only those things that move us deeply are ultimately of consequence, since only those things will make us act, and only in action is faith validated. *Advices and Queries* – the guidance document for Quaker living – says simply, "Let your life speak" (Religious Society of Friends, 1995, 1.02, 27). A traditional story told of George Fox and William Penn illustrates my conviction. Penn had begun to attend Quaker meetings but, despite the Quaker testimonies against bearing arms or showing marks of social distinction, he could not bring himself to give up the fine clothes and sword that became a fashionable cavalier gentleman. Penn was anxious and asked Fox's advice, justifying himself by saying the sword had saved his life once, and that Jesus had told his disciples to equip themselves with swords[16]. Fox responded, "I advise thee to wear [the sword] as long as thou canst" (Religious Society of Friends, 1966, 40), recognising that only a change of heart, not argument, would be decisive for a genuine and sustained change of action.

This has proved true in my experience: although I cannot assent to

[16] Luke 22: 36.

anything that does not make intellectual sense, neither can I regard a proposition as valid unless it also makes 'heart sense' and therefore produces action or at least a yearning for it. My research quest was for an answer to my question about the importance of children for adults that would have that sense of personal validity: I could not therefore be satisfied with conclusions that did not have 'heart sense' behind them.

When analysing my journal after two years of *Weavers* sessions, the common assumptions about the effects of children on adults re-emerged, causing me to expect categories deriving from them would play a central role in organising the material. However, when I applied my 'rule of heart' to the analysis process I found this expectation was challenged and was surprised by the emerging results, both at the level of journal content and the level of analysis.

There were two surprises regarding content. The first was that the journal contained a preponderance of general reflections on simply being with children, rather than specifically Christian or even overtly 'spiritual' issues. This reflected the general nature of my research question, but I was surprised that so little faith-related material had made a sufficiently deep impression on me to merit inclusion.

The second surprise regarding content, emerging about a quarter of the way through the analysis, was recorded in my diary of the process:

> After five days immersed in this [analysis] I am aware how much of the comments in the journal are shaped by who I am. I suppose that should be obvious – after all it's <u>my</u> journal.

This was the beginning of a realization that would prove crucial in the final shaping of the analysis, and also in the conclusion that I would carry forward into the ultimate findings of the study. It went beyond the obvious point that a journal based on personal responses to an experience is bound to be personal. The phrase "shaped by who I am" pointed to a much deeper relationship between myself and the record I had made.

The surprises at the level of analysis were to do with the 'feel' of the categories I was generating and how they might relate. First, assumptions about the effect that children have on adults presuppose some kind of

learning on the part of the adults from the characteristics and approaches exhibited by the children. This led me initially to draft categories such as 'learning from and with children' and to consider that 'learning' would be the natural 'core category' for the whole analysis. But as I worked with the material on this basis, it became clear to me that it did not 'feel right'. Instead, another feature of my *Weavers* experience seemed much more prominent – the question of adult authority in the group. The description of the *Weavers* ethos in Chapter 2 recorded the importance of minimising adult leadership in order to give children equal status so that the adults could experience them 'as they are'. My diary of the analysis records that this endeavour had taken on an unexpected significance, becoming "a dominant theme of concern and reflection" and "part of the effect/learning, rather than a means of achieving it".

This proved a turning point in the analysis as I recognised that the question of leadership and equality that featured so prominently in the journal was in fact an issue of deep and long-term personal concern. It was thus clear that the effects I had recorded were shaped by the personal 'history' I had brought to the multi-generational encounter and that therefore reflection on the journal analysis offered the possibility of important self-examination. This realization came almost exactly halfway through the process of analysing my journal, and provided a key to organising its material. My diary of the analysis records:

> the key, driving issue here is the relationship between adults and children, whether it be seen in terms of 'power & authority' … or 'power & equality' or 'authority & equality' or 'what distinguishes an adult from a child?'

I therefore divided the analysis into two sections: one concerning the things that bring adults and children together, and the other concerning the things that set them apart.

The assumption that 'learning' would be the unifying thread of the analysis now came under scrutiny. The most significant material in the journal proved not to be about learning but concerned my feelings, both negative and positive, about being a member of the group. This material matched almost exactly with the division between the separation (negative

feelings) and drawing together (positive feelings) of the age groups. My feelings about being part of *Weavers,* rather than 'learning', therefore became the unifying organisational factor of my analysis. It emerged from analysis organised in this way that *how* I gained from *Weavers* was far more significant than *what* I 'learned' or 'gained'. The benefit derived from personal, reflective engagement with multi-generational experience, rather than from exposure to the insights or characteristics of children *per se.*

The analysis

The structure of the journal analysis is introduced in Figure 4. Its two parts – Negative Feelings, and Positive Feelings – are then explored in more detail. Each is illustrated by a sample session of the *Weavers*, followed by a commentary relating to the headings in the analysis structure.

The sample sessions are 'composite' narratives designed to evoke my experience as a participant in the *Weavers* and provide examples of the kind of events from which the analysis derives. The experiential nature of this form of presentation not only reflects the emphasis I have placed on experience as a ground for knowing, but also prepares for the experience-based theological reflection with which I will conclude this chapter. The samples are constructed from events that took place on different occasions during the *Weavers* research period, and have been selected and arranged to illustrate the major themes of the analysis structure. The 'characters' are pseudonymous members of the *Weavers.* This approach is informed by Caroline Ellis' practice in constructing exemplar teaching sessions for her "methodological novel about autoethnography", *The Ethnographic I* (Ellis, 2004).

Figure 4

FEELINGS ON BEING PART OF THE *WEAVERS* GROUP

A. NEGATIVE FEELINGS (old and young stand apart)

A.1. The 'given-ness'

Resisting the gift of difference
Adults come to terms with the gift
Children value the gift
The gift is necessary

A.2. A weighty gift

Adults' concern for children's well-being
Adults making 'judgement calls'
Adults and organisation
Adults meeting children's spiritual needs

B. POSITIVE FEELINGS (old and young stand together)

B.1. Gifts in relationship

Children welcome adults
Children and adults share experience
Children lead

B.2. Gifts of the child

Children are physically expressive
Children are practical and experiential
Children are playful and imaginative
Children are capable

B.3. Gifts to the adult

Adults reflect on their being and behaviours
Adults reflect on Christian beliefs and practices
Adults reflect on their values

A. NEGATIVE FEELINGS (old and young stand apart)

My negative feelings in relation to *Weavers* arose from my personal struggle in principle with the expectation that adults should exercise authority over children, and in practice with the difficulties of being part of a multi-generational group in which the adults try to minimise their authority. Ultimately, the 'given-ness' of the adult/child distinction and the adult responsibilities this entails could not be denied, and the weight of these responsibilities was a further source of negativity. However, when I recognised that the relationship of adults and children as distinct groups with different roles was a gift, I was able to view the situation positively. In addition, I found that positive feelings arose from the successful discharge of traditional adult responsibilities. The following 'sample session' is constructed from events recorded in the journal that illustrate these points, and is designed to enable the reader to enter into my affective experience.

THE NIGHTS DRAW IN

Sunday evening. Only six o'clock, but darkness has already fallen. The nights are drawing in. As my car pulls up the incline of the vicarage drive, my headlights catch a small, coated figure heading for the door. Kaye, early for *Weavers* as usual. I join her at the threshold. We say, 'Hello,' she smiling quickly and turning back to stare at the door. She's knocked and not been heard. I knock firmly, and Joyce is there in a moment. Brisk, efficient, retired with grandchildren – Joyce, like me, is a volunteer minister in the parish. Kaye and I follow her into the living room, like chicks behind a mother hen. Waiting for us, lounging in an easy chair, is Chris, the vicar's son. Kaye stops by the door.

'Come in and sit down!' says Joyce, brightly.

Kaye smiles and stays where she is.

'You're the first child to arrive,' Chris says to her.

'What *is* a child?' Joyce asks.

I expect Chris to find this question odd, but there's no hesitation in his reply:

'Someone under 18,' he tells her, simply.

It's not an odd question to me. I've briefed the adult members of the *Weavers* group that we should minimise our adult authority and aim for equality between adult and child members. So, understandable that Joyce should be thinking about distinctions.

'Can I be a child?' she asks.

Chris laughs – not cruelly, but in the half-embarrassed way *adults* do when children say something that doesn't seem to make sense.

The four other young *Weavers* soon arrive and the vicar, James, and his wife Lucy join us in their living room. They are the other two adult members and they have been setting up an opening game – the group has been meeting for a couple of months and has established the pattern of starting with a game. Usually, one of the young members chooses what to play. Tonight Chris and his parents have chosen. We have to hunt through the house for letters on hidden pieces of paper. When collected, they'll spell something. Chris gives instructions. He's a strong, confident character like his father. We have been sitting as equals to listen, but when we stand to begin the game something changes. I rise and become a giant. As the chest-high children whizz round the house I wander slowly, feeling like an intruder so big that he's unnoticed – an elephant in the room.

The letters are collected, but nobody seems bothered what they spell, just that the task is done and a good time has been had charging round the rooms. Hot and high, the children roll on the living room carpet. All except Kaye – who sits neatly out of the ruck, but beaming with enjoyment – and Emma, the only teenager in the group, who looks on with an expression that is hard to interpret. Maybe she just doesn't know what to do. Neither do I. We need to get on with our first activity, and if we were all equals, the young *Weavers* would know this and settle down. They should know what comes next because we planned it last time. But still they are sitting on each other, pinching, letting fly the occasional, none-too-gentle kick.

After a few moments I say, tentatively, 'I think it's time we shared our stories. Shall we sit in a circle?' It's doubtful whether I've been heard. Certainly no one takes notice. It's been like this every time *Weavers* have met, and it's been a shock. My vision for the group had not included the possibility that the adults would have to exert authority. I was a junior schoolteacher for 12 years. I know about children. So why I thought that simply by saying all would be equal, the young

members would assume joint responsibility for leadership, I do not know. But I know why I *wanted* it to be so. It was because throughout those years as a teacher I hated having to be the 'authority figure'. Maybe the wish to be rid of the role had blocked all sense of reality. At last, after many coaxing words addressed to individuals by me and the other adults, the children calm down and we are able to proceed. I'm exhausted.

A key feature of the *Weavers* is that the group as a whole chooses activity topics, and last time we decided to look at 'Bible stories' when next we met. It was agreed that everyone would come ready to talk about a favourite Bible story. All the youngsters have forgotten this. Not only that, when asked to think off the top of their heads of a favourite Bible story there are blank faces and some even claim not to know any. I'm stumped. I could draw on my teacherly skills and shape an instant session, but that *is not* the relationship I want to have with these children.

James, always impatient of wasted time and lack of focus, is about to head for his study in search of Bibles, when Jess suddenly remembers that someone has recently been visiting her school assemblies telling Bible stories. I ask her which ones and she starts to dredge up some details. She can't remember any characters' names, but I hazard a few guesses, and she claims to recognise my suggestions. I feel the relationship is going wrong again – I'm being the 'clever-clogs' teacher, and as I add details she's left out it feels as if I'm showing off. But at least the ball is rolling. The rest of the children now realize with pleasure that they know dozens of Bible stories. James takes a lead, encouraging each child to think of a story they like and say why. He meets each contribution with great enthusiasm, saying how important it is. He talks a lot. This, again, is not how I want things to be. But I have to acknowledge with relief that it has got us up to the mid-session snack break in something like a purposeful manner.

Group members take it in turn to provide snacks, and this time Jess and her sister Emma have brought crisps, biscuits and cake. We gather in the kitchen and Lucy pours drinks. She coordinates Junior Church and so relates to these children in a more structured context in which a teacherly word from her would bring immediate results. We catch each other's eye as she's distributing plastic cups and there's something despairing in her look that makes me realize I'm putting her, and the other

adults, in an impossible situation. I feel my face instinctively respond with an expression that says, 'Yes, this won't do for me either.'

We return to the living room for the last part of the evening. The four adults move slowly, almost reluctantly out of the kitchen. I come through the living room doorway and see a circle of children sitting in the middle of the carpet – not looking up expectantly, ready for the next activity, but intent on their own business, talking among themselves, their backs turned to the adults, heads down, oblivious to our presence. The image of that inward-turned circle of seated young people and the four standing giants at the door reminds me of the exchange between Chris and Joyce at the beginning of the evening. I also remember that I had prayed for the group earlier in the day – that we might all enjoy our time together. In the midst of the prayer had come the knowledge that the ongoing uncertainty over leadership was blighting my enjoyment – and probably that of the others too. I take a deep breath and in my best, firm teacher's voice say, 'I need you all to stop talking now and look this way because we have to plan our next session.'

Fifteen minutes later, we have produced a workable plan and are all holding hands in a circle to say the concluding Grace together. As we shout 'Amen!' and give each other's arms a shoulder-dislocating jerk, I have a pleasant sense that I have used my teacher's skills effectively to guide discussion, keeping the group members concentrated on task, ensuring everyone had the opportunity to speak, and summarising the points made so that everyone knew what they were expected to contribute to the next session. Whether they will remember or not, is another matter. But if they don't, I'll have a 'Plan B' ready.

There is the usual ruck at the door as children struggle to find coats and shoes. I tidy up in the living room. Nina's mother comes in to tell me Nina wants to ask something but is too shy to do it herself. She explains that Nina wants to make some bookmarks and sell them in church for church funds. She's made some samples to show me. At this point, Nina appears, brandishing three beautiful creations made from painted lolly sticks with flower-shaped heads covered in stick-on decorations.

'I was thinking of selling them for 20p each,' she says tentatively.
I tell her they are beautiful and she can certainly sell them in church, that I will make sure there is an announcement in the notices next Sunday, that I will organise a table

on which to put her produce, and that she should sell them for 50p each. She beams and jumps for joy.

Nina and her mother are on their way out when, from the hallway, I hear the unmistakeable intonation of a parent berating a child. I recognise the voice. It's Jess's mum. I stay in the living room, not wanting to add to the girl's embarrassment by increasing the audience. I catch words about something in her coat pocket that Jess should have left at home. I feel hot with indignation on her behalf. I think of the way she saved the day by remembering the assembly Bible stories. That's the Jess I want to remember when I get home. That's the Jess I want *Jess* to remember when she gets home.

But when I do get home, it isn't Jess but that circle of children, closed and in-turned that I remember. I open my journal and scribble what comes first into my mind. I write that maybe the children exercised a deeper leadership by obliging the adults to take up their proper role, by declining to take on a responsibility that shouldn't be theirs, by making me recognise that my God-gifted authority should not be abdicated.

Negative feelings – commentary

The given-ness

My *Weavers* experience was dominated by a struggle with the distinction between adult and child and the relationship arising from it. In the sample session above, my discomfort as a 'giant', exiled from the group of children and invisible to them as a person, typifies my feelings. The sample session indicates that the other adults appeared more comfortable in the leadership role commonly associated with adult status: Joyce, the "mother hen"; Lucy, accustomed to being the children's "teacher"; James, "impatient of wasted time". In contrast, my reticence emerges. The distaste I had for exercising authority as a school teacher is recalled; but behind that, origins of the discomfort can be discerned: the fear of "showing off" when sharing knowledge; and my dislike of adults who dominate by talking too much. The latter is an instance of adults overriding children and diminishing them as human beings. My response to the telling-off Jess receives is an example of

the pain I feel on children's behalf when adults deny their agency by exerting authority over them. It is a remembered pain from my own childhood, and is intensified if I am the adult exerting the restrictive authority that I so resented as a child.

As well as being a picture of exile, the 'giant' imagery in the session exemplifies the inescapability of the adult role. An adult may be able to 'hide' by sitting on the floor among children, but eventually all must stand and be reminded of the relationship 'given' by their respective ages. As the journal developed, I began to come to terms with this given-ness. In the events I have selected for inclusion in the session the children show they have already done so, as demonstrated by Chris's simple response to Joyce's question about adults and children. The image of the in-turned circle of children and my journal reflection on it are reminders that adults are not the only ones with a 'say' in how the relationship between themselves and children is enacted. By their behaviour the children seem to insist that the adults accept their given role, and indeed the children are instrumental in the 'giving' as part of a 'social contract'. In contrast to my rejection of adult authority, the children seemed instinctively to see value in it. They appeared to prefer things that way, and the pleasure I felt in exercising some teacherly skills marked a recognition that in certain circumstances, perhaps I did too.

The nature of those circumstances is indicated by some of the events included in the sample session. They are instances in which the 'power' of the adult is used to facilitate the agency of the child. Kaye was eager to be a part of *Weavers* – she had come early to the group. However, she could not gain entrance, because of her soft knock. I provided the confidence and physical strength to achieve success. The young *Weavers* had plenty to contribute to the planning discussion, but without my chairing much would have been lost and the quietest unheard. Nina envisaged and carried out a project to raise funds for church and she enlisted adults to help her bring it to fruition. She used her mother's confidence to engage my services, and thereby used my authority to complete the practical arrangements.

A weighty gift

As well as tracing my acceptance of adult authority as a 'gift', material in my journal also explored the 'weighty' nature of this gift – a consideration that further explains my reluctance to take up its challenge.

My reflections recognised that adults bear ultimate responsibility for the physical safety and social order of the group. This concern is represented in the sample session by the physicality of the children's behaviour to each other. This is portrayed as a social order issue concerning the activity the group were to undertake, but anxiety for the physical well-being of the children was also present. Such considerations entail the challenge of making 'judgement calls' about acceptable behaviour. The children's emotional welfare is also an adult responsibility, and concern that Kaye and Emma be comfortable in the group was indicated by observations about their responses.

Adults' greater experience and expertise bring responsibility for organising and guiding the activity of the group. The incident in the sample session when the children forgot what they had agreed to do was not an isolated instance. The final planning discussion represents my eventual acceptance of responsibility for focusing the group's thoughts, clarifying organisational matters, and providing alternative plans.

B. POSITIVE FEELINGS (old and young stand together)

The positive feelings recorded in my journal arose from instances of bonding with children and their acceptance of me; of sharing activities with them; and in moments when they demonstrated their capabilities, especially in taking a share in leadership. Many approaches characteristic of children were in themselves enjoyable to witness but also gave me the pleasure of joining in with them and revealed new faith insights, as did children's contributions to discussion. These insights and other aspects of the multi-generational experience prompted personal reflection and added to my pleasure in the children's company. The following sample session is constructed from events

recorded in the journal that illustrate the above points and, like its predecessor, is intended to facilitate reader engagement with my feelings.

IN A SUMMER GARDEN

The vicarage has a large back garden. As I get out of my car, I can hear the shouts and screams of children from behind the house. This is the second summer of the *Weavers* and a new group of children has joined. There are now ten regular youngsters. Emma has stopped coming. Still the same adult members. I go through to the garden. Children are running, swinging, sliding, bouncing on the trampoline, kicking a rugby ball high into the sky.

Jess has decided the opening game will be dodgeball. She's good at this kind of thing – plays basketball at a high level. It's great to see her strength and agility as she races round the garden. I wince and keep wanting to shout, 'Don't trip on the rockery!' but she's sure-footed and confident. The others may not be as skilled – except rugby-playing Chris – but they all move at speed. Lucy skips around, shouting out. James is a born competitor, and director – he calls loudly, issuing orders as he passes the ball. Even Joyce, the oldest of us all, is shouting out reminders of the rules and swirling across the lawn in her long skirt. I'm the only one who is leaden-footed and silent. I'm not feeling out of it though. I'm enjoying being in the midst of all this life. But I'm not getting much of the ball.

Chris shouts, 'You should call for it, Steve!'

'Not my style!' I shout back.

He laughs as he races away across the grass. It's the warm laughter of a shared joke.

Dale decides to play a strange game within a game. When he's 'out' – hit on the legs with the softball – he withdraws to the swing and keeps shouting, 'Nobody can hit me twice!' I consider saying something to him, but the other children seem to cope. They either ignore him or shout back, 'You're already out.' I wonder if he's upset that he's out, or maybe he's going to *become* upset because no one is taking up his challenge, but he seems content to be still involved by shouting from the sidelines.

Joyce tells us we can have one more round, and then it's time to begin the session. For the first part we split into 'originals' and 'new' members. The three other adults take the new members. I take the originals. I want to use some special cards with

them and need a table, so I start dragging a heavy garden table onto the patio. Jess sees what I'm doing and quietly takes the other end. Together we lift it into place. I say, 'Thank you.' The cards[17] are like normal playing cards, but each has a question on it. The youngsters quickly invent a game that will determine who gets which question, and we have time to answer a couple each. Some of the topics are heavy, but the atmosphere stays light. I breathe deeply. I've had a rough week, but the warm, garden-smelling air, the sun and the company relax me. I lounge and listen, trying not to say too much when it's my turn to answer.

As I put the cards back in their box and Dale spreads out the snacks he's brought, I'm already forgetting the children's answers, and how their game worked. What I do remember is that they took as long considering, 'What is the best food in the world, ever?' as they did over, 'Would you rather forgive or be forgiven?' But most of all I remember the ease we had in each other's company. As the drinks are handed round, I'm feeling relaxed and confident so, finding I'm standing near to Jess, I ask how her sister Emma is getting on. Normally, I would fear some awkwardness or rebuff, but Jess doesn't shy away. She simply chats to me for a few moments about her sister's studies before we drift apart – she to the trampoline, I to a quick consultation with James about next Sunday's service.

I call order, and gather everyone to sit on the grass. We've been working through a list of topics the group has thought up. This session we're due to consider 'Why do people choose to be nasty to other people?' I get flipchart paper and felts and collect ideas for different aspects of the topic. I categorise them into three groups. People then choose which group they want to work on. We normally try and have one adult per group, but on this occasion one group is all children. They say they'll be fine without an adult, so I give the ok and allocate groups to different parts of the garden.

The group I've chosen is thinking about 'reasons for nastiness'. Dale is in the group. Dark haired, intense and rational, he deals with the issue at a stroke by pronouncing nastiness a feature of childhood that people simply grow out of. He talks frankly and unemotionally about being bullied at school and how he deals with it. He's surprised when I tell him that some grown-ups can be nasty too. Dale thinks

[17] From *Schoolswork.co.uk*

and talks fast. He soon gets to work on this information, developing a theory that there must be something that hasn't 'hatched' inside grown-ups like this. He does a mime of something desperately trying to get out of what he calls 'a steel eggshell'. Joyce is also in the group – we look at each other in amazement.

Chris is in the group with no adult and marches over, seeking clarification on the task. Joyce goes into too much detail and Chris stops her, mid-sentence, with a raised hand.

'That'll do, Joyce,' he says and returns to his group.

The sun's dipping and it's time for us to finish. Our group decides to do a presentation to the others next time based on Dale's steel eggshell mime. I wander towards Chris's group. He sees me coming and bars my way.

'Do not disturb!' he says.

I apologise and ask if they're ready to wind up.

'Nearly,' he says.

Looking past him I can see that the group is gathered in a circle and Jess is writing down plans. I'm surprised as I had been keeping half an eye on them and they hadn't seemed particularly 'on task', spending most of their time on the slide.

Time to go. Parents are at the garden gate. The *Weavers* gather in their traditional circle to say the Grace. We look at each other's faces as we say the ancient words. By chance I catch Anna's eyes. Tall, long dark hair, dark eyes – very intelligent, but often seeming disengaged, happy just to nod and agree with what the last person said. I don't feel as if I've ever connected with her – always had a suspicion she views me with mild disdain. But as the light weakens in the summer sky, our eyes meet and there is no disdain in her steady look.

James walks me to my car. He's a shoulders-back, chest-out sort of man – he doesn't droop. But tonight he's oozing tiredness. We stop by my car door and he tells me he's had a difficult pastoral issue that afternoon.

'When I came back here to a happy garden full of adults and children playing and socialising together, I thought I'd far rather be with the *Weavers,*' he says. 'It's been fab this evening. Why can't all the world be like that?'

Positive feelings – commentary

Gifts in relationship

My journal recorded evidence that natural, equal relationships with children give me a personal acceptance and affirmation that I feel to be trustworthy. In the sample session, Anna's look while sharing the Grace was a brief but powerful example of this. The helping hand given by Jess in lifting the table was another, and demonstrated how such moments are promoted when children take initiatives during sessions. Such initiatives are themselves encouraged by an ethos that welcomes what children have to offer – such as their ideas on the card game or input on aspects of the topic to be discussed. The more experiences adults and children share, the more they have to talk about, and the natural conversation with Jess about her sister demonstrated this.

Gifts of the child

In the garden, the children were in their natural element – able to express themselves physically in play. There was enjoyment for the adults in joining in, but children such as Jess and Chris were the sure-footed 'experts'. Play was also used for investigation, and Dale's eggshell mime was a striking example of a child's effective use of the imagination for 'serious' play. His discussion of bullying grounded his exploration in experience; and the children in this session drew widely on their experience of 'nastiness' to analyse its origins. Such matters of practical interest were always more engaging to them than more 'churchy' topics, and their engagement gave me a positive sense of shared enterprise. I also felt positive about the group when the young members showed themselves capable of successful social interaction and task-orientated organisation. Their response to Dale in the dodgeball game, and the conduct of the 'group without an adult' were examples of this in the sample session.

Gifts to the adult

By being in the company of the young *Weavers* and in relationship with them; by seeking to articulate and communicate beliefs and values to them; by

sharing activities and exploring with them; and by observation and reflection I was led to self-interrogation and critical assessment; reminded of things I had lost sight of; and given new recognitions, insights and better understandings concerning my being, behaviours, beliefs, practices and values. In the sample session, the recognition of what was and wasn't 'my style' of play; the new thinking Dale provoked about 'nastiness'; and the contrast felt both by James and myself between the ethos of *Weavers* and that of our other worlds are all examples of these kinds of effect.

Analysis findings

My journal provided evidence of the 'effects' that children are commonly assumed to have on adults: their physicality, and their practical, experiential, playful and imaginative approaches were recorded; as were reflections on aspects of my being, behaviours, beliefs, practices and values, arising from sharing time, activities and faith material with the young *Weavers.* However, the structure of my analysis did not give prominence to these aspects of my experience. This reflected the weakness of their impact on me. They were interesting observations rather than transformative experiences: if I were looking for an effect powerful enough to fit me for the kingdom of heaven – as the scriptural roots of my quest suggest I should[18] – then these observations and reflections would not serve the purpose. And to return to the original objection raised in the Northern Region Advisers meeting – that the characteristics often identified with the 'patterns of discipleship' children might provide were not unique or universal among children – then that could certainly be said of the instances I recorded.

The only aspect of the 'Positive Feelings' strand of my analysis that had a powerful personal effect was the 'Gifts in relationship' material, where I recorded positive feelings either in terms of the trustworthy sense of affirmation I received or because of the alternative provided to the authority relationship I had so disliked as a schoolteacher. In this latter case there are

[18] Matthew 18: 3 and 19: 14; Mark 10: 14, 15; Luke 18: 16, 17.

clear links to the 'Negative Feelings' strand of the analysis, and it was in that strand that the other significant, personal effects of the *Weavers* experience were revealed as I struggled with my rejection of the adult authority role and recognised that the equality I had written into the structure of the *Weavers* group, ostensibly as a practical matter of good practice, might actually derive from a deep-seated personal aversion.

The 'Negative Feelings' strand of the analysis contains the most powerful effects I experienced in the *Weavers.* The final effect was not, however, negative since I began, through the analysis of the journal, to come to terms with and eventually value the responsibilities adults have in relation to children, recognising their various demands and seeing them as a given of the human condition – a God-given 'gift' of being. In this way I began to value the 'standing apart' as well as the 'standing together' aspect of my *Weavers* experience. The most powerful effects, then, were experienced not as a result of any child's words or actions, nor as a result of exposure to the children's ways of doing and being *per se* but rather as a result of the total experience of relating to them. This was an experience to which the children's words, actions, and being contributed, but which was shaped by what I brought, as a unique individual with my own history and preoccupations, to this inter-generational encounter.

If my analysis findings challenge the common assumptions about what will affect adults most powerfully in their encounters with children, this final observation also calls into doubt another assumption implicit in the way that those involved in children's ministry commonly discuss and portray this topic: namely that there is a set of universally observable effects to be discerned when adults work with children.

To return to my research question:

> *What personal effects do adult Christians experience when they explore the Christian faith in company with children?*

My analysis findings suggest that the effect of children on adults is influenced by what the individual adults concerned bring to the encounter. Once recognised, this is not in itself a surprising finding. However, it has the potential for deeper significance in terms of the theological reflection to which

such a recognition can give rise. When adults reflect on how their individuality has shaped the effects they have experienced, they can gain valuable and sometimes unexpected personal insights. As I will demonstrate in the next section, these personal insights offer the possibility of grounded theological reflection.

In the light of these findings, the response to my research question would be:

> *Adult Christians can experience valuable personal insights, from which theological self-examination can flow, when they explore the Christian faith in company with children.*

In other words, as adults, children can 'show us what we're made of'.

The recognition that 'what we're made of'[19] is a 'gift', was a turning point for the understanding of my analysis. Its importance is reflected in the frequent use of the words 'gift' and 'given-ness' in Figure 4, and by its re-emergence as an interpretative key later in the thesis (see Chapter 6). The process of this recognition was an example of the 'heart sense' referred to above. The more I used the vocabulary of 'gift' and thought and talked about my findings in this way, the stronger the conviction became that this was the key to understanding the significance of what I had found. Common parlance might term such understanding 'a revelation', and this religious term hints at the theological potential of personal reflection.

2. FROM ANALYSIS TO THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

This section describes the second part of the *Weavers* research process, in which the theological significance of the analysis findings in section 1 is explored.

This enquiry arises from the question 'what is special about children?' deriving from the scriptures that show Jesus commending children to his

[19] Including the 'spirit of the age', 'childhood experiences', 'encounters and relationships' and 'individual characteristics' identified as influencing Schleiermacher's theology in Chapter 3.

disciples as worthy of special attention. In other words, it is a theological enquiry concerning the connection between attention to children and adult discipleship. The findings of section 1, above, were more personal than theological. Indeed, one finding was that the overt faith material in the *Weavers* experience held only passing interest for me. To complete the research into my experience it was therefore necessary to develop theological reflections from the personal insights of the analysis findings. Section 2 of this chapter begins by outlining the process I developed to achieve this second stage. It is described at length here rather than in Chapter 3[20] since – following an emergent model – its detail was developed in response to the analysis findings rather than in advance of them. The section concludes by indicating the outcome of the reflective process.

It must be stressed that the following account is not offered as a generalizable model either in process or outcome. Rather, its significance lies in demonstrating that an adult Christian can find a resource for the journey of discipleship in reflecting on the personal effects experienced in sharing time with children. It is, therefore, the *nature* of the reflection rather than its *particulars* that is important for the argument of this thesis. However, it would be impossible to appreciate that nature without some account of the particulars.

The reflective process – frame of reference

Graham, Walton and Ward (2005 and 2007) describe seven 'types' of theological reflection. Of these, "The Living Human Document" (2005, 18-46; 2007, 51-88) examines human experience as the source of theological awareness and seeks to transform it into text – 'living human documents' that record their authors' encounters with others, the world and with God, and are available for reflection, study and analysis. This location of valid theological material in the experience of the individual clearly relates to the ethos of my study. The 'type' also makes use of journal writing, spiritual autobiography and creative writing – forms of representation employed in my record and analysis of the *Weavers* experience. For these reasons I located my

[20] Where the connection between experience and theology is introduced.

reflection within the framework of 'The Living Human Document', and continued to draw on it in shaping my process.

Warren, Murray and Best (quoted in Graham et al, 2007, 18-19), identify three major approaches to theological reflection. These are: use of the 'Wesley quadrilateral' of scripture, tradition, reason and experience; establishing a relationship with a classic Christian theme; and taking an approach from a particular scholarly theological perspective. As my purpose was to demonstrate a resource available to a broad range of 'ordinary' adult Christians (see Chapter 3) the second and third of these options did not recommend themselves. The 'quadrilateral' option seemed more appropriate since many 'ordinary' Christians would be able to bring some light to bear from each perspective – especially since Warren et al include "hymns, prayers and creeds" as well as "scholarly texts" among resources for accessing the Christian tradition (*ibid,* 18). They also define their understanding of experience as "the affective way of engaging with and apprehending reality" (*ibid,* 19) thus broadening it from a strictly Wesleyan reading. Within 'The Living Human Document' framework, I therefore chose to use a quadrilateral approach to reflection, as interpreted by Warren et al.

The reflective process – procedure

Of the two strands in my analysis findings – positive and negative feelings – I chose to reflect on the negative feelings associated with the issue of authority since they seemed to offer the possibility of the richest material. I based this judgement on the strength of the feelings evoked while working on the analysis.

I began my reflection by free-associating with the issue of authority to identify emotive scenes in my life – from childhood to the present – that resonated with it. Analysis of the 41 scenes that emerged, using a constant comparative approach, revealed two groupings that were at a deeper level than the initial journal analysis. One group contained scenes in which my 'problem with authority' stemmed from self-orientated motives – not wanting to be 'bossed around'; while in the other it arose from concern for others – wanting to defend their freedoms. I selected material from some of the 41 scenes to create two autobiographical stories, reflecting the two groups. Like

the sample *Weavers* sessions they were 'composites', bringing together events that had happened but not necessarily at the same time. To 'thicken' the descriptions, I incorporated the imagined viewpoints of other characters in the stories (West, Noble and Todd, 1999, 37-38). I also gave myself a pseudonym and wrote in the third person to distance myself from the material (Herr and Anderson, 2005, 60).

I now used these stories as fresh data. To further objectify this personal material, I analysed it using literary techniques, examining the use of figurative language, images, similes, metaphors, striking adjectives or expressive choices of verb, noun or adverb. As I had written the pieces quickly without revision these features offered access to affective 'deep themes'. These themes became the subject of my theological reflection.

Stephen Pattison (2000, 136) offers a model of theological reflection as "critical conversation" – a model that resonates with the 'quadrilateral' approach. The 'deep themes' identified beneath my autobiographical stories became one 'participant' in such a conversation – the voice of my deep experience. I sought to foster a sense of real, group conversation (*ibid,* 143) by enlisting two ministerial colleagues in my parish to reflect on my autobiographical stories from the perspectives of scripture and Christian tradition; and two suitably qualified friends to reflect on the stories from the perspective of relevant contemporary social issues (*ibid,* 136). Thus scripture, tradition and reason were brought into conversation with the 'deep themes' of my experience.

I asked these 'conversation partners' to provide me with typed reflections, which I analysed to establish the "difficult questions" they raised (*ibid,* 141). I then imagined a conversation between myself, a composite theologian, and a composite social commentator (see Moon, [1999] 2002, 132-133) in which some of these questions were debated, together with those posed by the 'deep themes' from my autobiographies. I used my script-writing skills to produce dialogue, again writing instinctively and without revision. When the conversation reached a natural conclusion – at about 2,000 words – I imagined that my 'guests' the theologian and the commentator had departed and I meditated on the debate. Finally, I 'summed

up' by addressing my thoughts and feelings to God in prayer (see Augustine of Hippo and Merton, cited in Graham et al, 2007, 53-56; 60-63).

The reflective process – outcome

The outcome of this process was a richer understanding of my problems with 'authority'. I came to see the word as personal shorthand for a complex of issues concerning both the tensions between individual freedom and the requirements of social living; and the demands of acting 'with authority' in social situations. The use of the autobiographies helped me trace these issues from my experience as a parent and a teacher back to my youth and childhood. I reconnected with forgotten levels of pain, anger, frustration and helplessness in the face of social 'givens' that demanded I act in ways deemed appropriate to my age and supposed capabilities. The discipline of writing other viewpoints into my stories enabled me to recognise some of the fears that drove and still drive the 'angry young man' who remains within me: fear of inadequacy and failure in exercising authority in life; and insecurity about the gifts that have been imputed to me by parents, teachers, friends and colleagues. This set of apparently negative insights was balanced by the realization that although my rejection of 'authority' was motivated partly by a selfish concern to avoid the challenges of exercising it, a significant proportion of my concern was motivated by a desire to ensure others' freedom to express themselves fully and not be diminished by oppression.

The above is a psychological, social and political analysis. It became theological when I considered each aspect of it as part of God's story as well as my own. Much of the self-examination was to do with 'givens' – the givens of my attributes and experiences and of the social situations in which I found and find myself. The point at which I changed 'givens' from a figure of speech to a literal description of a faith position – that God is giver of all – was the point at which a secular account of experience changed into a religious interpretation of being.

When David Hay was investigating 'religious experience' in the 1980s he asked whether this was an appropriate term for the material with which he was working. Most of the experiences were not classic "numinous and mystical occurrences" (1987, 165). Nevertheless, they were "a type of

experience which is commonly given a religious interpretation" (*ibid,*166) – although not all his participants wished to define their experiences in this way (*ibid,* 154). The experiences he recorded were connected with an awareness of some undefined 'power' or 'presence', whereas my reflections concerned the 'everyday'; but I would claim that this too is experience that, if not 'commonly' interpreted as religious, is nonetheless capable of that interpretation. As some of Hay's participants chose not to interpret their heightened experiences as religious so many do not interpret their everyday lives as part of a divine story; but that is not to say that it cannot bear that interpretation. The theological approach that I employed in my reflections, as outlined in Chapter 3, was to place life issues in the context of a faith story[21]. The challenge and complexity lay not in wrestling with abstract theological concepts in relation to ancient scriptures, but in valuing the complexities of everyday, lived experience as part of a divine narrative.

The conclusion of the reflective process, in which I took the 'debate' to God in prayer, was not 'conclusive' in bringing a resolution. Although I found myself able to accept the situations I had wrestled with as 'gift', I did not lose the anger and pain associated with the conflicts that seem inherent in this 'given' life. However, I found that I was not angry with God, but with those who try to minimise the pain of the world. I found that I was not 'working it out' with God but 'pouring it out' and that what I was working out was what to pour.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The journey that led to the reflection described above began as a search for the general 'effects' experienced by a Christian adult when sharing time with children in a faith-nurturing context. Analysis of the researcher's journal indicated that the effects were not 'general' and certainly not generalizable. Rather they were particular to the researcher, shaped by issues in his life, and showed him what he 'was made of'.

[21] As examples from Quoist and the Celtic tradition demonstrated everyday occurrences being turned into prayer.

The background to the research lay in the scriptures that indicate a child ‘in the midst’ of adult Christian disciples can assist them in their discipleship and furnish them with a ‘road map’ to the kingdom of heaven. In the light of these expectations, the conclusion that being with children can provide a catalyst for self-examination was insufficient. The insights of the analysis findings were therefore developed into a personal theological reflection. The resulting process led to the production of materials that, being captured in written form, remain a personal resource for reflection, meditation and prayer. And the journal from which they arose, also being written and archived, could generate further analysis and reflection.

The substance of the theological reflection has been briefly sketched above but not reproduced in detail since the substance is not the significant outcome but rather the evidence it gives that the adult/child interface can inspire theological reflection that contributes to adult discipleship. This chapter suggests that the full ‘effect’ of a multi-generational encounter on adults in a faith setting occurs in two stages: the first is the experience, shaped by the adult’s background; the second is theological reflection, influenced again by what the adult brings.

The findings of an investigation based on one individual’s experience, such as those recorded in this chapter, require confirmation by comparison with the experiences of others. The following two chapters fulfil this basic corroborative function. However, the introduction of new perspectives will also offer the exciting possibility of extending and developing the theological insights emerging from the current chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE VIEW FROM ELSEWHERE

> Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find the way to be true to it … Listen patiently and seek the truth which other people's opinions may contain for you.
>
> Advices and Queries, No17
> Religious Society of Friends

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Four adults were involved in the *Weavers* group: myself (Steve[22]); James, the vicar; his wife, Lucy; and Joyce, a Licensed Lay Reader in the parish. This had the advantage of giving four experiences of the same events and thus providing corroboration that adults are affected differently by the company of children. But more importantly, in considering the personal factors that contributed to this diversity it allowed me to identify themes with theological potential that arise from them. The differences in our four experiences and the themes underlying them emerged from analysis of a recorded conversation in which we discussed the effects we had experienced as members of the *Weavers*.

The chapter begins with an initial overview summarising the three topics covered in the conversation and compares the distinctive contributions made to them by each adult. The contributions are then analysed individually, with reference to the personal factors that influenced them. Finally, these personal factors are grouped under four themes and the theological questions they raise are highlighted.

1. THE CONVERSATION

Rather than directing the conversation, the researcher began it by asking what effects had been experienced from *Weavers* then let the discussion

[22] All other *Weavers* names are pseudonyms.

take its own course, contributing thereafter as an equal participant. The conversation passed through three main topics: ‘adults and children’; ‘a sense of community’; and ‘gifts of the child’. Brief summaries of these topics are given below, followed by the distinctive perspectives of the four adults.

Adults and children

The adults began by discussing behaviour issues, but the ‘difficulties’ were seen as stemming from positive characteristics of children such as honesty and sense of humour. When problems with group planning were raised, it was noted that an inability to focus on task was not a problem unique to children. This raised the question, what *does* set children apart? The topic ended by considering what was special about the *relationship* between adults and children – why it feels so good to adults, when it works.

The following distinctive individual perspectives were identifiable:

Steve: Concern over whose needs are being met – the children’s or the researcher’s.

Lucy: An emphasis on mutuality and enjoyment of each other’s company.

James: Questions regarding a right understanding of adult responsibilities towards children, and what adults should learn from children.

Joyce: Positivity towards adult/child relationships, characterising the adults as the privileged parties.

A sense of community

The discussion of good adult/child relationships prompted comments about a sense of family, trust and love. This led to thoughts on the communal sense in the *Weavers* and issues for the wider church – the need for adults to relate to children, and the love children show towards adults who do this. This

mutual love suggested love within the Body of Christ. It was the responsibility of adult members to promote a communal sense in *Weavers* by positive nurture and intervention when behaviour threatened the community ethos. As this topic closed, the enthusiasm of the children for *Weavers* was noted, and the way the informality and hospitality of the group fostered relationships with parents.

Distinctive perspectives were:

Steve: The group gives material for general reflection on human community irrespective of age.

Lucy: Adults and children both have a responsibility for building and maintaining community.

James: The children have a natural communal sense and promote a sense of community among the adults, thus building the Eucharistic Body of Christ.

Joyce: The way forward in establishing 'community friendly' behaviour in the group is through children's desire for everyone, including the adults, to feel good.

Gifts of the child

The positive assessment of the current group ethos led to consideration of the needs of an imminent new intake of children. This returned discussion to the unresolved question of what makes children special. The new perspectives they offer were mentioned, and the 'have a go' mentality that produces them. Children's lack of traditional theological knowledge was also seen as a positive in facilitating unusual connections. The creation of a wordless, symbol-rich Creation Banner in one *Weavers* session was

remembered. Finally the discussion turned to speculation about Matthew 18: 3[23] and related scriptures.

Distinctive perspectives were:

Steve: The adults' self-examination when responding to the children's 'free', 'honest' and therefore 'difficult' behaviour.

Lucy: Valuing the fun children have and their 'no-frills' honesty.

James: The energizing effect of the children's company, deriving from their creativity, risk taking and non-conformity.

Joyce: Valuing the children's ability to work with symbol, their freedom from constraint, and their orientation towards process rather than product.

2. THE PERSONAL TOUCH – CONTRIBUTORS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

The comparisons in section 1 indicate the different perspectives of the four adults. If, as Chapter 4 suggests, *the effect of children on adults is influenced by what the individual adults concerned bring to the encounter,* it should be possible to connect the perspectives of the adult *Weavers* revealed in their contributions to the conversation with the lives and experiences they bring to the group. Section 2 of this chapter will make these connections.

As well as comparing the four adults' contributions to the three topics in the *Weavers* conversation, their contributions were also analysed separately. The four resulting analyses each demonstrated a characteristic, clearly distinguishable perspective. The researcher's perspective concerned 'the nature of the child'. Lucy's contributions gave a strong sense of 'enjoying

[23] "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven".

each other's company'. For James, speculation around the question 'what are children for?' was key. And Joyce's prominent concern was with 'relating to children'.

When James and Steve engaged with each other's ideas in conversation this produced some convergences in their contributions; and the titles given to the analyses of the four contributions do not imply that each perspective was exclusive to only one participant. However, each adult demonstrated a strong affinity with a particular perspective. The analysis of each adult's contribution to the conversation is summarised below, and their distinctive perspective linked to their life and experience.

Steve – 'The nature of the child'

The personal story that I bring to the *Weavers* is dominated by the fact that as well as participating, I am observing and reflecting as a researcher. The overall title I gave to the analysis of my contributions – 'The nature of the child' – recalls my initial research interest in why children are 'special'. The subheadings in the analysis of my contributions – 'Children are the responsibility of adults', 'Children raise relational questions', and 'Children are free from constraint' – reflect concerns found in my *Weavers* journal, and those concerns were deeply personal (see Chapter 4).

<u>Children are the responsibility of adults</u>

The material I collected under this heading indicated a dawning acceptance of this responsibility as 'gift' within God's providence. I continued, however, to struggle with the implications of discharging that responsibility through leadership. In relation to the latter point I expressed concerns about introducing reflective material to the *Weavers* that suited my research rather than the children's interests. I also questioned the ethics of encouraging children to share their deeper feelings when this could be seen as applying pressure and prying.

<u>Children raise relational questions</u>

My contributions in this area again reflect aspects of my journal content and analysis. In the conversation, I asked why it felt so good when a child related

positively to me – why the effect I experienced was so much stronger than in a similar situation with adults. Another personal concern associated with my research project – that of the similarities between adults and children – also emerged in my contributions regarding relationship. I remarked that some of the 'difficult' behaviour encountered with the young *Weavers* was not peculiar to children, and that the difficulties we experienced in *Weavers* represented the universal human struggle to coexist with those who have different priorities.

Children are free from constraint

This resonates with reflections on my journal analysis in which I link my 'problem' with authority with my desire to uphold the rights and needs of the individual against the threats of an authoritarian approach. The freedom of the child evokes a complex response in adults. I indicated that I valued the young *Weavers'* freedom from constraint, even if it might entail an occasional instance of seeming rudeness, since it could lead to creativity and also unrestrained personal responses to situations or to learning.

The personal touch

The fact that the analysis of my contributions to the *Weavers* conversation reproduces some of the analysis of my *Weavers* journal provides helpful triangulation, supporting the reliability of the journal analysis. The concerns with authority and relationship found in both my journal and my conversation contributions demonstrate the personal nature of the effect the *Weavers* experience had on me.

My resistance to coercion and conformity has been lifelong; as has my commitment to egalitarianism and the common right to self-determination. As noted in Chapter 3, I grew up in an age of protest, and I have been protesting ever since against anything or anyone that tells me, 'This is how it has to be – you have no choice.' I am also an only child and have consequently always felt unsure of myself in social contexts, continually seeking affirming relationship. These personal observations demonstrate how the effects of being with children in the *Weavers,* as revealed by the analyses of my journal

and contributions to the *Weavers* conversation, reflect the individual characteristics I brought to the group.

Lucy – 'Enjoying each other's company'

Mutuality was a key feature of Lucy's distinctive contributions to the first two topics in the *Weavers* conversation, and appreciation of the honesty of children was her notable contribution to the third. The individual analysis of her contributions revealed her key concern to be 'enjoying each other's company'. She expressed this concern by exploring three areas: 'working together', 'mutuality', and 'sharing issues'.

Working together

In an early contribution to the conversation Lucy identified the multi-generational planning of activities as a strength of *Weavers*, and an aspect that the children enjoyed. Her appreciation of the openness to contributions from all offered by this approach is recalled by the value she gave later in the conversation to the wordless 'Creation Banner' created by the group. "It can be interpreted as you wish," she explained. Thus the co-created banner could have a co-created meaning.

Mutuality

I initiated the conversation by asking what effects the adults had experienced*,* but Lucy's contributions emphasised that the importance of the *Weavers* lay in the two-way traffic of mutuality. Alongside *her* memories of being with the young *Weavers* she was keen to stress what the children gained from being with the adults. When I asked why it felt so good to an adult when a child related positively to them, Lucy stated that the children felt just as good about a successful adult/child relationship. Regarding behaviour issues, Lucy explained that she became frustrated when children's behaviour was exclusive, threatening the corporate nature of the group.

Sharing issues

Through pleasure in each other's company, the give and take of mutuality, and working together on common tasks, the *Weavers* have been encouraged

to share issues of personal importance. It was this that Lucy highlighted when, at the conclusion of the conversation, I invited the participants to raise any subjects not yet covered. She cited the example of Emma sharing her thoughts about how church made her feel. For Lucy this openness was “a really special thing”.

The personal touch

Lucy has coordinated the parish Junior Church for a number of years. She therefore has more regular contact with the children in *Weavers,* and in more varied circumstances than the other adult members. They are more a part of her life and her relationship with them is more developed. Her pleasure in the children’s company and in the fact that they enjoy the adults’ company could be seen to reflect this. And the fact that she is an enthusiastic and committed coordinator of the Junior Church indicates a natural appreciation of young people’s company.

When I discussed my analysis of her contributions with her, Lucy recognised this link. She also noted that she encourages young people to engage deeply with issues and bring concerns into the open, as reflected in her comments on Emma’s “special” openness. She encourages her own children to be open in this way, and links this to the fact that as a child, she felt unable to share her worries about the world with her widowed mother.

James – ‘What are they for?’

An engagement with scripture, a concern for Eucharistic community, and a fascination with the special ‘life’ in children are distinctive features of the contributions James made to the conversation. With Lucy, he is the parent of two young children, and at the time of the conversation had also been researching childhood, adulthood and the relationship between the two. These factors, coming together with his *Weavers* experiences raised the fundamental question: what are children for?

James approached this issue generally by posing the question, “What is it that makes a child different from an adult?” and more specifically by asking whether children were “mini-adults waiting to become adults” or whether there was “something particular about what they are?” As a

Christian, he added a scriptural dimension to this question, citing the claim that in order to enter the Kingdom one must first change and become like a child[24].

His speculations about what these words might mean concerned the specialness of children, and his search for "the essence of childhood" surfaced at various points throughout the conversation. Analysis of his contributions, identified two contrasting pictures of children – as 'catalysts of community growth', but also as 'edgy elements within a social group'.

Catalysts of community growth

One of the first comments James made during the conversation was that the children had shown commitment to the group and this had motivated him to reciprocate. He also identified the friendships the children had formed with adults both in *Weavers* and the wider church as part of the family sense children generate around them. He also noted the pleasure of working with the other adult members as one of the benefits he gains from *Weavers*. The commitment shown by parents was mentioned, and he considered that *Weavers* had fostered more relaxed relationships between himself, as vicar, and these other adult congregation members.

For James, the 'community' that the children were helping to strengthen also had a theological significance. When discussing the love that adults need to have for children if they are to work well with them, he stated that this was an expression of "our collective love of children as the Body of Christ." He also reminded the other adults that *Weavers* had been designed to provide ongoing nurture to a group of children who had been admitted to Holy Communion before Confirmation[25]. The status of these children as fellow communicants was important to James. Recalling *Weavers'* participation in an experimental communion service at York Minister, he noted that the children's enthusiasm and the welcome they had received were powerful reaffirmations for him of the importance of Communion within the Christian community.

[24] Matthew 18: 3.
[25] My search for a multi-generational group as a data source coincided with this parish need.

Edgy elements within a social group

There is, however, an aspect of James's contributions that contrasts with the picture of children as agents of social cohesion. He also saw children as risk takers and innovators. While this brought the energy and excitement of creative chaos, it also threatened social structures through the breaking of rules, making children an 'edgy' element. James recounted with relish how the children "went into places where they were meant to be silent and talked" during the *Weavers* visit to York Minister. However, he was critical when horseplay and giggling disrupted *Weavers* activities.

For James, creative chaos and innovation were valuable benefits of children's 'edgy' freedom and boldness. He recalled a session that all the adults had found significant, in which the group created a banner on the subject of Creation from the "chaos and mess" of a pile of material. James described the session as "one of our messiest and most fabulous ones." He spoke about this while reflecting on children's ability to cope with getting things wrong – an aspect of their boldness that made them more willing than many adults to "have a go" with little concern for consequences.

Several times after *Weavers* sessions, James commented that children recharged his batteries. During the conversation he repeated this observation and asked "what is it specifically about the life that dwells in them that energizes me as an adult?" Later, he seemed to associate this mysterious energy and life with the divine, connecting Emmanuel, "God with us", with "light and life" and concluding, "there's a life in children that (…) seems to burn slightly more brightly than my light burns some of the time."

The personal touch

The fact that James was the only participant to pursue scriptural and theological speculations at any length reflects his theological training and position as vicar. However, when discussing my analysis of his contributions with me, James said simply, "That's the way I am." He characterised himself as naturally enquiring and saw his probing, speculative approach to scripture as reflective of his nature as a person and a Christian.

James's current life experience as a parent, together with the formal study he was undertaking into childhood issues informed the questions he

raised about the nature and significance of children and adults' relation to them. He also noted, in discussing my analysis, that employment as a youth worker prior to ordination had given him an abiding interest in young people.

As vicar, James also has an interest in promoting community in the parish, particularly the Eucharistic community of the Body of Christ, and this was reflected in the first aspect of his contributions. The second aspect – an ambivalent response to the 'edgy' nature of children – reflects a tension between his interest in freedom and creativity (he is a poet, and a creative liturgist) and his liking for clear leadership and purposeful activity.

Joyce – 'Relating to children'

The value Joyce attaches to children is seen in all her distinctive contributions to the three *Weavers* conversation topics. A key feature of her response to the *Weavers* experience, found frequently among her contributions to the conversation, is positivity about relationships with children, especially as individuals. However, she is also mindful of the issues that problematise relationships between adults and children, and this generates another thread concerning anxieties about rudeness and also about adult responsibilities in responding to such behaviour.

<u>Valuing children</u>

Joyce demonstrated the value she places on children by expressing her appreciation of their characteristics. Contributing to the discussion on the "essence of childhood," initiated by James, she suggested that it might involve children's freedom from constraints – a freedom that meant, "they tend to be more open and honest about things." She concluded by noting that freedom is a frequent gospel theme. She critiqued the common negative view of children as literal thinkers, by observing that in the making of the 'Creation Banner' it was the adults who produced literal images "whereas [the children] chose something like 'beauty' and you got these few feathers." She even took something usually perceived as negative – getting things muddled – and turned it into a positive by noting that when children muddle things up "you can start having a fantastic conversation about things."

As a consequence of the value Joyce accorded to children she expressed concern that their needs be recognised and met. She recalled a session in which the group had reflected on being "made in the image of God" and she wondered what the children had thought about it. This concern over outcomes for children emerged earlier when Lucy voiced anxiety about the arrival of a new cohort of younger children, particularly their ability to engage in discussion. Joyce developed Lucy's concern for age appropriateness by suggesting a need for a balance of activities so that they were not all word-orientated.

Rudeness, and adult responsibilities

The sense of a threatening "trend in 'the youth of today' … to be as rude as possible to everyone that's older than you" is discernable in Joyce's reflections on the children's behaviour. However, she is eager to see evidence of the young *Weavers* "kicking against" such a trend, and rejoices when they do so. In discussing the annoyance caused to adults when children withdrew into whispering cliques, Joyce recalled one of the children who often engaged in this behaviour contributing openly to the whole group, commenting enthusiastically, "that gave me a real thrill."

Minimising adult leadership in *Weavers* impacted on two areas of traditional adult responsibility – behaviour management and programme planning. Regarding the former, Joyce recalled that when the adults had explained how some behaviours make others feel bad, the children had responded well. "They do like people to feel good," she observed. "Often it's just not thinking, you know." It is notable that she attributed children's disruptive behaviour to lack of awareness, rather than malicious intent.

Concerning programme planning, Joyce recorded frustration that the young *Weavers* had rarely taken a clear lead and that sometimes "you don't feel you've got anywhere." However, she acknowledged that some of the occasions she had found most rewarding were those when a topic had been explored in a small group, despite the final presentation of 'results' being unsatisfactory. In this way she showed herself willing to leave the 'product orientated' adult world and enter the more 'process orientated' world of children.

The personal touch

As the oldest of the adult *Weavers* Joyce has entered the 'grandparent generation' and so her sense of the importance of relating to children has gained a new dimension and significance. When I discussed my analysis of her contributions with her, she linked the particular pleasure she expressed in developing relationships with *Weavers* children on a one-to-one basis to her general preference for children as individuals rather than *en masse.*

Joyce strongly associated the 'valuing children' theme with her personal approaches, linking the value that she gives to children with the value she gives to all people, of whatever age. The positivity she exhibited even when discussing problematic issues of behaviour was again linked to personal attributes as she characterised herself as the kind of person who tends to look on the positive side of life. Reflecting on the aspect of my analysis that stressed her concern for good behaviour, Joyce recalled that as a child she had never liked chaotic situations. She linked this to her discomfort when there was disorder in the *Weavers*, and also to her sense that the children would not enjoy chaos any more than she had at their age.

3. THEOLOGICAL POTENTIAL

Chapter 3 showed how experience shapes theology – whether or not this is acknowledged – and that ordinary Christians' theological reflections can have significance for the Church, not least because they can introduce new themes. An openness to such themes was seen as indicative of theology done in an 'ordinary' manner, even by those with theological training. My reflection on the *Weavers* experience in Chapter 4 was offered as an example of this, and demonstrated that personal examination in the light of the adult/child interface held theological potential.

The current chapter has broadened the evidence base of my enquiry by indicating a variety of personal factors influencing the effects that the adult *Weavers* experienced in the group. It remains to consider the theological potential of reflection on such factors. Section 3 will do this by grouping them

under four thematic headings – 'childhood', 'life', 'relationships' and 'values' – and exploring the theological questions raised by these themes.

Childhood

My childhood as an 'only one', together with memories of the resentment I felt when 'bossed' and treated as a child emerged from the analysis of my reflections. Lucy too recalled her childhood when reflecting on the importance of children sharing their worries. And the childhood preference for ordered rather than chaotic situations was recognised by Joyce as influential in shaping her responses to the *Weavers.* Elements unifying these examples are adults' empathy with children when reflecting on their own childhood; and the opportunity children afford adults of addressing issues in their own childhoods, by ensuring perceived problems are not repeated.

The fact that the two great commandments of Jesus[26] are relational indicates the centrality of relationship to Christian faith. Relationship exists in the tension between commonality and difference. Seeing only difference denies the possibility of relationship – but so does seeing only commonality, since there must be distinct 'others' with whom to relate. Adults reflecting on their own childhood in the company of children are resourced in maintaining the tension. The 'otherness' of the child is plain to the adult, and yet remembering one's own childhood promotes a sense of commonality. In this way, reflection on self in the light of 'the other' promotes the Christian spiritual attribute of relationality.

The various models of the reflective cycle depend upon a return to the arena of action, armed with reflections upon previous experiences there. However, the passage of time can mean that such a 'return' is impossible. This is the case with childhood. For an adult, maintaining contact with the 'inner child' (Worsley, 2000, 2002a, 2002b)[27] or aspiring to a 'mature childhood' in adult life (Rahner, 1971)[27], can never entail returning to the physical circumstances of childhood to make use of reflection. This is true of

[26] Matthew 22: 37-40; Mark 12: 29-31; Luke 10: 26-28.
[27] See Chapter 1.

all phases of life. Angela Shier-Jones' edited collection *Children of God* (2007) argues a role in God's plan for each stage of childhood, and this insight might be applied to the whole of life. One role of each stage is to pass on the fruits of experience and reflection to those inhabiting an earlier stage of life. Another is to act on insights gained at an earlier phase of life. For example, as a child one might reflect that the behaviour of adults towards children could be improved, but be powerless to act on this reflection. As an adult, one might be able to implement the results of the reflections made as a child, not for one's own benefit, but for the benefit of current children.

Shier-Jones' collection portrays each phase of life as reflecting God's purposes, and if each phase communicates the fruits of its reflections to those who are following we can see a developmental structure to God's purposes. Such considerations have implications for a view of the human trajectory: is the 'golden age' behind, or yet to come? Is creation long since finished and marred, or still a work in progress and not yet perfected? Orthodox theology might take the former position and a theology open to new insights the latter, arguing that orthodoxy itself is an ongoing spiral of reflection and action.

Life

Childhood is a highly influential period of life, but our experiences as adults shape us too. James makes reference to being a youth worker and a parent in relation to his interest in children and questions about their nature. Lucy, too, acknowledged that her experience as a Junior Church leader has influenced her response to *Weavers.* And campaigning on various political and justice issues shaped my own approach to the whole project.

Clark-King (2004) does not give priority to the academic over the ordinary Christian, rather she emphasises the importance of the different experiences both groups have had in forming the voices they bring to the 'choral theology' she advocates[28]. The different life experiences of the adult *Weavers* gave them different insights about the group, caused them to value different things

[28] See Chapter 3.

in it, and gave them different questions to bring to it. If each individual's life is God's gift to them, then the insights and questions each life entails are part of God's gift. To appreciate the theological importance of examining life experiences and the questions they raise it is only necessary to recognise their divine source.

In the case of the adult *Weavers,* experiences of caring and nurture in other situations were brought to mind when reflecting on the group, together with situations in which justice, respect and personal freedom were at issue. These experiences bring questions about how we care for others, and what justice and freedom entail. Specific questions about the essence of childhood and how it relates to adulthood were also raised. All of these become theological questions when they are asked not only in the context from which they arise but also in the context of the Kingdom, of which all other contexts are a part. How can our hands be the caring hands of Christ?[29] What does justice look like in the Kingdom and can it come on earth? Are there any adults among the children of God?[30]

Relationships

What I describe as 'the adult/child interface' is a human relationship, and as such is shaped for each adult by the way they relate to others in the rest of their lives. For myself, the particular relational issues involved in being an only child had an important bearing on my experience of *Weavers.* Joyce interpreted her positive attitude to the young *Weavers* in relation to her overall attitude to others. And James placed his sense of relationship in the theological context of a faith community.

The importance of relationship to the Christian faith has already been noted, above. Indeed, "Relational Consciousness" was given by Rebecca Nye as her definition of spirituality (Hay with Nye,1998). The categories 'others', 'self', and 'the divine' are three domains of Nye's Relational Consciousness within which factors shaping the adult *Weavers'* experiences can offer

[29] "Christ has no body now but yours" (Teresa of Avila).
[30] "God says … I only want children in my kingdom" (Quoist, [1954] 1963, 3).

questions for reflection[31]. Her four domains are found in earlier discussions (see Westerhoff, 1980) and subsequent to Hay and Nye's work have become widely used (for example, Francis and Robbins, 2005). The reflections on childhood and later life experiences, discussed above, promote a sense of relationship in the 'self' category, as well as with 'others'. And in giving adults material with which to reflect on their attitudes to the rest of humanity the adult/child interface further contributes to the 'others' category of Relational Consciousness.

The Quaker 'Advices and Queries' ask "Do you respect that of God in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern?" (Religious Society of Friends,1995,1.02 17). To reflect on our attitudes to others enables us to reflect on their status – as our siblings within the parenthood of God, and as bearers of God's light. The clear and sometimes difficult 'otherness' of children can also offer the opportunity to reach an honest assessment of our ability to see and respect "that of God" in those of all ages whose 'otherness' is difficult. This area contributes to reflection on relationship with 'the divine' and also to the project of 'choral theology'.

James makes connections between the communal feeling he values in *Weavers* and the Eucharistic community he pastors. The place of children within that Eucharistic community is highly important to him. This is clearly a consequence of his desire for them to feel loved and included; but the fact that they *are* so included is vital to his own enjoyment of the Eucharistic community. For him, that community is augmented not just by the presence of its young members but also by the fact that it will admit them. Conversely, any rejection would diminish his sense of the community's value. Reflections on the inclusivity of the Christian community of faith, in every way that that community is expressed, pose questions about its claim to be The Body of Christ[32].

[31] The fourth domain is 'relationship with creation', and only appears in the reflections I have recorded when participants allude to children's responses to nature.
[32] Romans 12: 4-5; 1 Corinthians 12: 27.

Values

Both James and I demonstrated responses to the *Weavers* experience that were shaped by core personal values reflecting our Christian faith but not exclusive to it. For both of us, the high value we place on the freedom to express oneself and be creative was an important consideration in our approach and response to the *Weavers*.

For a Christian, any experience that causes one to reflect on one's core values will become a theological resource. The question of the origins of our values arises: do they come from our religious faith? Did they pre-exist our coming to that faith? Do they come from 'the world' rather than the world of our religious faith? Does it matter where they come from if they accord with that faith? What does it mean when values from 'the world' and religious faith are indistinguishable? What happens if our personal values conflict with the teachings of our religious faith?

Reflections on values constitute another contribution to the category of 'relationship with others'. They may also contribute to 'relationship with creation' where values encompass environmental issues. The sometimes problematic nature of these contributions is evident in the consideration of personal freedom. Rowan Williams (2000) has pointed out that freedom for one may entail restriction for another, and in relation to God's care for all, any consideration of personal values must encompass an assessment of their impact on others. The fact that the faithful life of Jesus would put a sword to his mother's soul[33] shows this to be a complex issue. Values that involve creativity and environmental stewardship are also problematic. Creativity to one may be chaos or heresy to another; and the use of creation's more scarce or dangerous resources may involve the livelihood or well-being of some of its human constituents.

Themes, questions and theological potential

This section has explored four themes that arose when considering the factors shaping the effects that adult *Weavers* experienced from the adult/child interface. Each theme has been shown to raise questions for

[33] Luke 2: 35.

theological reflection. It is in such questions that we find the theological potential of reflecting on time shared with children.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The analysis of the four adults' contributions to the *Weavers* conversation has demonstrated within a single discourse the distinctiveness of their perspectives on events in which they all participated. Discussing the researcher's analysis of their contributions with the other three conversation participants confirmed the shaping influence of their individuality on their experience of *Weavers.* This supported the findings of the *Weavers* journal analysis.

Grouping the personal factors that had shaped the adults' experiences generated four themes – 'childhood', 'life', 'relationships' and 'values' – all of which were then linked to aspects of the Christian faith. It would have been inappropriate for the researcher to produce reflections on these themes on behalf of the other adult *Weavers*. However, brief comments on the themes were offered to indicate the questions they could raise and hence their theological potential.

Considering the responses of four adults to the same events has advantages in limiting the variables when demonstrating the diversity of their responses. However, there is a major disadvantage in that the context of the adult/child interface is consequently limited to one situation. Will the findings from the *Weavers* be replicated in a diversity of settings, and will any new insights be revealed by drawing on data from a variety of situations? These questions will be addressed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SIX
REALIZING THE POTENTIAL

> Seek for [children and young people] as for yourself a full development of God's gifts and the abundant life Jesus tells us can be ours.
>
> Advices and Queries, No19
> Religious Society of Friends

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the interface with children as experienced by nine adults of contrasting ages and backgrounds who relate to children in a variety of nurture situations (see pages 16, 17 and 33 above for details). The introduction of this new data not only confirms the conclusions of the previous two chapters, but also makes important additions to the story of my research exploration and the development of the emerging thesis.

In considering this wider sample, a new thematic category arises to augment the groupings of personal factors, identified in Chapter 5, which shape the adult/child interface. More importantly, the concept of 'gift', which proved so influential in interpreting my own experience of being with children, is developed significantly as a theological resource. The chapter, and the story of the exploration told by Part 2 of my thesis, concludes with the emergence of a unifying theological question. Responding to this question represents one realization of the theological potential adults can discover in reflecting on their interface with children.

1. UNWRAPPING GOD'S GIFTS

This section will summarise the analyses of the six interviews that provided the data for this chapter under the four thematic categories established in Chapter 5 – 'childhood', 'life', 'relationships' and 'values' – and will add a fifth category – 'attributes'. It will characterise the personal factors that shape

adults' responses to children as God's gifts, and instruments of God's purposes.

Analysis of the interviews confirmed that the adults' responses to the interface with children, like those of the adult *Weavers,* were influenced by the individuality they brought to the encounters. Consideration of the personal factors exerting this influence showed that almost all of them corresponded to the four themes identified in Chapter 5. However, the 'givens' of personality and age that emerged in analysing the six interviews represented a new theme not so clearly evident in the *Weavers* conversation, and are represented by the fifth category, 'attributes', in the following summary of findings. These five categories reflect the analysis of Schleiermacher's theological influences, given in Chapter 3: his childhood, life, relationships and attributes were all seen to have influenced his experience of children, as expressed in his writing; and the writing itself was an expression of his values.

Childhood

Most participants demonstrated that their responses to the adult/child interface were influenced by their own childhoods. Adult empathy with children resulting from childhood memories was particularly evident in the reflections of Ken, a black Pentecostal Sunday School teacher in his 50s. He recalled the final year of primary school as a special time, when he had been looking forward to the challenges of the future and also first felt the call to give his life to Christ. He described how this causes him to relate to and enjoy being with the 10-11 year olds he teaches. His enjoyment includes the pleasure of reconnecting with that special time in his life, and thus indicates how adults reflecting on their childhood can be moved to celebrate it as God's gift.

However, not all memories of childhood are positive. Ken himself acknowledged that his transition to adolescence had not been entirely without its struggles. And Sandra, a white 40 year old childminder and Anglican priest, recounted a difficult childhood in which she had experienced "one or two very nasty good hidings because I was just being – a child."

From an early age she had thought that if she had children herself she "wouldn't hit them quite so much and make them feel unworthy." A strong thread of Sandra's reflections concerned the transformation of her childhood experience by using it to inform her relationships with children both as a mother, professional carer and minister. This provides an example of reflection leading to action, not at the time it occurs but in a future when the necessary conditions exist. It also adds a dimension to the picture of human trajectory and God's plan. Ken's experience reminds us how positive God's gift of childhood can be, and Sandra's is an indication of how it can be marred. Every life could be seen as having the potential for the 'golden' realization of each of its phases – "life in all its fullness"[34] – and sin could be seen as those things that separate us from fulfilling the potential God intends. However, Sandra's life experience, in which negative childhood experience has been transformed both by her own approach to children and by the personal healing and sense of self-worth this has brought her, provide an image of redemption.

Sandra's childhood experience was dominated by parental influence, and relationships with parents were prominent in shaping the effects that several interview participants experienced with children. John, a white grandparent in his late 60s, felt that "there was something that hadn't been said" with his father, which led him to seek meaningful communication with his own children and grandchildren. And, reflecting on the relaxed parenting highlighted in my analysis of his interview contributions, John wondered if this might represent a reaction to his mother's more assertive approach. Both of these instances further illustrate a reflective cycle that crosses generations, indicating that God's purposes include a critique of each generation by its predecessor.

That critique, however, does not always result in a change of direction. Reflective cycles do not inevitably lead to a change but sometimes affirm existing practice, and this was evident in relation to the faith upbringing recounted in some participants' reflections. Gill, a white Church of England

[34] John 10: 10.

primary school teacher in her 50s and the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, recalled that her father had once been called a “slim-line Christian.” She identified herself with this position, characterising her theology as “liberal”. Her school is 94% Muslim and the influence of her father’s theological stance could be seen in her openness to the encounter with another faith. Affirmation of faith upbringing was found, too, at the other end of the theological spectrum. Patricia, a black Pentecostal Sunday School teacher in her 40s, was also the daughter of a Christian minister. Prior to her father’s retirement she recalled that she had trusted to him to do the thinking, but now she had answered her own call from God to ministry as ‘Lead’ in the Sunday School. Her only negative critique of her own faith upbringing was not theological, but rather that the classes her generation had experienced in church had only been “pretty little songs and pretty little parables.” In contrast, the lessons she gives her children are more challenging, designed to produce adults who will be “powerful weapons for God.” Her father brought her up to give “110%” to everything she does, and she has carried this through into her promotion of the faith in which she was raised.

Such instances of affirmation suggest cross-generational reflective cycles as mechanisms through which God’s purposes can be progressively revealed, not necessarily by continual change, but rather through progressive refinement.

Life

The reflections of Tim, a white Eden Network worker in his 20s, were influenced by his life as child, adolescent and young adult. He characterised his upbringing in a middle-class area as “hugely privileged”, but his view of this background and the version of the Christian faith he experienced there was challenged by his experience as a teenager. At 16 Tim took part in a church inner city mission and felt drawn to work in urban areas of deprivation. At 19 he returned to the inner city church he’d visited earlier and lived in the area for a year. For him, “that’s really where it started, my heart for inner city young people.” This ‘heart’ ultimately led him to his current work with

deprived urban youth on an Eden Network project[35]. The contrast between his privileged upbringing and the experience of the young people with whom he now works informed many of Tim's interview responses. It caused him to examine the faith in which he grew up, to distinguish the cultural from the essential elements in it and to recognise its bias towards the successful and powerful. This reassessment has shaped his approach in sharing faith with the young people.

The 'culture clash' experienced by Tim could be classed as a justice issue and resonates with the concerns for justice discerned in the *Weavers* conversation analysis. It indicates the close relationship between a life of faith and the quest for social justice. The 'social gospel' did not begin with Jesus, but in the history of a people whose scriptures Jesus was quoting when he declared his mission to "let the oppressed go free"[36]. The concern for justice can also be detected in Patricia's passing comment that as a black woman, her striving for excellence as a teacher is partly motivated by the desire to give a positive role model to the children. Such reflections can promote an appreciation of the totality of a Christian's calling to God's service. Tim and Patricia are called to specific teaching ministries among young people, but they are also called to specific social and cultural situations, and as the particular individuals they are. Everything they bring and every detail of the situation in which they work is part of their ministry.

Tim's teenage life experience led him to his ministry, and shaped his openness to it. In a different way, Gill's prior work experience can be seen as a preparation for the way she responds to the situation in which she nurtures children – a situation that is not only multi-cultural but also multi-faith. Before becoming a primary school teacher, Gill was a language teacher at a grammar school. The interest in and respect for other cultures associated with her language teaching can be detected in Gill's current role, not only teaching in a school with a high Muslim population but also serving as parent partnership coordinator, involving a considerable amount of contact with the children's families. Her enthusiasm for this work and her openness to the experiences and learning it has brought her were evident. In her interview,

[35] See http://www.eden-network.org/ for details of the Eden Network.
[36] Luke 4: 18.

Gill stated that she was going through a period of questioning and is “still very much developing” her faith. Her encounter with the faithful practices of Muslims – both pupils and their families – and with the children’s engagement in issues of faith, had affected her personally and contributed to her understanding of her own faith. It had caused her to question some of her Christian beliefs while confirming her in others.

Both Tim and Gill gave value and respect to marginalized groups, to the extent that they were prepared to have their faith influenced by the experience of being with them. The same could be said of Sandra. As a childminder, Sandra spoke passionately of the lack of social respect and appropriate remuneration received by those engaged in this work. She saw this as a failure to value not only her profession but also the ‘assets’ with which she and her colleagues are entrusted – the children. Importing this concern into her Christian context, Sandra also advocated a proper value and respect for children in the worshipping community. She began attending church in her 30s after having been invited to a Christingle service by one of her childminding charges. She subsequently became a Sunday School teacher, and the value she accorded children as a result of her life experience enabled her to allow their questions, openness and honesty to influence her faith journey.

Concerns for justice issues, such as those reflected above, can arise from the specific life experiences of individuals. They can also result from more generalized societal influences, as noted in analysis of my *Weavers* experience. Another strand of the ‘Life’ theme in the *Weavers* conversation was the issue of care and nurture. Among interview participants, this concern emerged most strongly in John’s contribution. Reflecting on his own parental practice, he considered that his relaxed approach, as well as being a reaction to his mother’s style, might also reflect the times – the late 60s and early 70s. He noted that he and his wife Maggie had had their children at a period when society’s view of the adult/child relationship was shifting, and that living in such times might have influenced his approach to nurture, and the effects he experienced in being with children.

Reflection on the role that life experience has in shaping the way that adults relate to children, especially in a context of ministry or nurture,

broadens the idea of giftedness. In a theological context, God's gifts for ministry might be seen to include the social contexts in which individuals have found themselves placed, the employments they have undertaken, and even the historical contexts in which they live and have lived.

Relationships

Three attitudes to relationships that shaped the adult *Weavers'* responses – my 'issues' with relationship, as an only child; Joyce's positive attitude to people; and the ecclesial approach taken by James – are mirrored in personal approaches that three of the interview participants brought to their interface with children.

Maggie, John's wife and a grandparent in her 60s, has been caring for children in her family since she was a teenager and has now added the duties of a Sunday School teacher. In discussing the analysis of her contributions Maggie remarked that in general she was "not a relationship person". However, the pleasure she expressed in her relationships with children and in witnessing relationships between children indicates that this is a context in which she can appreciate relationality. Both Maggie's experiences and my own as an only child highlight the complexities underlying the theological imperative to 'be relational'. They also indicate that the presence of children may furnish an easier environment for relationality to flourish than a purely adult context – a reminder that "of such is the Kingdom of God"[37].

One way of establishing a relationship is through service. Miller-McLemore (1994, 2007) warns of the dangers in this, especially for women (see Chapter 3). However, meeting the needs of the children played and continues to play an important part in Maggie's interface with them. On being asked about the changes to her life caused by having children Maggie observed that, "whatever you did you had somebody else to consider". And when asked about new insights she might have gained through motherhood she responded by identifying with the children rather than herself, commenting, "it's more their development that you're interested in." The

[37] Matthew 19: 14; Mark 10: 14; Luke 18: 16.

element of service was very important, too, to the other grandmother in the interview sample – Edith. With her husband, Robert, Edith ran 'houseparty' weekends for her grandchildren, exploring Christian themes together. As well as preparing for the teaching, the domestic elements of the weekends had required much work. Describing the adults' attitude to the children, Edith emphasised that "We bothered to cook nice meals for them" even though this entailed a 6am start for her. This 'bothering' was, for Edith, a mark of the respect that the adults paid the children in running the weekends. A positive approach to children in the *Weavers* was, for Joyce, a reflection of her positivity to people of all ages. And Edith's hospitality and caring for the young guests at the 'houseparty' was consistent with the hospitality she showed in feeding me on both occasions I visited her home in connection with this research. Reflection on the positivity and respect we show to others, in the light of our treatment of children recalls the Christian conviction that anything done for the least is done for Jesus[38].

To accord equal status and respect to adults and children is to lay the foundation for a multi-generational community, and Robert brought a long-standing concern for such a community to the 'houseparty' weekends. He saw multi-generational relationships as counter-cultural, but he did not place this exclusively in a secular setting. Like James of the *Weavers* he brought a vision of an ecclesial community to the adult/child interface. For James it was the Eucharistic Body of Christ. For Robert, it was the kind of multi-generational faith community described in Jason Gardner's *Mend the Gap* (2008), which he quoted. Robert saw the 'houseparty' as an example of the kind of multi-generational setting necessary for promoting the change of heart among Church adults that would enable them to value children for what they are. He linked such a positive relational attitude towards children with the value he considered Jesus gave to them.

Gardner (2008) analyses the intergenerational gap in terms of society's changing expectations of the young, a prolonging of adolescence promoted by commercial interests, and the stereotypical old/young conflict portrayed by the media. Promoting a multi-generational agenda in church, as

[38] Matthew 25: 40.

Robert has spent so long doing, involves encouraging church to demonstrate a different way of being community, as a witness to secular society. This 'modelling' approach is one Robert used in teaching the young people at the 'houseparty', and that he sees as derived from Jesus. If reflection on the personal characteristics that shape adult responses to children can lead to an assessment of the adults' relational nature, then this can lead to more general reflection on the witness the church gives to the world as a relational community.

Values

As noted in Chapter 5, the values of freedom and creativity brought to the *Weavers* by James and myself could have secular or religious origins. The interview analyses offered a connection between the two through 'meaning making'. I titled the key theme of John's contribution 'What's it all about?' and a key personal characteristic brought to his interface with children was a longstanding interest in philosophy. During the course of the interview he characterised himself as an intellectual, and he has undertaken 'spare time' study for much of his adult life. Ken too, described himself as an avid researcher, in the area of scripture and also in a wide range of secular interests. Both these participants are involved, through their study and reflection, in the enterprise of 'meaning making' in their lives. For James Fowler, 'meaning making' is the essence of faith as described in his classic *Stages of Faith* ([1981] 1995) and for him faith can be either secular or religious.

All the adult *Weavers* had a similar degree of knowledge of the Christian faith through long involvement in the Church and, for three of them, through ministerial training. They also came from the same worshipping tradition within the Church of England and occupied similar positions on the theological spectrum. The way that differences in Christian experience and expression might shape an adult's experience of the interface with children did not therefore emerge. However, there were distinct differences among the participants in the six interviews in this respect. It has already been noted that Gill and Patricia represented different ends of the Christian theological spectrum, and there were also marked differences in experience of the

Christian faith between the interview participants. Ken and Patricia regarded themselves as born into their Christian communities, and Robert brought a long professional history as a Scripture Union children's evangelist. Maggie, however, had only begun to explore the faith in any detail since starting a Sunday School for her grandchildren, and Sandra had not attended church until her 30s.

My literature review (see Summary of Portfolio) explored the difficulties involved in applying Fowler's 'stages of faith' model – not least its tendency to imply a hierarchy, and the theological assumptions in its view of 'developed faith'. However, it was clear that the different interview participants experienced the adult/child interface differently depending on their faith approach – most notably in their readiness to learn from children's insights and have their faith influenced by them. It might be more helpful to refer to the participants having different 'styles' of faith – John Westerhoff's preferred term ([1976] 2000) – or even different styles of 'faithing', to borrow Nicola Slee's usage (2004). The way the participants responded to the adult/child interface in a faith context could provide them with material for reflection on the way they make meaning and 'do' their faithing. And a comparison of differing responses would inform a wider debate about what is meant by 'faith development'.

Attributes

During her interview Sandra characterised herself as "the type of person who [is] … always out to prove something" – in this case, that her own negative experience as a child need not be replicated. In subsequent discussion of the interview analysis she noted that her siblings' responses to their childhood experience had been very different to hers. Her personality had clearly affected the way she approached her relationships with children – her own, her childminding charges, and children at church. It also influenced the way she responded to being with children, and her strong, forthright manner drove her advocacy for them. She described her campaigns in church to have children properly valued and respected by saying, "I was kind of on my soap box."

Ken's personality, although more quiet, was also connected to his feelings about sharing time with children. He characterises himself as "a little bit more serious" than his colleague Patricia, who works with younger children, yet he still likes to have fun with his class. These personal characteristics could be seen as reflecting the nature of the age range he prefers to teach – in transition from the playfulness of childhood to the greater earnestness of youth – and provide another link to the pleasure he experiences in working with this age group.

Edith also brought her personality into the discussion through contrast – in this case, with her husband Robert's approach to the 'houseparty' weekends. In discussion of the interview analysis and my emerging thesis concerning the importance of individual characteristics, Edith commented that she was the more practical of the couple, needing to see "a working model" of a project. Robert acknowledged this, characterising himself as "a big picture person" who sees the dream rather than the practicalities. This was reflected in the way Edith emphasised the nature of the planning and execution of the project, linking this to respect for the young people. Robert, however, spoke more about the dream of a relational, multi-generational Church.

It can be seen from these examples that reflection on personal characteristics can result from examining those aspects of our make-up that influence the way we respond to being with children. In the context of a ministry with children in the Church this can lead to a valuing of those characteristics that make a positive contribution, and a redirection of those that do not. The *Core Skills for Children's Work* training programme makes use of Meredith Belbin's leadership roles as an audit tool to foster the constructive use of diverse skills (CGMC, 2006, 40 and 44). In a ministry context, reflection on the positive use of personal attributes can enhance an individual's understanding of them as God-given gifts for service.

Age is an ever-changing characteristic, but at any given time it constitutes a significant personal attribute. Gill, in her later 50s, linked the questioning period in her faith to her age. And John, in his late 60s, was concerned with the responsibilities of the 'elders' for passing on wisdom to the young. Robert and Edith, in their 70s, shared this concern. Robert placed

it in the context of Psalm 78, verse 4, which he quoted from memory as, “We will pass on to the next generation the wonderful works of God and all that he has done.” Edith noted that the ‘houseparty’ project had allowed the adults to exercise their gifts of prayer, professional educational skill, and hospitality, and this had given her a sense of worth that society sometimes denies to the ‘grandparent generation’. Robert concurred, explaining that sharing his life experiences with the children had made him feel “wanted.” He noted that, “The old are conditioned into thinking that when they turn a certain age they’ve got no further use” and suggested that intergenerational work helped “draw out from them what they’ve got.” These considerations support the extension of Shier-Jones (2007), noted earlier – that each age of life, not simply each stage of childhood, has its distinctive contribution to make in God’s service. The opportunities accorded by an adult’s age, then, together with the attributes of personality noted above, can emerge from reflection on the adult/child interface and be seen as potential gifts for God’s service.

A gift for what?

The analysis in this section has indicated that the personal factors influencing adults’ experiences of children can be seen as gifts. This recognition has emerged from a consideration of the uses to which those factors can be put in personal reflection, church development, or the nurture of children. The meaning of ‘gift’ is extended by the concept of the ‘gifted’ person – someone who has a ‘gift’ *for* some activity. In this sense, no ‘gift’ is properly understood or valued until its purpose is discerned. The following section will consider this issue.

2. DISCERNING GOD’S PURPOSE – REALIZING POTENTIAL

This section places the ‘gift’ of being in the context of God’s purposes and suggests that in raising the question of fulfilling these purposes the theological potential in this study begins to be realized.

The reflections in this and the preceding chapter indicate that children can show adults 'what they're made of'. Of the five themes identified above, two relate to the people adults are ('relationships' and 'attributes') and two to the places they've been ('childhood' and 'life'). Who we are and where we've been, interacting with each other, constitute 'what we're made of', being our key formative influences: the innate and the experienced. The remaining theme, 'values' – which I have extended to include faithing – represents 'what we make of it all': the story we create to give the person we are a meaningful role.

Reflections on 'what we're made' of, as revealed by the light of a child, could become anthropology. They can also become theology if the story to which they contribute includes God in some way. This is the kind of story I am writing to make sense of who I am and where I've been. When reflecting on the person and experiences that make me who I am, during the analysis of my *Weavers* journal, I was able to respond constructively to my negative as well as my positive feelings by seeing the characteristics and situations behind them as 'gift' – God's gift *to* me and *of* me. The latter ensures that reflection on 'what we're made of' and 'what we make of it' does not become self-centred but seeks full understanding of our being by discerning how it may fulfil God's purposes.

The sense of 'gift' emerged as a unifying thread, too, in reflecting on the personal influences that shaped my interview participants' responses to children. It was easy to see Patricia and Ken's childhood experiences as treasured gifts. And Sandra clearly felt gifted by God in what she had been able to make of otherwise difficult experiences. The culture and faith clashes experienced by Tim and Gill were gifts allowing them to progress in their faith journeys. The opportunities to enjoy relationships between and with children, to respect and to serve their needs, were gifts for Maggie, Edith and Robert; and Edith and Robert were able to see their age as gift, while Sandra had a positive view of the forceful personality she had been given. And finally my use of the word 'values' indicates that those participants who shared their religious beliefs in their interviews regarded them highly as precious gifts.

This approach is 'good news' because it gives a positive view of humanity and human experience. However, it is not easy news, because all

human experience is not at first sight positive. But the negatives must be encompassed, not least because a theology that considers only positive feelings is an evasion rather than an interpretation of reality. I experienced negativity in my *Weavers* reflections, and the detailed explorations in my theological reflection showed the pain involved. Fulfilling any purpose involves effort, and this may involve pain. However, it is hard to see gratuitous pain as God's gift. Sandra's allusions to her childhood remind us of the needless pain to be found in human experience. History and the daily news are full of human trauma. If such instances of random suffering are not in themselves God's gift – although we cannot escape the ambivalence of calling them 'givens' of the human condition – then perhaps Sandra's story indicates that God's 'gift' in such circumstances could be the possibility of transformation.

This chapter has shown that the theological issues arising from reflection on the adult/child interface will be a different mixture for each individual. They will concern those shaping attributes, experiences and values that are highlighted for them in the light of a child. But viewed as 'gift', the ultimate theological question asked will be the same: how can these aspects of the adult's life be brought to serve God's purposes, so that the adult's being can become God's gift to God's world?

This begs the question: how can we know that God's purposes are being served? Perhaps the context of this research can suggest one response. All its reflections have arisen from situations designed for the nurture of children. One might judge God's purposes to be served if the people adults are, the places they've been and the resulting faith stories they write can foster the flourishing of a child. After all, the faith story written by the author of Matthew's Gospel claims that the service of the least, is the service of the Lord of all[39]. When children are seen as "Gifts of God and sources of joy" (Bunge, 2004) this casts a positive light on all that is done to prosper them; and everything that adults bring to this nurturing relationship takes on the blessed nature of the gift it serves.

[39] Matthew 25: 40.

Mutuality in family life was a concern of both Schleiermacher and Miller-McLemore, and it is the mutuality emerging in the above reflections that prevents my findings being interpreted as either suggesting that children's importance lies in the personal development adults can derive from them, or that adults exist solely for the nurture of children. In exploring the implications of baptized children taking their rightful place as "integral members" of the Christian community, Louis Weil points out that both the children and the community will be changed. He notes that "Each baptized person, adult or infant, brings into the community the particular gifts God gives to each one of us" and that "As the child grows and develops, those gifts are manifested, or even drawn forth from the person as they seek to serve" (Weil, 2000, xi). It is unclear whether by 'the person' Weil means the developing child or the nurturing adult, and this ambivalence is helpfully expressive of the mutuality I am describing.

The study of human experience becomes theological when theological questions are brought to it (see Miller-McLemore, 2010, 816-817, citing Hiltner and Tillich). Theological potential is therefore a matter of the theological questions that can be brought to experience. In drawing a number of theological questions together within one larger question about fulfilling God's purposes through fostering the flourishing of children, we can begin to see the potential of this study being realized.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

Consideration of the more varied material provided by this chapter has played a key role in drawing together the themes that emerged during the 'exploration' narrated in Part 2 of the thesis. The personal factors that have influenced the way the interview participants experienced the adult/child interface fell into thematic categories that represent the people they are, the things they have experienced, and the sense that they have made of life. In this way, the 'light' of children has show them 'what they're made of' and

'what they've made of it all'. If God is "maker of … all that is"[40], how adults are made is the work and gift of God. This can shed a positive light on some negative feelings and experiences, if viewed as serving God's purposes. In the context of this study, 'God's purposes' might be served when children are enabled to flourish. The theological potential of the study begins to be realized in considering the question of fulfilling this purpose; and the 'light of a child' is seen to reveal not only what adults are 'made of' and what they 'make of it', but also how best to 'make use of it'.

The nature of the adult/child relationship will be considered further in Part 3 of the thesis, as it returns to the initial 'quest' to identify the 'specialness' of children and further realizes the theological potential revealed by the 'exploration' of Part 2.

[40] Nicene Creed.

PART THREE – CAMPFIRE TALES

‘Campfire Tales’ because this is a stopping point, but not journey’s end. It is where this project stops, but not the journey of investigation into the significance of children within a multi-generational Christian community. When a journey is broken, tents are pitched, food prepared, campfires lit, and travellers share the story of the journey so far. Part 3 of the thesis is offered in this spirit. It will provide an assessment of what has been learned on the journey to date. In it a response will be given to the original research concerns, the implications for the researcher’s professional field assessed, and the contribution that the project findings could make to the current life of the Church in the world will be suggested.

CHAPTER SEVEN
DISPATCHES

> Faithfulness and sincerity in speaking … may open the way to fuller ministry from others.
>
> Advices and Queries, No13
> Religious Society of Friends

CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

One question remains unaddressed, and it is the question that encapsulated the 'quest' behind the exploration: 'Why are children special?' The first section of this concluding chapter summarises the research project findings regarding personal reflection arising from the adult/child interface, and the importance of the adult/child relationship. It then returns to the opening question and considers what is 'special' about that relationship. The implications of the response suggested represent the full realization of the project's theological potential.

An overarching question for any research project, especially one arising from a professional context is, 'How can this be applied?' The possibility of utilizing my findings by promoting personal reflection in a congregational context is considered in the second section of the chapter. The third section acknowledges the limitations of the study. And its implications in relation to theology, our view of childhood, Church and social agendas, and my professional context are explored in the final section.

1. FINDINGS

The study sought to contribute to knowledge in the professional field of Children's Ministry by providing new understandings of the issue of children's special importance for adults, and identifying new areas for investigation in this area (see Trafford and Leshem, 2008, 16-17). This section will summarise the research findings regarding the importance of the adult/child

relationship, and the new understanding it provides of children's 'specialness'. It concludes by indicating the new areas for theological investigation that this understanding offers.

The importance of the adult/child relationship

The response is now complete to the initial research question:

> *What personal effects do adult Christians experience when they explore the Christian faith in company with children?*

Having sought evidence in which I could feel personal confidence by recording and analysing my own experience as a Christian adult exploring the faith in children's company, I found to my surprise that the commonly assumed benefits had not been prominent either numerically or in terms of their personal impact.

There were instances when I was struck by and appreciated the children's open, trusting, lively and joyful responses to life, and to the faith-based material we shared. References to their honesty, questioning, and unusual theological insights were also evident in my journal. This confirmed the general view that working with children could encourage adults to develop or rediscover such approaches. However, I did not experience any strikingly inspirational effect since (a) I already exhibit these characteristics in my approach to the Christian faith and (b) I encounter them professionally in many Christian adults. Those who work with children often explore their faith in these ways, which suggests the possibility that rather than faithing that way through the influence of children, they may work with children because they already do their faithing in a child-like way.

The other assumption is that being with children will prompt reflection on traditional theological issues, leading to new and significant insights. My journal recorded theological issues being reconsidered and illuminated as a result of interactions with children, for example: our parent/child relationship with God; the use of scripture; the significance of the cross and the incarnation; and the implications of forgiveness. However, none of these had a significant effect on my faithing; and only the first related directly to being with children.

The aspect of the *Weavers* experience that did have an impact on me was the relationship with the young people – its challenges and successes, sorrows and joys. Not only that, but the research analysis demonstrated that the reasons for this impact were personal. Here at last was the kind of substantial effect I had been seeking. The analysis of my *Weavers* journal indicated that the effect children had on adults was shaped by the characteristics of the individuals concerned. Interviews with other adult Christians working with children in different situations and also with the other adults involved in the *Weavers* group supported this finding. A significant effect of working with children, for those who are open to it, may therefore be deeper personal understanding – an aspect of the journey of self-knowledge that Teresa of Avila linked with the journey to God (Ford, 1999, 213). In the study, this personal understanding, in the light of relationship with children in a faith nurture context, led to the discernment of adult 'being' as a 'gift' for the fulfilling of God's purposes in promoting children's flourishing. Such a discernment represented an attempt to understand the connection between lived experience and divine purpose in the light of children. It thus reflected Ganzevoort's characterisation of Practical Theology as "the hermeneutics of lived religion" (2009).

We must now assess how the response to the research question given by the above findings addresses the issue that prompted this research – the 'question behind the question'. The conceptual framework of my study was the special importance of children for adults, as indicated by scripture and exemplified in the everyday experience of the Christian community. My research quest arose from the failure of a group of diocesan Children's Ministry advisers, of which I was a part, to identify any 'special' characteristic of children that could not also be found in adults. Furthermore, the advisers recognised that not all children exhibited the 'special' characteristics commonly cited when addressing this issue.

In highlighting the relationship *between* adults and children and what it can evoke, rather than the supposed inherent characteristics of children, my study offers a different approach to the question of children's 'specialness' than that commonly taken by children's advocates. Nonetheless, the question

of uniqueness persists. The importance of relationship is not a surprise since it is now commonly associated with spirituality (Hay with Nye, 1998, 141-158; Nye, 2009, 51-52) but why is *this* relationship special?

The specialness of the adult/child relationship

As noted in Chapter 1, Miller-McLemore (2003, 21) describes the relationship between parent and child in terms of parental responsibility for the child's safety and development. Elsewhere (2007, xvii) she broadens 'parenting' to include all who care for children and are changed by the experience. White, in his exploration of elements essential to child development (2008b), makes much of the saying that 'it takes a village to raise a child' thus agreeing that 'parenting' in the broad sense indicated by Miller-McLemore, can be a communal activity. Adults 'changed' by their sense of communal responsibility would fall within Miller-McLemore's parenting definition. As would I, since the aspect of my *Weavers* journal analysis having the most powerful effect on me was that concerning adult authority and responsibility in relation to children. If responsibility is such a significant aspect of the adult/child interface, perhaps some element of it might point to the 'specialness' of the relationship.

The adult responsibility for the 'safety' of children identified by Miller-McLemore implies the vulnerability of children; and by beginning his exploration of children's developmental needs with 'security', White links vulnerability to the 'development' Miller-McLemore sees as the other aspect of parental, and thus communal adult responsibility for children. Copsey (2005, 60-73) indicates the vulnerability of children's spiritual development by highlighting such damaging adult influences as broken trust, repression of children's curiosity, or denial of unconditional love. And Williams (2000, 31), in claiming that "adults in general" have a responsibility for the "nurture" of "new human subjects in process of formation", not only emphasises corporate 'parenting' but also, through the vocabulary of 'nurture' suggests the vulnerability of the whole developmental 'process'. The etymology of 'nurture' is found in 'nourishment', and dependent children's regular supply of wholesome nourishment, both literal and metaphorical, is vulnerable to interruption or pollution.

The link between adult responsibility and children's vulnerability was also made while analysing my *Weavers* journal. My diary of the analysis records that an initial category was 'vulnerability', which was subsequently transferred to the category 'responsibilities of adults'. Ultimately, this became 'Adults' concern for children's well-being' – part of the 'weighty gift' of relating to children (see Figure 4, page 74 above). The *Weavers* conversation (see Chapter 5) and all six of the interviews referred to in Chapter 6 also provide data indicating adult concern for the vulnerability of the children to whom they relate. A sense of responsibility is expressed regarding: children's material needs; their vulnerability to violence and injury; their exposure to negative influences; possible restrictions on their development; their pastoral care; and their emotional, social, educational and spiritual development.

The variety of vulnerabilities identified even in the small sample in my study is perhaps an indication of the importance of this aspect of the adult/child relationship; and Jensen in his influential *Graced Vulnerability* (2005, 65-77) catalogues the even greater diversity of children's vulnerability globally. It was one of the characteristics of childhood highlighted by the Northern Advisers (see Figure 1, page 5) and also the subject of the first main chapter (Richards, 2009) in *Through the Eyes of a Child,* commissioned to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the United Nations Year of the Child.

Children's vulnerability emerges from the above as a distinctive element of the adult/child relationship. However, its presence among the characteristics identified by the Northern Advisers is a reminder that, like the other characteristics they considered, it is not unique to children. All people are potentially vulnerable (Archbishops' Council, 2006, 2). Indeed vulnerability can be seen as an essential characteristic of humanity (Le Pichon, 2010, 100); and the specific vulnerability of persons with disabilities will often influence their relationships with able-bodied persons.

The quest that motivated my research was for the 'special importance' of children in relation to Christian adults. The Northern Advisers' discussion on this topic assumed that children's 'specialness' would involve 'uniqueness'. However, the recognition that even the relationship engendered by vulnerability is not unique to the adult/child interface brings this assumption into question. The difficulty in distinguishing 'child' from 'adult'

other than by social construction (see Chapter 1) indicates that the search for a 'unique' characteristic of 'child' is unlikely to be successful. However, this is a positive outcome for advocates of children's importance in the Church, since they are concerned to emphasise that children are not a 'different breed' but fellow members, sharing a common humanity with all ages.

Moreover, the fact that the adult/child relationship is not unique may enhance rather than undermine its 'specialness', understood as 'special value' to the Church. White maintains (2008a, 354, note 3) that Jesus chose children rather than any other marginalized section of society as a "sign of the kingdom of heaven" since "every person either was or is a child". In the light of the link between children and vulnerability made above, perhaps the special value to be drawn from White's point is that children are ever-present, embodied reminders of and invitations to relationship with human vulnerability, including our own. As McCloughry and Morris observe (2002, 3) any person could become disabled at any time but disability is seen as about 'them' rather than 'us' – an indication of the importance of the reminder, and the invitation.

Brueggemann (2008, 411-418), in his discussion of 'the orphan'[41], notes the repeated biblical linking of 'widows, orphans and aliens', calling it "almost a mantra for the unprotected" (*ibid,* 411). The 'orphan' – a highly vulnerable child – thus holds an important but not unique place in relation to vulnerability. As Miller-McLemore points out, from her own experience as a mother, there is the potential of a progression from care for one's own children to empathy for all children (1994, 158), and ultimately to "[see] each person as someone else's child" (2003, 169). This observation suggests the possibility that the communal parenting she has implied (2007, xvii) and White has emphasised (2008b) might promote a greater general ability to "love your neighbour as yourself"[42]. If this is so, then the adult/child relationship, by encouraging adults to explore their 'being' as 'gift' in promoting the flourishing of children, may also promote an examination of the ways 'what they're made of' could be used in response to human vulnerability

[41] See Bunge's sixth image of children in the Christian tradition: "Orphans, Neighbours, and Strangers in Need of Justice and Compassion" (2004, 43).
[42] Matthew 22: 39; Mark 12: 31; Luke 10: 27

in general. The fact that children are not unique in their vulnerability now becomes of positive value in facilitating this transfer. Love of neighbour amounts to half the law and the prophets, thus the self-examination prompted by the child/adult relationship can be seen to have a special value in the Church; and through it the theological potential of relating to children and of this study can be fully realized.

2. APPLICATION

The work of Astley and Christie (2007), and Clark-King (2004), though drawing on the reflections of 'ordinary' Christians, was in each case part of an academic study, rather than generated from and driven by an 'ordinary' congregation. The same is true of this project. Section 2 will indicate how the study findings can be applied as a resource for theological reflection originating from and managed by ordinary Christians in a congregational setting.

Getting started

The stages of my approach in Chapter 4 offer a progression that could be used by anyone in reflecting on their experience of the adult/child interface:

- identify a context in which you interface with children;
- record your responses to this interface;
- analyse your record, to identify patterns and surface issues;
- recall events in your own life that resonate with these issues;
- identify personal themes from this pool of events;
- delve deeply into these themes;
- reflect on what you find and ask how these deep personal aspects of your being can become 'gift' in the service of the vulnerable.

This kind of deep personal reflection might, however, seem unfamiliar or even threatening to some ordinary Christians. It is also – unless the

assistance of others is sought in the final phase – a solitary undertaking. Christians are individuals, with personal gifts, characteristics and functions, but they believe themselves to constitute a corporate entity – the Body of Christ. For those who are anxious about 'going it alone', it might be helpful to 'get started' on theological reflection 'in the light of a child' as a corporate enterprise. It would also be appropriate to return to a corporate setting after subsequent individual reflection, to promote shared theology.

A context for a corporate approach to reflection on the adult/child interface might be a review of a congregation's vision for itself as a multi-generational community. Participants could follow the general trajectory of the progression outlined above, but take refuge in the generality of talking about 'the adults' of the congregation rather than specifically about themselves. They might imagine hypothetical adults, embodying common characteristics of congregation members, responding to children in certain ways because of aspects of their personal background. Some participants might be happy to ground such hypothetical discussion with examples from their own stories; others might purport to be speaking generally and hypothetically while covertly airing their personal experience. Within a group session, of course, there can also be space for private reflection, as in the Godly Play creative response time, during which individuals produce their own drawing, painting or writing, and only share it if they choose to do so.

Options for reflection

The reflective approaches that I employed in Chapter 4 were those of a literature graduate and creative writer who is used to the analysis of imaginative texts, to journaling, to self-expression and to exploration through a variety of creative literary means. Such experience may not be widespread in a congregation. However, pursuing reflection corporately would give the opportunity to introduce participants to a variety of reflective approaches, including but not limited to the literary, among which they could find one or more that suited their personal aptitudes and needs.

The cover illustration of Ellis's *The Ethnographic I* (2004, see 184-192) provides a vivid example of a pictorial, rather than verbal approach to reflection and non-literary methods of expression and exploration are now

often used in Church study resources (for example, Birkinshaw, 2006). Moon ([1999] 2000, 198-202) suggests a number of exercises such as playing with metaphors, imaginary dialogues, and using dream imagery that may contribute to reflective practice, and observes ([1999] 2002, 47) that graphic and other non-literary material can contribute to reflective portfolios. Such resources could provide approaches and activities to promote reflection. One creative approach designed for group use is drama improvisation. The work of Anthony Reddie in facilitating 'Black God-talk' (2007), demonstrates how drama can create a 'text out of life' for those who would not otherwise find a 'literary' voice. Although this approach would not be directly transferable to subsequent individual reflection, it could encourage the use of imaginary dialogue and the visualisation of scenarios to bring varied perspectives together.

Theological resources

If theological reflection on the adult/child interface is to take place outside an academic setting, then the question of theological resourcing must be addressed. The 'four voices' model of 'Theological Action Research' (TAR) described by Cameron et al (2010) suggests a means of providing theological resources in a congregational context.

Cameron et al note that variable "levels and kinds of theological literacy and fluency" are an issue when conducting TAR in a parish context (2010, 142-143). In their characterisation of Practical Theology, they note that linking theology and practice is problematic for practitioners (*ibid,* 24). To address these issues they propose an understanding of theology as conversation between four voices of equal weight: normative theology (scripture, teachings, liturgy and doctrinal documents); formal theology (the academy); espoused theology (the beliefs articulated by the group under study); and operant theology (what the group actually does) (*ibid,* 53-56). In a TAR project these voices have their distinct representatives, bringing their own expertise. There will typically be 'insider' and 'outsider' teams (*ibid,* 64-65). The insider team, members of the group under study, will be the source of the espoused and operant theological voices. The outsider team, the

'professional' researchers, will be the main voices of normative and formal theology.

Applying this 'four voice' approach to a congregational group reflecting on the adult/child interface, questions about individuals' responses to children would supply the 'operant' theological voice; and the 'espoused' theological voice would come from a church's relevant policies. However, if the theologically trained ministers of a congregation provide the only 'normative' and 'formal' voices, all four voices would be 'insiders'. The 'distancing' effect of outsiders can be helpful in providing new perspectives (*ibid,* 73) and in my own reflections I invited contributions from outside 'experts' to contribute to the conversation. For a congregation, theological educators within a denominational structure, such as the Church of England's diocesan Canon Theologians could supply an outsider voice (*ibid,* 75), or neighbouring congregations could collaborate[43]. Over time, such outside links could not only support but also build a congregation's theological capacity. At an individual level, if a communal session led on to personal reflection, congregation members could provide 'outside' conversation partners for each other, given sufficient trust, as friends and ministerial colleagues did for me.

Conversation is a characteristic feature of TAR, providing unexpected insights without dependence on depth of learning. Even an imagined conversation such as that used in my personal reflection can have this effect, provided it is honestly informed by perspectives beyond one's own. A foundational conviction for TAR is that the Holy Spirit is at work among Christ's people – a conviction also underlying the 'heart sense' approach used throughout my research – and Cameron et al note that conversation can facilitate the epiphanies by which deeper understanding of faith can occur (*ibid,* 148 and 149). The questions used to instigate such conversations can be simple, such as "Where is Jesus?" or "Are there any Scripture stories/passages that illustrate what [this] might look like?" (*ibid,* 115). The depth to which participants wished to pursue such questions would

[43] A small scale version of a TAR project in the Roman Catholic diocese of Portsmouth that resulted in an ongoing network for support and learning being established between four dioceses (Cameron et al*,* 2010, 128).

determine how far they searched for theological resources to supply the 'normative' and 'formal' voices in the conversation.

3. LIMITATIONS

This section will address issues concerning the generalizability and 'transfer' of the findings; the theological depth possible in 'ordinary' reflections; and the sustainability of personal reflection on the adult/child interface as a theological resource.

What can be said?

It can be objected that a study using the researcher's experience as its principal data, produces solipsistic and non-generalizable results. It is certainly not possible to generalize the specific effects that I experienced as an adult within a multi-generational group. But to attempt this would be to misunderstand the study, since the particularity of the experiences analysed, and of the personal factors that shaped them, is foundational for the thesis. Rather, identifying theological potential in personal reflection on such particularities is one outcome of analysing my experience that invites generalized investigation. Another is the suggestion that the effect of the relationship with children may be more significant for adults than the commonly assumed results of close contact with children's characteristic approaches to life. A third is the importance of children's vulnerability in giving 'special value' to their relationship with adults.

The evidence of my journal data was supplemented by analysis of 12 other adults' experiences. This is a small group, but as Cameron et al observe (2010, 119), even a small data set can be "revelatory" and provide important new insights. Nevertheless, the limited sample in my study cannot provide evidence that the potential for personal theological reflection will generally be found in the adult/child interface. Rather, my findings offer an invitation to others to 'transfer' (Herr and Anderson, 2005, 50) rather than 'generalize' and investigate further by (a) looking beyond the assumed effects of the adult/child interface; (b) finding effective methods of personal

and corporate reflection on adults' experience of their relationship with children; (c) realizing the theological potential of such reflections in relation to 'the gift of being' and 'God's purposes'; (d) seeking further areas of theological potential, grounded in the reality of personal reflection on the factors shaping adults' experience of children.

Depth of theological reflection

I suggest, above, that my study invites further investigation of the kind of theological reflection it describes. However, any such 'transfer' must consider the question of depth. The issues raised in the theological reflection on my *Weavers* journal were not deeply examined. Every aspect of each issue would have merited prolonged investigation, but the time constraints of my study precluded this. For ordinary congregation members, too, the pressure of time would be a restricting factor in developing the depth and detail of their theological reflections. Astley suggests that the theologising of 'ordinary' Christians is worthy of academic study (2002, 97-121) and perhaps one means of addressing the lack of time and theological expertise among congregation members might be to take the issues arising from their reflections on the adult/child interface to the academy for further investigation.

However, the 'application' proposed in section 2 of this chapter is designed to enable ordinary Christians to engage with theological reflection in a way that benefits their spiritual journey and that of their faith community, having relevance to their lived experience, and enabling them to explore the 'gift of being'. Academic and spiritual depth do not necessarily go together, and it is questionable whether detailed academic analysis would enhance the spiritual efficacy of 'ordinary' reflections on the adult/child interface. In my own case, while I know that academically my reflection only scratched the surface of the issues, I also know that important personal spiritual work was done.

Most importantly for this study, its opening image – the child as 'teacher' in the midst of adult disciples – suggests a reversal in a traditional balance of power. And the approach that this study has taken in grounding theology in ordinary experience rather than traditional academic concerns

implies a similar reversal. Any suggestion that an input from the academy is required should not betray the importance of ordinary faith experience and theological reflection. The 'four voice' understanding of theology proposed by Cameron et al is helpful in this respect. Its authors maintain that each voice is of equal weight and there should be an expectation of "mutual learning" between the outsider team (normative and formal voices) and the insider (espoused and operant voices) (2010,119). While greater academic depth from the formal voice may therefore add to the theological conversation, this should not drown the voices of congregation members, reflecting on their espoused aspirations and operant experience or drawing on their understanding of normative resources.

Sustainability of the source

In suggesting further investigation by others of the issues raised in this study, I am also mindful of issues of sustainability. The reflections on my journal identified only one set of themes having powerful personal significance. This may be considered a limitation. However, as noted above, the issues arising were not examined in depth and much work remains to be done on the material. There is potential therefore, even in one set of themes, for considerable further reflection.

4. IMPLICATIONS

The study has implications for the Church's view of children, intergenerational relationships, and theological conversation both within the Church and between the Church and those outside it. In this way its choices of 'object' and 'audience' are shown to include society as well as the Church (see Ganzevoort, 2009). This section will explore these implications and relate them to the researcher's professional context as an adviser for Children's Ministry, showing that they provide resources for advancing an all-age agenda and advocating children's importance in the Church in terms of mission, theology and adult spiritual development. It will conclude by

considering the possibilities for disseminating the study findings in the professional context.

Relating to reality

An exploration of what it means to be 'like a child' remains important for adult spiritual development, not least in the light of Rahner's observations on "the mature childhood of the adult" (1971, 48 – see Chapter 1). However, the shift in attention away from the presumed characteristics of children, encouraged by this study, will help counter the objection that Children's Ministry relies on a romanticised and over simplified view of childhood. The Children's Society report *A Good Childhood* has made an important contribution to public understanding of the rapid changes that are affecting children's experience of their childhood (Layard and Dunn, 2009, viii-x). Miller-McLemore points out (2011, 12-13) that society's view of children is undergoing major reconstruction as it replaces a vision of innocence – everything that the adult world is not – with a more complex, troubled and troubling picture in which the world of the child does not provide a refuge from that of the adult. Libby Brooks' study of modern childhood (2006) is a reminder that sexual issues, gender issues, the pressures of poverty, consumerism, fear, violence, mental illness, politics, racism and criminality are as much part of the child's world as the adult's. And Jensen (2005, 66-78) examines the harsh realities of children's lives in a global context. While some of my interview participants mentioned innocence among the things they valued in children, Gill (pages 117-120 and 125 above) claimed not to know what the word meant, and Tim's inner city narratives (pages 118-119 above) were a stark reminder of the complexity of the issue.

John Hull, exploring the blocks to adult Christian learning, observed long ago that "deep in their hearts many adults believe that religion is really for children" (1985, 8). Behind his observation lies a sense that the child's world is idealised and unrealistic, and so is religion's. These sentiments resonate with Nouwen's realization, after encountering the struggles for justice in South America, that his spirituality had been too "spiritualized", typified by a romantic reading of the Gospels that included a view of children as essentially innocent and harmless (Ford, 1999, 130). If their advocates

continue to portray children's importance for the Church solely in terms of their innocence and the example it provides, not only do we risk being seen as unrealistic, but we also compound the sense that the 'real adult world' is not the place for religious engagement. During a period when society's picture of childhood is shifting radically, it is timely to find a new and more complex focus for the advocacy of children's importance in the Church.

Relating the generations

That the new emphasis I am suggesting should concern relationship is also timely when the 'Big Society' is high on the political agenda. Government proposals include programmes to encourage service among teenagers (CIPFA, 2011, 4 and 8), but there is a need to match this by encouraging older citizens to engage with the young. The fragmentation of the generations remains a significant issue within the broader context of "excessive individualism" – one of the 'problems' identified in creating 'a good childhood' (Layard and Dunn, 2009, 6-8). My interview participants Robert and Edith (pages 122-126 above) were attempting to create the sort of loving, relational bonds that to Robert were key for the future of society. Jason Gardner (2008) expounds the importance of mending the generation gap, particularly for the Church; and the all-age Church agenda outlined by Mounstephen and Martin (2004) still has far to go. My suggested focus on the importance of intergenerational relationships can contribute to addressing these concerns, particularly since I highlight the importance of reflection on such relationships for personal and faith development.

Relating to the world

Hull (1985, 185) links "the evolution of the self" with "the evolution of personal faith" and sees it as a Christian educator's responsibility to promote harmony between the two. The perspective I propose would help discharge this responsibility. The links between faith and self-understanding can be found in my reflections on the adult/child interface, and they are links that Astley makes in concluding his *Christ of the Everyday* (2007, 126-127). At the beginning of that book he recalls a parish mission led by members of a religious order. It had not gone well: " 'We want to know,' someone said, 'how

to be Christians here, in *our* lives' " (*ibid,* 2). There is clearly a desire for an exploration of Christianity as it is lived and experienced by 'ordinary' Christians; and Cameron et al suggest this as the basis for a claim to truth, "grasped through the practice of the Christian life" (2010, 17). The process of reflection on the adult/child relationship offered by my study can contribute to these endeavours by providing widely available material.

Richard Cheetham, Bishop of Kingston, writing in the Church Times (2011, 12) advocates congregational theology as a way of grounding the Church's message in those aspects of faith that resonate with its members' lives, and engaging with elements they find difficult. Cheetham sees this as a need for the Church, but also suggests this approach would enable the Church better to engage with those outside its doors. David Hay notes the angry disappointment of 'outsiders' that "The images of God and the interpretations of reality purveyed by the religious institution simply did not resonate with their life experiences" (2006, 210-211); and Cameron et al list the incomprehension with which society views the Church among contemporary problems in talking about God (2010, 11). My suggestion that the adult/child relationship provides a catalyst for theological reflection in the Church would give its members something to talk to the world about that the world would recognize and understand, and 'ground' their theological language. Parents might also recognize a kinship between the process of theological reflection I advocate in section 2 above and their own intuitive reflections on parenting. The understanding, emerging from my findings, that 'self' is gift when it fulfils a 'divine' purpose in the service of 'others' brings together three domains of the "Relational Consciousness" identified by Nye as the basis of spirituality (Hay with Nye,1998). A connection can thereby be made with the interest in spirituality shown by a society wary of formal religion. Such a link with spirituality can also be helpful in re-establishing connections with psychology (see Collicutt, 2011) and encouraging reflection with theological implications among those for whom this science represents a way in to self-examination. My emphasis on personal flourishing would also contribute to this link by association with 'positive psychology' (*ibid*).

In the above ways, my study can contribute not only to Laity Development (see Cameron et al, 2010, 152) but also to Mission and

Evangelism. Such links might encourage professionals working in these areas to see those involved in Children's Ministry as allies in a common cause. And those who act as advocates for children in the Church can argue the importance of children in areas of the Church's ministry beyond the Junior Church.

Relating to each other

Astley and Christie (2007, 4), describing Ordinary Theology, tell the story of Barbara:

> Being quite normal, she had her doubts about some aspects of Christian faith. But she did not always feel normal. '*You sit in the pew wondering if everyone else has "got it" and you are the odd one out.'*
>
> She eventually realized, however, that quite a few others were thinking the same thing.

Ordinary Theology gets people talking, sharing and listening, and conversation was important for Theological Action Research. In offering a resource based on discussing children I am giving 'ordinary' Christians a shared experience to talk about among themselves as well as to others. And where there is talking, there must also be listening. Archbishop Rowan Williams, in his Presidential Address to the new General Synod (see Church Times report, 2010, 11), highlighted difficult issues to come and hoped that members would listen well. Bill Kirkpatrick, in his *The Creativity of Listening* (2005) describes "soul listening"[44] in which depth of listening to others is enhanced by deeper listening to the self and one's own feelings. The personal reflection and sharing that I am proposing consequently offer an encouragement and resource for the deep listening the Church will need in the future. Opening the issue of different adult 'styles of faithing' in relation to individuals' affinity with Children's Ministry may also offer a new way of appreciating divisions in the Church. Children's advocates can thus place children in the midst of this cohesive venture.

[44] A term drawn from Carl Jackson (2003).

Relating to theology

My suggestions for reflection, in a congregational setting, on the adult/child interface make use of the 'four voices' conversational model of Theological Action Research. Such reflections could therefore contribute to the development of TAR. The importance I give to the theologising of 'ordinary' Christians on their everyday experience also indicates the potential for a contribution to Ordinary Theology. And my emphasis on the particularity of individual experiences suggests an affinity with 'choral' theology.

A factor common to all these approaches is the location of theological interest in ordinary experience and enacted faith. The distinctive contribution my study makes to theological debate is in identifying such interest specifically in the issues that arise when adults reflect on their experience of relating to children. The theological potential of spending time with children, revealed by my study, not only emphasises their importance to the Church but is also an encouragement for more adults to engage in Children's Ministry as part of their own spiritual development. In addition, those already involved with children in a variety of settings, including professionals, may be led to recognise the potential for developing their own spirituality.

Such development might involve reflection on the new approach my study offers to Pridmore's interpretation of the child in the midst of the disciples. I suggest it is not just that *children* are 'patterns of discipleship' in themselves, but that the *relationship* with them provides such a pattern, and reflection on this relationship reveals patterns of discipleship that are more personally specific. Adults in Children's Ministry might also use my study to reflect anew on the words: "When you welcome even a child because of me, you welcome me. And when you welcome me, you welcome the one who sent me" [45].

If we see Jesus in the child and 'the one who sent him' in Jesus, then my interpretation of 'children in the midst' as partners in a relationship with adults, rather than examples to emulate moves us away from reductive views of the significance of Jesus at the centre of our lives. He is no longer simply an object for emulation but rather a partner in a dynamic and reflective

[45] Mark 9: 37; Luke 9: 48 (Contemporary English Version).

relationship. Jensen (2005, xi) claims that considering the circumstances of children's lives "transforms and enriches our understanding of the *imago Dei*". Perhaps viewing our relationship with Jesus in terms of the adult/child interface shows us how *kenosis* can produce an astonishing relational invitation to humanity from God in Christ. White points out (2008a, 372) that the first disciples rejected Jesus's talk of his death – the mark of his vulnerability. As we reflect on the joys and sorrows, successes and failures of our relationships with children, and the claim that God's purposes are fulfilled when the vulnerable flourish, we might ask ourselves how well we are accepting and discharging our responsibilities in relation to a vulnerable God.

Relating to the profession

The findings of this study have important implications for my professional practice as a Diocesan Children's Ministry adviser. It is an often-voiced complaint that those who give their time to Children's Ministry in the Church are not being 'fed' because they are generally not present in the main church service to hear the sermon. This frequently gives rise to rota systems that enable adult volunteers to be more regularly in the service, and large numbers of volunteers being recruited not to serve the children but to serve the rota. This view of what it means to be 'fed' spiritually, and the disruption that it entails to sustained weekly relationship between children and their adult ministers is detrimental to both adults and children. The findings of this study will allow me to challenge the assumption that the most significant spiritual food for adults is to be found when they are not in the company of children. It will also enable me to promote a greater valuing of sustained relationship with children as in itself a source of spiritual reflection and growth, both for individuals and the community of faith.

A prime function of my role as an adviser is to provide training and consultation for Children's Ministry volunteers, and those in ministerial leadership within the Church of England. Such training events and consultations will provide a primary context in which to disseminate some of the findings of this study. They will also enable me to carry out further work in devising and promoting the kind of reflective application of my findings suggested in section 2 of this chapter.

Beyond my diocesan role, I am also a member of regional and national networks of Church of England Children's Work Advisers, and of an area ecumenical group of Children's and Youth Officers. All these groups provide opportunities informally and through conferences to present material drawn from this study and to gain the insights of professional colleagues on the issues raised. My own diocese and the Church of England nationally maintain websites dedicated to Children's Ministry issues, and these provide the opportunity for posting more substantial presentations of my findings. Journals such as the electronic *Journal of Childhood and Religion* also offer the possibility of publication in a format that is regularly accessed by the profession.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION

The Church of England, in its most recent policy for children and young people, *Going for Growth,* claims that the Church is called to transformation at all levels, and to recognise that its young members can be "the agents of change" (Archbishops' Council, 2010, 14). This chapter concludes that by the relationships their vulnerability evokes, children could be 'agents of change' – for individual Christians, for congregations, and for the theology of the Church. It has summarised the results of investigating the question *What personal effects do adult Christians experience when they explore the Christian faith in company with children?* – results that located the effect in reflections arising from the relationship between adults and children rather than in children's inherent characteristics. The chapter then returned to the underlying concern of the investigation – the 'specialness' of children. This specialness was identified in the relationships evoked by their vulnerability. It was recognised that children's vulnerability was not unique. However, this was seen as adding to the 'special value' of the adult/child interface, since it facilitated a transfer to other situations. If personal reflection 'in the light of a child' could lead adults to a reassessment of their 'being', it could also enable them to discern that 'being' as God's 'gift' when used to promote the flourishing of all vulnerable people.

The chapter considered promoting reflection on the adult/child interface in Christian congregations, and the study was seen as offering an invitation to others for further theological reflection in this area. Implications of the study for the researcher's professional context in Children's Ministry were highlighted. An image of children as complex catalysts rather than romanticised exemplars was seen as a more potent basis for advocating their importance in the Church. Theological reflections 'in the light of a child' were suggested as possibly effective in engaging those beyond the Church, and such attention to children might therefore contribute to mission. Finally, placing relationship with children at the centre of adult theological reflection was seen as contributing to the all-age agenda, cohesion within the Church, and the collegial conversation that could be the future shape of theology (Ford, 2005, 761). These implications were related to the researcher's practice as an adviser, and the possibilities for dissemination of the study findings were considered in local, regional and national contexts.

At the heart of those findings is the image of children as 'light', holding up a candle to the world and, by their very being, asking a mute question of humanity: 'Will you hold my hand in this place of shadows?' Perhaps that was and is the question asked by a vulnerable Christ.

Jesus bids his followers become like children to enter the kingdom[46]. In the context of this study, that entails an acknowledgement of human vulnerability. In a society that prizes self-sufficiency, the vulnerability of dependence becomes devalued (Carter, 2007, 26). However, in writing about the divine compassion he had felt in the presence of an aged priest, Henri Nouwen suggested that his own stark vulnerability had somehow summoned the compassion of God from his companion (Ford, 1999, 150). The Quakers speak of the presence of God in everyone. They speak of it as 'inner light'. Perhaps in attending to the effect children have on them, adults can re-evaluate the place of vulnerability in their own lives. By recognising and turning to the candlelight of each other's vulnerabilities whatever our age,

[46] Matthew 18: 3.

inspired by our caring response to children, it may be that we can summon from each other the dawning light of God's love.

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June 2012

Appendix

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES OF JOURNAL ANALYSIS

The material in this appendix provides examples of the process used to analyse the *Weavers* journal, as outlined in Chapter 2 (pages 32, 34 and 35) and Chapter 4 (pages 70 to 73) and summarised in Figure 3 (page 35). It relates to the analysis structure presented in Figure 4 (page 74); the two 'samples sessions' (pages 75 to 79 and 82 to 84) with their introductions and commentaries; and the summary of analysis findings (pages 86 to 88).

EXAMPLE 1: FROM JOURNAL TO ANALYSIS

Stage 1 – Identify 'units of meaning' in the journal text

Chapter 2 (page 32) describes the *Weavers* journal writing process. It includes almost verbatim the 'rule for inclusion' developed for the journal. Chapter 4 (page 70) gives more detail. The text below is a journal extract, beginning at page 51, recording my response to one *Weavers* session. All names are the pseudonyms used in the sample sessions (Chapter 4). A page break in the journal is indicated in parenthesis.

The first stage of the analysis was to identify 'units of meaning' (see Chapter 2, page 34). These are highlighted in bold. The research question concerned 'personal effects' experienced by adults (page 11), and the significance of these highlighted passages as 'units of meaning' for the research was determined by their expression of such personal responses – either feelings, thoughts or interpretations.

<u>10/5/09 – Weavers</u>

James's group led. He had us doing a rugby passing game in the garden. These games do help bond the group. They also help make us feel equal (<u>I</u> think, anyway) – or makes us feel a bit more equal.

Inside, James asked us what Bible stories we knew. Emma scribed. As we got going, more and more stories were being brought out – **a series from assembly was remembered by Jess. I guessed what some of them were from the details. Sometimes it felt a bit "show-off"-ish to do this – & sometimes I felt as if I added more details than were needed, for this reason.**

(Journal page 52) James then asked us which was our favourite story – we marked it on the sheet. He had a lap-top & we all had to try & find our story using a search engine. I was the only one who failed! Then we looked them up & read out a bit. **(James made some comments after each reading about what an important piece of scripture that was. I thought those comments were rather forced). He then asked why we'd chosen our particular story. Everyone was able to say something – except Kaye. I asked her how her story made her <u>feel</u>, & she was able to respond to that.**

Stage 2 – Highlight summarising phrase(s) in each unit

The units were typed from the hand-written journal as separate texts, and each given a page reference code (example: J/51 indicates the unit begins on journal page 51). Brief contextual references were sometimes included, shown in italicised square brackets. The significance of the passage was indicated by highlighting a key phrase or phrases in bold that encapsulated my feelings or thoughts. If a passage exemplified more than one such personal effect, it was copied, with a different phrase or phrases highlighted for each.

The following texts are the separate units derived from the journal extract above.

J/51 *[James]* had us doing a rugby passing game in the garden. These games do help **bond the group.**

J/51 *[James]* had us doing a rugby passing game in the garden. These games do help bond the group. They also help make us feel equal (<u>I</u> think, anyway) – or **makes us feel a bit more equal.**

J/51 *[while thinking of Bible stories we knew]* a series from assembly was remembered by Jess. I guessed what some of them were from the details. Sometimes it felt **a bit "show-off"-ish** to do this – & sometimes I felt as if I added more details than were needed, for this reason.

J/52 James made some comments after each reading *[from our favourite Bible stories]* about what an important piece of scripture that was. I thought **those comments were rather forced.**

J/52 *[James]* then asked why we'd chosen our particular story. Everyone was able to say something – except Kaye. I asked her **how her story made her <u>feel</u>,** & she was able to respond to that.

Stage 3 – Produce analysis structure:

- **assign units to subcategories and categories**
- **develop rules for inclusion**
- **relate categories to each other**
- **relate all categories to core category**

Units of meaning were initially grouped if they 'felt right together'. When several units had been assigned to a group, a propositional 'rule for inclusion' was drafted for the group with reference to the highlighted key phrases in its constituent units. This rule provided a guide for the inclusion of subsequent units. These groups (now termed subcategories) were then drawn together into larger groupings, termed categories, for which rules for inclusion were then developed. It was these categories that were eventually related to a 'core category' – 'Feelings on being part of the *Weavers* group' – in the 'hierarchy' shown in Figure 4 (page 74). Rules for inclusion were also produced for the two strands of this core category. All rules were subject to revision as the analysis developed. Pages 34 and 35 of Chapter 2 and pages 71 to 73 of Chapter 4 give further details of the categorisation process and the reflections that guided it.

The rule for inclusion for 'The 'given-ness'' – the first category of the 'Negative Feelings' strand in the analysis hierarchy – is given below. This is followed by the rule for inclusion for 'Resisting the gift of difference' – the first subcategory of 'The 'given-ness'' (see Figure 4, page 74). The unit of meaning from the journal extract above that was assigned to this subcategory is shown.

‘The given-ness’ – rule for inclusion
For a variety of personal and ideological reasons, some adults find the authority role in relation to children problematic. However, there are practical ‘givens’ of the human condition, leading to societal expectations that adults take on this role. Children’s behaviours tend to uphold the distinction, and the tension to which it leads can be viewed as healthy and productive.

‘Resisting the gift of difference’ – rule for inclusion
My resistance to the division between adults and children derives from three sources: memories of childhood, when I hated being bossed around and treated as a child; a political commitment to equality, undiminished since my adolescence; and negative experiences of being in authority over children as a primary school teacher. I am not at ease with the persona I have to adopt as a ‘leader’; I find it distances me from the children and, because of the demands and anxieties of the role, prevents me from engaging fully in activities with them. It can also lead to difficult relations with other adults. In addition, if children are denied a share in leadership they are missing an area of development and are not able to express themselves fully.

Unit of meaning assigned to ‘Resisting the gift of difference’
J/51 *[while thinking of Bible stories we knew]* a series from assembly was remembered by Jess. I guessed what some of them were from the details. Sometimes it felt **a bit “show-off”-ish** to do this – & sometimes I felt as if I added more details than were needed, for this reason.

Stage 4 – illustration of analysis through composite sample sessions

Page 73 of Chapter 4 describes the illustration of the journal analysis structure by means of composite *Weavers* sessions, drawn from material in the journal and presented in narrative style. The extract given below is from the first of these sample sessions – ‘The Nights Draw In’ – and is found on page 77. This session illustrates the ‘Negative Feelings’ strand of the analysis, and the unit of meaning from J/51 shown above under the subcategory ‘Resisting the gift of difference’ has been used in the extract.

James, always impatient of wasted time and lack of focus, is about to head for his study in search of Bibles, when Jess suddenly remembers that someone has recently been visiting her school assemblies telling Bible stories. I ask her which ones and she starts to dredge up some details. She can’t remember any characters’ names, but I hazard a few guesses, and she claims to recognise my suggestions. I feel the relationship is going wrong again – I’m being the ‘clever-clogs’ teacher, and as I add details she’s left out it feels as if I’m showing off.

EXAMPLE 2: TRACKING ANALYSIS BACK TO JOURNAL

In this example, an extract from one of the sample sessions of Chapter 4 is traced back through the analysis categories it is intended to illustrate to the unit of meaning and journal entry from which it arises.

Sample session composite narrative

The following extract is from the second sample session in Chapter 4 – 'In a Summer Garden' – and is found on page 84. This session is intended to illustrate the second strand of the analysis structure – my positive feelings on being part of *Weavers.*

Chris is in the group with no adult and marches over, seeking clarification on the task. Joyce goes into too much detail and Chris stops her, mid-sentence, with a raised hand.

'That'll do, Joyce,' he says and returns to his group.

The sun's dipping and it's time for us to finish. Our group decides to do a presentation to the others next time based on Dale's steel eggshell mime. I wander towards Chris's group. He sees me coming and bars my way.

'Do not disturb!' he says.

I apologise and ask if they're ready to wind up.

'Nearly,' he says.

Looking past him I can see that the group is gathered in a circle and Jess is writing down plans. I'm surprised as I had been keeping half an eye on them and they hadn't seemed particularly 'on task', spending most of their time on the slide.

Category rules for inclusion

The above extract is intended to illustrate the first category of the positive feelings strand – 'Gifts in relationship' – and specifically the subcategory 'Children lead'. The rules for inclusion for these groupings are given below. The sections highlighted in bold were used verbatim in the commentary on positive feelings (page 85).

‘Gifts in relationship’ – rule for inclusion
Natural, equal relationships with children give me a personal acceptance and affirmation that I feel to be trustworthy and therefore potent. Such relationships also enable me to share the demands of leadership within the group, and are promoted through jointly undertaken activities, sharing experiences, and an open **ethos that welcomes what children have to offer**.

Children lead – rule for inclusion
When children take a lead in Weavers I gain pleasure from their achievement, both developmentally and ‘politically’. There is also pleasure in being able to share the burden of responsibility for the group. For children to be able to share in leadership they need the requisite experience, knowledge and strategies. They must also know the group has an open ethos in which adults are prepared to give children’s suggestions proper consideration, recognise their creativity and perception, and respond positively to their strength of feeling and persistence. Such an ethos fosters confidence in the children to plan, initiate, enlist adult aid on their own terms, work independently and ultimately execute. Working in this way, children are engaged, and the activities they produce are engaging.

Units of meaning

The following units of meaning were included in the subcategory ‘Children lead’, within the overall category ‘Gifts in relationship’ and are the origin of the passage in the sample session above. They are sequential passages in the journal.

J/109 The ‘children only’ group positioned themselves at the top of a slide and I was anxious they weren’t ‘addressing the task’ (I c’d see out of the corner of my eye that they were sliding) – however, when I came to give them a 5 min warning of the end of the task, **they were gathered in conference & Chris said, ‘Do not disturb.’**

J/110 Chris had asked for clarification of the task *[planning a presentation]* earlier from Joyce, and she’d launched into a long explanation, **he cut her off with a ‘That’ll do, Joyce’** – signalling how he’d got the information he needed.

EXAMPLE 3: REFLECTING – DIARY OF THE ANALYSIS

My account of the *Weavers* journal analysis (Chapter 2, page 35) notes that a diary of the process was kept, recording the development of my thinking. As indicated in Chapter 4 (pages 71 and 72) my diary reflections were an important part of the process leading to the final analysis structure. The following extracts from this diary indicate an emerging interpretation of the relationship between adults and children – the things that divide and unite them – in terms of 'gift'. The concept and vocabulary of gift is thus seen to have emerged from reflection during the development and arrangement of categories in relation to the core category: 'Feelings on being part of the *Weavers* group'.

Omitted text is indicated by three dots. Text in italicised square brackets denotes an explanatory addition.

12.8.10
… A major piece of learning has been <u>not</u> to go with my feelings and validate the 'together' *['Positive Feelings']* at the expense of junking the 'apart' *['Negative Feelings']*. An important part of the experience has been coming to terms with and valuing the 'apart' as well as the 'together'.

13.8.10
… Two new categories emerged *[in the 'Negative Feelings' strand]*: <u>'The Given-ness of the division'</u> … and <u>'The responsibilities of the adults'</u> …

… One particular line of thinking emerges from the emergence of 'given-ness' as a category: who did the giving? God gives all things, so this adult/child division and the relationships we build across it are God's gift. God has given adults to children and children to adults <u>as</u> children & adults, as well as sister & brother humans …

15.8.10
… The word 'gift' and its derivatives seems to be coming up frequently. Perhaps 'Adult learning' would be better entitled 'Gifts to the adult'. I have renamed a number of the categories to reflect the emergence of 'gift' as an interpretative word …

16.8.10
… The issues of authority and the 'given-ness' of the relationship between adults and children were proving to be central to the journal analysis …

17.8.10
… The section on ‘memories’ seemed a little out of place amongst headings such as ‘being’ ‘beliefs’ & ‘values’. The memories about my teaching career are really background to my resistance to the ‘given-ness’ …

19.8.10
… The fact that as an adult I take instinctive pleasure in seeing children being ‘grown up’ is surely an indication of another of the ‘givens’ of the adult/child relationship: adults may have much to gain from children, but they’re still supposed to help children ‘grow up’ …

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