

# **African childhoods and Christian faith communities: A practical-theological engagement**

**S Ramashau**

 [https://orcid.org/ 0000-0002-7809-8621](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7809-8621)

Dissertation accepted for the degree *Magister of Theology*  
in *Pastoral Studies* at the North-West University

Supervisor: Dr Hannelie Yates

Graduation ceremony: May 2024

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First and foremost, I would like to direct my praises, my worship and my gratitude to the Most-High God, who is the Initiator of my research. He gave me ideas, strength, and good health so that I could complete my dissertation. This research is all about uplifting the name of the LORD.

I would like to thank my study supervisor, Dr Hannelie Yates, for the support, guidance, love, patience and kindness I received from her. It was not an easy road, but she was there to help me. May she be blessed in everything and in every way.

I acknowledge the motivation of Professor TD Mashau (The pastor of New Life City Church in Pretoria) and Dr TI Mashau. They always motivated and inspired me to study hard and persevere. I would like to thank New Life City Church for their support and prayers.

I am grateful for the support I got from Hettie Viljoen.

English is my second language, so I want to extend my gratitude to Christien Terblanche (Cum Laude Language Practitioners) for editing my dissertation.

Lastly, I would like to thank my mom, Vho Kutama Ramashau, for her huge contribution to my research, especially Chapter 2. She was of great help when it came to traditional African childhoods. She helped me understand how children were viewed and treated in the past. May God bless her abundantly.

## ABSTRACT

There is an underlying global and local societal view that children are of lesser value than adults. This view of the humanity and dignity of children has far-reaching effects on children, families, communities and societies at large. Faith communities have not escaped the effects of how childhood has been constructed historically. This reality urges contemporary theology and the broader faith community to examine how the praxis of faith communities either reproduces or resists dehumanising constructions of childhood and steer it in a different direction. Heeding this call, this study explores how faith communities can become partners in liberating African childhoods by examining what children's partnering role would entail in practice. The study is situated in the field of practical theology, which has its interest in the intentional actions – praxis – of faith communities and its implications for children and their holistic well-being. Richard Osmer's approach to practical-theological interpretation is used to discover how we can respond to the need to see children's humanity by applying the lenses of the Christian faith and how believers can act accordingly within the context of faith communities.

Firstly, this study presents fragments from children's lives to illustrate childhood images in African thought and to probe the implications of these childhood images on children's everyday lives. Secondly, an interdisciplinary childhood studies perspective is used to gain an understanding of historical and contemporary ideas associated with African childhoods. Based on the findings of the first two sections, the study reimagines the construction of African childhoods from a child theology perspective. Lastly, strategic directions for the partnership role of faith communities concerning children and the affirmation of their full humanity in society are presented.

**Key concepts:** African childhoods; child theology; faith communities; practical theology

## **CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS**

The key concepts are clarified below as they relate to the purpose of this study.

### **African childhoods**

For this study, childhood is viewed as a social construct. When childhood is regarded as a social construct, there is room for change. This implies that faith communities are called to act as constructors who strive to raise, nurture and treat children better than we do at present. Social constructs of childhood here refer to constructs of childhood in African thought specifically. The use of the term African childhoods in plural form is a conscious choice to acknowledge the heterogeneity of childhoods, thereby moving beyond stereotypical images of African children (see Adebe & Ofusu-Kusi, 2016).

### **Child theology**

Child theology refers to an international scholarly endeavour of theological reflection about the dignity and full humanity of children and a commitment to children in our faith practices in church and society.

### **Christian faith communities**

In this study, faith communities refer to groups of people who share faith in God and the body of Jesus Christ in God's world by participating through God's Spirit in God's mission of a transformed world.

### **Practical-theological engagement**

In this study, the subject field of African childhoods and the role of faith communities in uncritically reproducing or responsibly deconstructing and reimagining them are examined from a practical-theological perspective. Practical theology engages with questions related to the nature of faith practices and their impact on the holistic well-being of people in the context of faith communities and the broader society. In this study, practical theology is understood as the "dynamic process of reflective critical inquiry into the church's praxis in the world and God's purpose for humanity, carried out in the light of the Christian scripture and tradition and in critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge" (Anderson, 2001:22).

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                             |              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| <b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>                               | <b>i</b>     |
| <b>ABSTRACT .....</b>                                       | <b>ii</b>    |
| <b>CLARIFICATION OF KEY CONCEPTS.....</b>                   | <b>iii</b>   |
| <br><b>CHAPTER 1 CHILDHOODS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES .....</b> | <br><b>1</b> |
| <b>1.1 Introduction .....</b>                               | <b>1</b>     |
| <b>1.2 Literature overview.....</b>                         | <b>3</b>     |
| 1.2.1 Childhood as a social construct .....                 | 3            |
| 1.2.2 Child theology.....                                   | 3            |
| 1.2.3 African childhoods .....                              | 4            |
| <b>1.3 Research problem .....</b>                           | <b>7</b>     |
| <b>1.4 Research question and sub-questions .....</b>        | <b>7</b>     |
| <b>1.5 Research aims and objectives.....</b>                | <b>8</b>     |
| 1.5.1 Research aim .....                                    | 8            |
| 1.5.2 Research objectives .....                             | 8            |
| <b>1.6 Central theoretical argument.....</b>                | <b>8</b>     |
| <b>1.7 Research methodology .....</b>                       | <b>8</b>     |
| 1.7.1 The descriptive task.....                             | 9            |
| 1.7.2 The interpretative task .....                         | 9            |
| 1.7.3 The normative task .....                              | 9            |
| 1.7.4 The pragmatic task .....                              | 10           |
| <b>1.8 The significance of the study .....</b>              | <b>10</b>    |

|                  |                                                                                        |           |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>1.9</b>       | <b>Ethics considerations .....</b>                                                     | <b>10</b> |
| <b>1.10</b>      | <b>Schematic representation .....</b>                                                  | <b>11</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 2</b> | <b>AFRICAN CHILDHOODS.....</b>                                                         | <b>12</b> |
| <b>2.1</b>       | <b>Introduction .....</b>                                                              | <b>12</b> |
| <b>2.2</b>       | <b>Situatedness of researcher.....</b>                                                 | <b>12</b> |
| <b>2.3</b>       | <b>The traditional worldview of childhood in Africa.....</b>                           | <b>13</b> |
| 2.3.1            | Tribe .....                                                                            | 14        |
| 2.3.2            | Traditional leaders .....                                                              | 14        |
| 2.3.3            | Gender .....                                                                           | 15        |
| <b>2.4</b>       | <b>Childhood construction .....</b>                                                    | <b>15</b> |
| 2.4.1            | The history of childhood construction.....                                             | 15        |
| 2.4.2            | Childhood construction in Africa .....                                                 | 16        |
| 2.4.2.1          | Childhood as a biological stage .....                                                  | 16        |
| 2.4.2.2          | Childhood as a social construct .....                                                  | 17        |
| <b>2.5</b>       | <b>The paradigm shift in childhood construction .....</b>                              | <b>20</b> |
| <b>2.6</b>       | <b>Implications for children's everyday lives .....</b>                                | <b>22</b> |
| <b>2.7</b>       | <b>What causes the challenges African children face in their everyday lives? .....</b> | <b>24</b> |
| 2.7.1            | Culture.....                                                                           | 24        |
| 2.7.2            | Initiation school.....                                                                 | 24        |
| 2.7.3            | Discipline/punishment.....                                                             | 25        |
| 2.7.4            | Respect .....                                                                          | 25        |

|                  |                                                                               |           |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 2.7.5            | Taboos .....                                                                  | 26        |
| 2.7.6            | Poverty .....                                                                 | 27        |
| 2.7.7            | Pandemics.....                                                                | 27        |
| 2.7.8            | Child labour .....                                                            | 28        |
| 2.7.9            | War.....                                                                      | 28        |
| 2.7.10           | Natural disasters.....                                                        | 28        |
| 2.7.11           | Unemployment .....                                                            | 29        |
| 2.7.12           | Poor governance .....                                                         | 29        |
| 2.7.13           | Social media.....                                                             | 29        |
| <b>2.8</b>       | <b>Conclusion.....</b>                                                        | <b>29</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 3</b> | <b>AFRICAN CHILD THEOLOGIES .....</b>                                         | <b>31</b> |
| <b>3.1</b>       | <b>Introduction .....</b>                                                     | <b>31</b> |
| <b>3.2</b>       | <b>The concept of child theology .....</b>                                    | <b>31</b> |
| <b>3.3</b>       | <b>Child theology in Africa .....</b>                                         | <b>32</b> |
| <b>3.4</b>       | <b>Child theology based on Old and New Testament perspectives.....</b>        | <b>34</b> |
| <b>3.5</b>       | <b>A child theology that will bring liberation to African childhoods.....</b> | <b>35</b> |
| 3.5.1            | Theology for children .....                                                   | 35        |
| 3.5.1.1          | Child-attentive theological anthropology .....                                | 35        |
| 3.5.1.2          | Holistic salvation.....                                                       | 36        |
| 3.5.1.3          | Protection .....                                                              | 37        |
| 3.5.2            | Theology with children .....                                                  | 37        |
| 3.5.3            | Theology by the children.....                                                 | 38        |

|                  |                                                                                  |           |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 3.5.4            | Child theology: A new African hermeneutic.....                                   | 39        |
| 3.5.5            | Faith communities and child theology .....                                       | 39        |
| 3.5.6            | Child theology: Faith communities as liberating spaces .....                     | 40        |
| <b>3.6</b>       | <b>Conclusion.....</b>                                                           | <b>41</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 4</b> | <b>REIMAGINING AFRICAN CHILDHOODS.....</b>                                       | <b>43</b> |
| <b>4.1</b>       | <b>Introduction .....</b>                                                        | <b>43</b> |
| <b>4.2</b>       | <b>The role of faith communities in constructing African childhoods.....</b>     | <b>43</b> |
| 4.2.1            | Liberating the hierarchical marginalisation structure of African childhoods..... | 43        |
| 4.2.1.1          | Children as gifts of God .....                                                   | 43        |
| 4.2.1.2          | Reimagining the personhood of African childhood .....                            | 44        |
| 4.2.1.3          | Intergenerational gathering in faith communities .....                           | 44        |
| 4.2.1.4          | Creating children's ministries within faith communities.....                     | 47        |
| 4.2.1.5          | Discovering children's gifts .....                                               | 48        |
| 4.2.1.6          | African children as models of faith .....                                        | 48        |
| 4.2.2            | Reimagining African culture .....                                                | 49        |
| 4.2.2.1          | Revisiting African taboos .....                                                  | 49        |
| 4.2.2.2          | Revisiting discipline/punishment and circumcision .....                          | 50        |
| 4.2.3            | African children and their needs .....                                           | 51        |
| 4.2.3.1          | Taking care of their physical needs.....                                         | 51        |
| 4.2.3.2          | Taking care of psychological needs .....                                         | 54        |
| 4.2.3.3          | Taking care of children's spiritual needs .....                                  | 57        |
| 4.2.4            | Creating an awareness of child theology within faith communities .....           | 60        |

|                  |                                                                                           |           |
|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 4.2.4.1          | Preaching .....                                                                           | 60        |
| 4.2.4.2          | Reinterpreting abused scriptures .....                                                    | 60        |
| 4.2.4.3          | Sending members to theological schools.....                                               | 61        |
| 4.2.4.4          | Forming relationships between different generations within the faith<br>communities ..... | 62        |
| <b>4.3</b>       | <b>Conclusion.....</b>                                                                    | <b>62</b> |
| <b>CHAPTER 5</b> | <b>FINDINGS .....</b>                                                                     | <b>64</b> |
| <b>5.1</b>       | <b>Relevance of the study.....</b>                                                        | <b>64</b> |
| <b>5.2</b>       | <b>Research findings .....</b>                                                            | <b>64</b> |
| <b>5.3</b>       | <b>Limitation of the study .....</b>                                                      | <b>68</b> |
| <b>5.4</b>       | <b>Further areas for research .....</b>                                                   | <b>68</b> |
| <b>5.5</b>       | <b>Concluding remarks .....</b>                                                           | <b>68</b> |
|                  | <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>                                                                 | <b>69</b> |
|                  | <b>Appendix A:..... Declaration from Language<br/>Editor.....</b>                         | <b>78</b> |

## LIST OF TABLES

|                      |           |
|----------------------|-----------|
| Table 1-1: .....     | Schematic |
| representation ..... | 11        |

# CHAPTER 1      CHILDHOODS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

## 1.1 Introduction

Tragically, many children globally are exposed to a wide variety of dehumanising practices as part of their daily lives. Bunge (2012:5), for one, points out that many children, irrespective of their economic state, suffer abandonment or mistreatment by adults and, as a result, struggle with drug dependence, suicide and stress. She continues to highlight that “many children die from hunger or preventable diseases each and every day” (Bunge, 2012:5). In most cases, the causes of these circumstances can be traced back to adults who do not value children and do not act in their best interest.

These appalling child realities are also true for many children in sub-Saharan Africa. Palm’s (2020:34) research confirms that in contemporary South Africa, many children face high levels of physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse and sustained neglect and exploitation. Although families should offer children protective possibilities, children’s familial intimate spaces often remain the places where they are most vulnerable (Palm, 2020:34). According to Palm (2020:39), the high incidence of sexual crimes in South Africa has gained worldwide attention, with the rape and killing of girl children as a specific feature of crime in the South African context. Roux’s (2020) research in turn indicates that children are still forced into marriage in South Africa, noting that: “In a June 2019 exposé on child marriage in South Africa, the investigative journalism television show Carte Blanche drew renewed attention to the more than 90 000 girls in South Africa who entered marriages as child brides” (Roux, 2020:164).

Christians dare not stand apathetic to the plight of children. Yet, improving the childhoods of South African children is no easy task. Children’s living environments are complex and diverse. Discussing the family contexts of South African children, Holborn and Eddy (2011:1) remind us that “...when we speak of South African families, we talk not only of the nuclear family but also of extended families, as well as caregivers and guardians”. Faith communities in South Africa have a particular calling to serve as families of God. God calls adults to treat children in a dignified manner as Jesus did. Mark 10:13–14 illustrates Jesus’s attitude towards children:

*“People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as this’”.*

However, children’s lived experiences often speak of feelings of being undervalued and underestimated, both in families and in churches.

The abuse of children in society is often spiritually perpetuated in faith communities. Children and their contributions are frequently overlooked in faith practices. Churches, for example, habitually separate children from the worship service and, by so doing, deny "...the gift of the child with us" (Weber & De Beer, 2017:4). Relegated to fragmented and isolated ministry structures, children are not visible in the gathering of God's family. As a result, they are deprived of opportunities to be and feel part of the body of Christ. These practices can partly be blamed on a dominant view of children as the church of tomorrow. This view indirectly implies that children are not the church of today (Nelson, 1995:81). In many cultures there is a mindset that children ought to be trained, educated and equipped before they become fully human (Grobbelaar, 2019:4). This educational paradigm has infiltrated church ministry, with the effect that churches often isolate children from participating in broader church life.

One consequence of the dominant educational paradigm in church ministry with children is that other forms of child ministry are neglected. Matteson (cited by Mahlangu, 2016:4) illustrates in a discussion on child grief how the importance of pastoral care for and with children is often overlooked:

*"We didn't know that a child can grieve. We thought that they were too small to understand what happened. We didn't know that children go grieving for a long period. I never used to understand the behaviour of orphans".*

Children, like everybody else, experience pain in their lives, and they deserve to receive the same treatment as the adults at church. They should be cared for pastorally if they lose their parents through death, during their parents' divorce, failing at school, when they fall victim to abuse, etc. They deserve the same treatment as other members of faith communities – to be visited at their homes when sick or in hospital, or to be celebrated on birthdays or when they reach milestones in their lives.

Bunge (2012:5) indicates the problem in churches internationally when she says: "Many churches do not adequately support children and youth programs. Child and family ministries are underfunded and leaders are difficult to recruit and maintain". Bunge argues that the syllabi and classes of many religious learning curricula are scripturally weak and boring for children, and trained educators are not hired and retained (Bunge, 2019:35). These faith practices can be traced back to how children's humanity is viewed. Bunge continues to say that Christian custom and faith community tradition speak about children as "not fully human" or "beasts" or "close to being human" (Bunge, 2019:41). Children's perceived place and position in churches are foundational to how adults respond to their responsibilities and obligations towards children in ministerial practice and daily life. It is therefore pivotal that faith communities reconsider how they view childhood and how they construct childhood in their midst.

## 1.2 Literature overview

Studies about and of childhood have emerged in distinct disciplines (see Ansell 2017a:17). The theoretical perspective that has dominated the history of research about childhood is developmental psychology. When adhering to this perspective in a simplistic manner, we run the risk of viewing and treating children following a “deficit approach”, where the abilities children lack are the focus of research (see Dillen 2007:62). Work with children by sociologists, anthropologists and geographers has created an awareness of children as legitimate subjects of study. A new paradigm of research, *childhood studies*, has emerged from this work. Childhood studies takes a critical stance against the use of only a developmental psychological perspective in studies about childhood, in other words neglecting the idea of childhood as a social phenomenon (Ansell 2017a:18). In childhood studies the concept “childhood” is viewed as a social construct.

### 1.2.1 Childhood as a social construct

Norozi and Moen explore the concept of childhood from the perspective of social constructivism. This perspective “seeks to understand how children and childhood knowledge is constructed, by whom, why and most substantially, what purpose it will serve” (Norozi & Moen, 2016:75). They acknowledge the influence of context by saying that the “social construction of childhood is grounded in varying conceptions among different cultures, societies and at different periods in history” (Norozi & Moen, 2016:75). James and James (2008:122) define social constructivism as “a theoretical perspective that explores the ways in which ‘reality’ is negotiated in everyday life through people’s interaction and through sets of discourses”. As such, this perspective offers a paradigm shift when it comes to our view of children or childhood.

Ansell (2017a:13) explains that constructions of childhood include both descriptive and normative elements: “the characteristics attributed to young people of different ages and sexes, how they are treated, the ways they are expected to behave, how they are valued by society and what is considered desirable in a young person”.

From Ansell’s conceptualisation of childhood, it is clear that conceptualisations and experiences of childhood are interrelated. A concern for and curiosity about the relation between theological conceptualisations of childhood and the lived experiences of children stimulated the development of the interdisciplinary field of *child theology*.

### 1.2.2 Child theology

Bunge and Eide (2021:xiii) are quite correct when they comment that, “Although children are all around us, children and childhood have been a marginal topic in many academic fields”. The topic

of children has been underestimated in churches, communities and in theology. Child theology aims to raise awareness and take care of vulnerable and unseen children in our families, churches, and communities (see Grobbelaar & Jones, 2021:25).

Bunge and Eide (2021:xvii) explain that “Child theology attends to children’s challenges and contributions, honours their vulnerabilities and strength, and emphasizes adult duties and responsibilities to children”. According to Grobbelaar, “child theology is, in essence, an endeavour to think afresh about God and God’s involvement in this world by taking children into account in formulating, or reformulating theology” (Grobbelaar, 2016a:63). Bunge describes the value of child theology as located in the fact that “[t]he lens of the child...can also help re-examine central beliefs and practices of a religious tradition and expose some of its neglected or distorted elements” (Bunge, 2006:574).

According to Malherbe (2004:5) the African continent and African churches have been slow in formulating their local theology and discovering their children. One of the reasons for this slowness may be the strong influence of missionaries and other church leaders with western academic minds who restrain the growth of the African theology response (Malherbe, 2004:5; Mtata 2021:37). Mtata offers another reason in saying that “...this absence of childhood in African theological anthropology can be traced to the nature and the foundations of communitarian assumptions” (Mtata, 2021:37). Still, the predicament of the African child cannot be disregarded in its theological reflection. Child theology imparts a new hermeneutics for the African theologian (Mahlangu & Grobbelaar, 2016:103). Mahlangu and Grobbelaar (2016:112–113) make it clear that children should be viewed in new ways in African churches as well.

### **1.2.3 African childhoods**

Ndofirepi and Shumba warn that “...child’ and childhood are best understood within a cultural context and to attempt to universalise the concept child is a misrepresentation of the world of children” (Ndofirepi & Shumba, 2014:233). Many elements make up the African view of childhood, but the most salient is perhaps the influence of communal views. In the African context, “the birth of the new child is characterised by a community welcome, and the community invests in the child, who is given a name from the departed family or community member” (Ndofirepi & Shumba, 2014:236). As such, “in the traditional African society, the birth of the child is both physical and religious” (Mahlangu & Grobbelaar, 2016:88; Mahlangu, 2016:1).

In Africa, a child is everybody’s child. Ndofirepi and Shumba (2014:235) explain that “...traditional African communities place the child in close contact with a larger group and socialise the young into the group, and the group in turn has the responsibility towards the children”. According to the

African perspective, the community has the responsibility to raise the children of that community. Mahlangu relates this view to the *Ubuntu* ethic in South Africa, saying that it is “an important element in the African concept of self and/or community” (Mahlangu, 2016:3). Mahlangu further explains *Ubuntu* as follows: “It is about the self being so rooted in the community, that your personal identity is defined by what you give to the community – ‘I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am’” (Mahlangu, 2016:3). These aspects of the African perspective correspond with the second commandment in the Bible. The words in Leviticus 19:18 teach us “...but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD”. This value is again reiterated in the words of Matthew 22:39 “...love your neighbour as yourself” (Bible, 1984).

However, Adebe and Ofosu-kusi’s (2016:304) work does discuss the shortcomings inherent to the African view: “Childhood, however, as it is understood culturally, is a temporary event, a stage of life before one takes up full adult roles and responsibilities”. With this they point out that “Children are variously cherished and adored and given their rightful place, yet exigencies of their society often generate a palpable sense of vulnerability” (Adebe & Ofosu-kusi, 2016:303).

The communalistic philosophy means that children trust adults who are members of their community – their neighbours, pastors and their family members. Yet, despite this good African philosophy, children face physical and sexual abuse in their communities, homes, and churches as some of these adults become the perpetrators of injustices.

Mtata (2021:34) argues that,

*“Although African theologians have rightly emphasized the significance of community for understanding the human person, their uncritical reception of the African communitarian model of anthropology has resulted in hierarchical and adult-centred theologies and tend to minimise children’s full humanity and the vital role in the communities”.*

African culture includes adultism towards children. Dillen (2020:140) explains this phenomenon as follows: “Adultism is the concept that indicates that children are discriminated against because they are not yet adults”. This creates an insensitivity towards children. Although cherished, African children are trained to respect adults, which often means that they are not allowed to disagree with an adult or explain their feelings. Adults, in turn, can say whatever they want to children, children just have to absorb it.

This view that children are not fully human yet, they are “in training” to become responsible adults, leads to them being excluded from family meetings and church activities. Mtata (2009:85) connects the marginalisation and exclusion of children from church practices and sacraments like the Eucharist with

*“the social position children have occupied in the hierarchy of the construction of personhood in African thought. ...The marginalisation of children in the African communitarian ethos is sometimes rationalised using the language of ‘care’ and ‘protection’. At the same time, the real value of childhood is not recognised” (Mtata, 2009:97).*

Mtata warns that African personhood implies a hierarchy (Mtata, 2009:99). He explains that

*“...children are at the lowest level of personhood. In African society, children are not classified as ‘persons’ until they undergo various rites that introduce them to their ancestors, the highest level of personhood attainment. Even then, the child remains a potential person until reaching adulthood as determined by society” (Mtata, 2009:100).*

It is therefore clear that child theology has a contribution to make, also in the African context. There has been good progress in academic fields concerned with children. Yet, children are still underestimated and undervalued in our African faith communities. For instance, Molla (2018:192) says that, “The Ethiopian community caring system that is shaped by patriarchal and sexist norms and values exposes Ethiopian children to emotional, spiritual, and physical risk”. Therefore, there is a need to raise awareness in African churches about the full humanity of African children from a child theology perspective. The actions and underlying beliefs of Christians can hurt and harm children. The deconstruction and transformation of underlying patterns of thinking, motives and images that feed modes of being and doing in relation to children is a core task of practical-theological research. Practical-theological research is needed to bring transformation to children's daily worlds. Molla (2018:192) highlights the task of practical theology concerning Ethiopian children exceptionally well when she states:

*If cultural and religious values and systems create an oppressive system in which children become at risk, we need to rethink our traditions in order to enable Ethiopian children to flourish and be nurtured.*

According to Molla (2018:192), pastoral care of children who are in danger in Ethiopia calls on Ethiopia society to reconsider the model that has caused children to be overlooked and unnoticed.

As much as people value their culture, they cannot ignore the harm that some cultural beliefs bring to children. Faith communities have to embrace the things in their culture that are life-giving and recognise what denies the fullness of life for children, contradicting the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### 1.3 Research problem

Theology is a critical partner in an interdisciplinary endeavour to co-create life-giving and affirming societal spaces for and with children. The Christian faith tradition portrays children as, among other things, made in the image of God and therefore worthy of dignity and respect from the beginning of their lives (see Bunge, 2019:41). This is far removed from the dehumanising realities that children face daily. Growing up in life-limiting environments, many children today may feel neglected, unworthy, endangered and threatened (see Koopman, 2016:194; Smit, 2016:4). They may feel unwelcome in ways that inhibit their quality of life and consequently their flourishing. It therefore suffices to say that in South Africa, both African and Christian perspectives have failed to protect children. Faith communities have a duty to revisit this failure. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the theological grounds for faith communities to act as partners in the construction of life-affirming African childhoods.

### 1.4 Research question and sub-questions

The **research question** that guides the execution of this study is:

How can faith communities become partners in the construction of life-giving African childhoods and what is the nature of the partnership role of faith communities?

The primary research question divides into **sub-questions**. The sub-questions as presented below are addressed in the various chapters of the study:

- How are children's daily lives in Africa and African faith communities connected with constructions of childhood in African thought?
- What historical and contemporary ideas associated with African childhoods are available from a childhood studies perspective that can provide insight into why children's lives are affected by these ideas?
- What theological resources from a child theology perspective can be used to reimagine African childhoods?
- What type of partnership role can faith communities play in the construction of liberating African childhoods?

## **1.5 Research aims and objectives**

### **1.5.1 Research aim**

This study aims to determine how faith communities can become partners in the construction of life-giving African childhoods and to explore and describe the nature of the partnership role of faith communities.

### **1.5.2 Research objectives**

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- explore and describe children's daily lives in Africa and African faith communities and how they are connected with constructions of childhoods in African thought;
- explore and describe from a childhood studies perspective historical and contemporary ideas associated with African childhoods that can provide insight into why children's lives are affected by these ideas;
- identify theological resources from a child theology perspective that can be used to reimagine African childhoods;
- formulate strategic ideas about the partnership role(s) faith communities can fulfil in the construction of life-affirming African childhoods.

## **1.6 Central theoretical argument**

The central theoretical argument of this study is that a practical-theological engagement with the social construction of African childhoods may provide strategic perspectives on how faith communities can be actively involved as partners in the construction of life-giving African childhoods.

## **1.7 Research methodology**

According to Anderson (2001:22), practical theology is the

*“dynamic process of reflective critical inquiry into the church's praxis in the world and God's purpose for humanity, carried out in the light of the Christian scripture and tradition and in critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge”.*

How children are treated in African societies, families, and churches is a praxis matter, because this is what people do, it is how they react or respond to children every day. It is also a theological

matter because children are created in the image of God, and in Christian theologies of childhood there are resources for families and churches to use when it comes to constructing an understanding of childhood and its implications for daily living.

The study uses Osmer's approach to practical-theological interpretation to answer the research questions. This approach to practical theological research is particularly suitable for this study as the four tasks offer succinct guidance for the exploration of a problem such as the one posed in this study. The first task helps identify the challenges children are facing in their daily lives and within faith communities. The second task helps us explore the reasons why it is happening. The third task guides the examination of the norms we can gather from the resources within the interdisciplinary field of child theology. Finally, the fourth task facilitates the formulation of strategic practical theological perspectives to respond to the need to see African children through the lenses of the Christian faith and act accordingly within the context of faith communities. The four tasks are subsequently discussed in more detail.

#### **1.7.1 The descriptive task**

This task begins with an exploration of the context. In this study, this means that we take seriously African children's present day-to-day conceptions in real life. According to Osmer (2008:4), the principle of this task is the systematic collection of data to determine and describe what is going on in the particular circumstances, episode or context. Information was collected using a literature study within the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. This information was to disclose images of childhood and children in African thought and to gauge how this affects and challenges children's day-to-day lives.

#### **1.7.2 The interpretative task**

During this phase, the focus was on analysing causes, factors contributing to the problem, and the consequences of the situation. According to Osmer (2008:4), following the descriptive-empirical task, the collected data are interpreted to respond to the question: "why is this going on?". In this phase, data were gathered using a literature study to detect the causes of the way childhood and children are viewed within African thought and to examine its consequences for children. Deficit models and dysfunctional imagery of childhood in the history of social thought are studied within the field of childhood studies.

#### **1.7.3 The normative task**

The normative task is "an effort to understand more broadly and deeply the analysed situation and context in the light of living faith, scripture, church social teachings, and the resources of

tradition” (Holland & Henriot, 1984:9). According to Osmer (2008:4), the attention of this task is to determine what ought to be going on, i.e., what the ideal will look like in the light of Christian theological resources.

The third phase built on the previous two phases by examining relevant child-focused theological literature. The task includes a review of ideas from people who have influenced theology in connection to the lives of children. The scholarly work of Kenneth Mtata (2009; 2021) on a theological anthropology of children is highly relevant for this task due to its focus on the personhood of children in African theologies of community. In addition, the scholarly work of Chiroma and Chiroma (2022) on African childhood theology and the implications for teaching in a manner that is comprehensive, God-centred and life-changing, is relevant. This task engages with the third sub-question. Normative principles are laid down for the partnership role of faith communities. The study of literature sources contributes to the normative element of this dissertation.

#### **1.7.4 The pragmatic task**

This task is concerned with what actions God expects of his chosen people. The task addresses the last sub-question of this study. According to Osmer (2008:4), during the pragmatic task, strategies of action are determined that will affect the progression towards the wanted outcome. The task also involves a synthesis of the research findings gleaned from a practical-theological methodology.

In this last phase of the study, strategic perspectives on the role of faith communities in the construction of life-giving African childhoods in holistic and integrated children’s ministries are formulated.

#### **1.8 The significance of the study**

This study seeks to reconceive how children are viewed and treated in society by providing a practical-theological perspective on the partnership role of faith communities in the construction of life-giving African childhoods. The study hopes to raise awareness of the need to transform life-denying ways of relating to children in and through faith communities.

#### **1.9 Ethics considerations**

Although this research does not include empirical data gathering, I followed all the ethics guidelines for conceptual data collection as outlined by the North-West University. I attempted to

offer a fair presentation of the available literature. This study carries a low ethics risk since it is a literature study that does not involve human participants.

### 1.10 Schematic representation

**Table 1-1: Schematic representation**

| Research question                                                                                                                                                                                       | Objective                                                                                                                                                            | Methodology                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| How are children's daily lives in Africa and African faith communities connected with constructions of childhood in African thought?                                                                    | To explore and describe children's daily lives in Africa and African faith communities and how they are connected with constructions of childhood in African thought | Descriptive task. Information was collected using a literature study in the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies.                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| From a childhood studies perspective, what are the historical and contemporary ideas associated with African childhoods that can provide insight into why children's lives are affected by these ideas? | To describe the causes of images of childhoods in African thought and the implication for children's everyday lives                                                  | Interpretive task. The data were gathered through a literature study in the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies to detect the causes of childhood images in African thought and its implications for children's everyday lives.                                                                          |
| What theological resources can be used from a child theology perspective to reimagine African childhoods?                                                                                               | To identify theological resources from a child theology perspective that can be used to reimagine African childhoods                                                 | Normative task: In the third phase, theological resources were identified from a child theology perspective. The scholarly work of Kenneth Mtata on a theological anthropology of children is highly relevant for this chapter due to its focus on the personhood of children in African theologies of community. |
| What partnership role can faith communities play in the social construction of African childhoods?                                                                                                      | To formulate strategic ideas about the partnership role faith communities can play in the social construction of African childhoods                                  | In this last phase of the study, strategic perspectives on the role of faith communities in the construction of life-giving African childhoods in holistic and integrated children's ministries were formulated.                                                                                                  |

## **CHAPTER 2      AFRICAN CHILDHOODS**

### **2.1    Introduction**

This task begins with an exploration of the context of the study. This means that we take seriously African children's present day-to-day experiences, exclusions and oppression in real life. According to Osmer (2008:4), the principle of this task is the systematic collection of data to determine and describe what is going on in the particular circumstances, episode or context. Information was collected using a literature study within the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies. This information was collected to disclose experiences, exclusions and oppressions of childhood and children in African thought and to gauge how this affects and challenges children's day-to-day lives.

### **2.2    Situatedness of researcher**

This study was conducted by an African woman, born into a Venda tribe in the Limpopo province. As an African woman, my identity is defined by my community. I grew up in an African traditional family. My family does believe in Jesus Christ but also believes in and worships their ancestors. The family performed all of the traditional rituals. I started going to church when I was seven years old, following my neighbours and my friends. Christ saved me when I was still young. I came to realise that I no longer had to adhere to some of the traditional rituals performed at home and in my community because they contradict the Word of God.

It was very difficult to convince the adults in my family and my parents that I could not do what they wanted me to do because it was perceived as disrespect. There is an initiation school for girls called "*Uimbelwa*". I did not want to go, but I was forced to go. I was told that "you are a child you don't choose what you want to do; the community will laugh at you if you don't attend this initiation, and you will play alone because all your friends went to the initiation." It became clear to me that when you are a child, adults make decisions for you, whether you like it or not. Being a traditional African child means conforming to the customs and values of the community.

Unfortunately, I experienced the same denial of children's voices in faith communities. The same African cultural values pervade African faith communities. The voices of children are sometimes muted in our African faith communities. A pivotal childhood experience compelled me to conduct this research: I experienced family violence in my family. There was no peace between my parents. One day when the pastor was preaching, she made an altar call for people who had problems. I also went forward to be prayed for, but the pastor prayed only for the adults. My heart was in pain because she did no notice that I was suffering. It made me realise that faith

communities are sometimes ignorant about the pain of African childhoods. In some African faith communities, children are seen as problem-free beings. I advocate in faith communities, working in partnership with African children, to liberate children from their misery and to do away with the culture of discriminating against them.

### **2.3 The traditional worldview of childhood in Africa**

Ndofirepi and Shumba point out that different communities have different notions of childhoods in Africa, although they share some common features due to their African worldview. The focus of Ndofirepi and Shumba is on the Shona notion of childhoods. They relate it to other African cultures and conducted research on the idea of a child in African traditions from a historical-philosophical viewpoint (Ndofirepi & Shumba, 2014:233). They highlight the fact that “[c]hildren, it is commonly assumed, are those subjects who are yet to reach biological and social maturity, or simply, they are younger than adults and are yet to develop those competencies adults possess” (Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:235). They continue to say “The developmental perspective of childhood is rooted in the view that children are in the position of immaturity represented by being irrational, incompetent, and asocial, and a cultural, passive and dependent” (Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:235). Because of these views, children are seen as not yet fully human, they will become human when they are adults. As a result, adults are considered translators and exegetists of children’s lives, and for that reason adults are correct and children are wrong (Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:235).

In Africa, community is very important. “The person is the centre of existence not as an individual but as a family and the community. Thereafter the concept of self and community is the strongest force in traditional Africa” (Mahlangu 2016:3). The person cannot live for him- or herself but has to live for the family and the community. In Africa – “a child is everybody’s child”. According to Murovhi *et al.* (2018:2), many African countries have idioms that speak about the child being the child of the community. In Tshivenda they say “*nwana wa munwe ndi nwana wau*,” meaning that another person’s child is your child. Parents put the child in close contact with the community, and socialise the young. Society, in turn, has a responsibility towards the child (Mahlangu, 2016:3, Adu-Gyamfi, 2014:7). According to Ndofirepi and Shumba (2014:235), traditional Africans endorse the view that the communal is more significant than the individual and it takes preference over the individual.

Ndofirepi and Shumba argue that “on the contrary, childhood is historically, culturally and social variables” (Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:233). They continue to say that it is a platitude that the best way to understand children and childhoods in Africa must be within a cultural context (Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:233). Childhood in Africa is profoundly influenced by the culture into which the

child is born. Generally speaking, a “child” in Africa is socialised to be a traditional person who is slightly affected by modernisation (Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:234). When a child is born in Africa, the parents have the responsibility to rear the child according to their culture. The child will be taught a native language, eat their traditional food, and will be taught all things associated with that culture. People can be identified as belonging to a certain culture by their behaviour, language, food, etc.

“The traditional paternalistic conception of childhood treats the child as a blank slate in need of protection and training for adulthood just like conceptions of childhood in other societies” (Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:236). In African thought, the child comes with an empty mind that must be filled with information. The child is seen as somebody who cannot reason for him- or herself and who cannot make decisions. In some tribes, children have to go through traditional initiation to be considered adults. According to Ndoferipi and Shumba (2014:236), in an African traditional interpretation of personhood, some adults are still addressed as “child” regardless of their age if they do not comply with the communal standards:

*“Consequently, one becomes a person as one gets older and more accustomed to the ways of one’s respective community and conversely one remains a child as long as they fail the personhood in the adult.”*

This view of the child in Africa is influenced by several elements. These are discussed below.

### **2.3.1 Tribe**

The different tribes in Africa have each created their own cultures and each share common features as a community. According to Mahlangu (2016:2),

*“Among the Northern South Sotho (the Pedi) people of South Africa, the birth of a child is an event of great importance. Not only does it initiate a new member into a group, but in the case of the first child it confers on the mother (ostensibly to the father too) the status of parenthood which, for the tribe, is synonymous with attaining the full status of a woman/man.”*

According to Mahlangu (2016:3), all individuals in a tribe should be connected.

### **2.3.2 Traditional leaders**

According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:385), chieftaincy has continued to exist in Africa amid contemporary political structures of government. Customary leaders rule as the representatives of the ancestors. The traditional leader is the ethical, governmental, and sacred leader of the society with duties that need insight, integrity, and a profound understanding of customary duties (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022:386). These traditional leaders are responsible for modelling culture for

their communities. According to Murovhi *et al.* (2018:34), traditional leaders are regarded as the pillar of every community. They are the ones responsible for fostering a cultural way of life through traditional schools because they are the leaders and rulers of their community. Traditional leaders are revered in their communities. If they give an order, everyone in the community has to submit. Anyone who disobeys the order can be banished or receive punishment.

### **2.3.3 Gender**

Baloyi and Manala (2019:1) argue that in the traditional childhood construction in Africa, views on girls and boys are not the same. Boys are seen as superior to girls. The merriment of the birth of a boy child is more than with the birth of a girl child, and that results in discrimination towards a girl child (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). They continue to say, “The high level of gendered illiteracy in Southern Africa was orchestrated, instead of going to school, girls were to be trained to be good future wives and housewives” (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:5). Girl children in Africa face different challenges from boy children, like domestic violence and sexual abuse inside and outside their cultures.

## **2.4 Childhood construction**

### **2.4.1 The history of childhood construction**

Social construction is defined by James and James (2008:122) as “a theoretical perspective that explores the ways in which ‘reality’ is negotiated in everyday life through people’s interaction and through sets of discourses.” According to Ansell (2017a:13), the

*“[c]onstruction of childhood and youth encompass both descriptive and normative elements: the characteristics attributed to young people of different ages and sexes, how they are treated the way they are expected to behave, how they are valued by society and what is considered desirable in a young person.”*

Aries (1962:125) points out that the idea of childhood did not exist during medieval times. It was only by the late seventeenth century that the concept of childhood began to emerge. According to Norozi and Moen (2016:77), “In Dionysian children were perceived as ‘little devils’ born with original sins as being inherently naughty, un-socialized and uncivilized beings.” This was followed by an Apollonian view which thought of children as little angels who are born good and innocent. During this time childhood was considered a time of innocence (Norozi & Moen, 2016:77). According to Aries (cited by Ansell 2017b:11) the notion of childhood was not prominent in Europe before the fifteenth century: once the physical dependency of infancy was ended, children were treated as miniature adults fully integrated into social and economic life and without special protection. During the sixteenth century, the differentiation between childhood and adulthood

became more distinct, but it was only by the nineteenth century when schooling became universal and children were progressively removed from adult society into their own space that many popular ideas about childhood emerged.

This history shows that there was a paradigm shift in childhood construction. From generation to generation, the views on childhood altered depending on the culture each generation embraced during their lifetimes (Woodhead, 1996:13; Norozi & Moen; 2016:79).

## **2.4.2 Childhood construction in Africa**

Childhood is defined as the initial stage of the person's lifetime in virtually all cultures and all civilizations (Norozi & Moen, 2016:76). Childhood construction in Africa can follow one of two different theoretical positions, namely childhood as a biological stage and childhood as a social construct. These two positions are discussed below.

### **2.4.2.1 Childhood as a biological stage**

Bogin and Smith (1996:576) researched the growth and maturity of human beings; they assessed the various basic principles of human growth and maturity and put them in the evolution context. They note that human beings have a quite lengthy span of maturity and four stages of evolution and gestation between birth and adulthood (Bogin & Smith, 1996:517). These phases are infancy, childhood, youthful years, and adulthood. When the child is born, there are certain expectations as they grow naturally. For example:

*“At birth, states of wakefulness and sleep are not sharply differentiated, and motor coordination is variable and transient. By 1 month, the infant can lift its chin when prone, and by 2 months, lift its chest by pushing up with the hands and arms” (Bogin & Smith, 1996:533).*

These developments happen to all children around the same age, although some may experience delays in development. The various African communities have standards and expectations of children depending on their age. They know the age or period when the child should sit, crawl, stand, walk, talk, and stop breastfeeding; and these developments occur naturally. They also know the age when a child can start doing home chores or other work.

According to Hollos, “The fact that in African societies children work from an early age has been well documented by many observers” (Hollos, 2002:174). Hollos described African children’s lives in the Pare traditional patrilineal culture, focussing on children between six and eight years of age. His reason for choosing this age was that this is the age at which children begin to do heavy chores in African communities. They also spend a few hours at school (Hollos, 2002:177). Hollos

argues that non-formal inspection reveals that around the age of five, children start to do small chores, such as cleaning the house and collecting and carrying things for adults working on the plantation. There is a slight separation of duties by gender, and this lasts until they are about eight or nine years old. By then, female children are more likely to be introduced to doing the laundry, cooking or taking care of their younger brothers or sisters and male children to carrying weighty things such as water or food for animals (Hollos, 2002:175).

Murovhi *et al.* (2018:2) describe that in the Vhavenda tribe, children who are five years old can carry water bottles on their heads and those 12 years and older can pick up a 20-litre water container from the ground and put it on their heads without being assisted. This shows that by 12 years they are independent; they can do things without being assisted.

Hollos confirms that “By the time girls are 12 and boys are around 14 years of age, they are considered to be equal to adults in power and skill in most work and they can take care of themselves and of the household in the absence of grownups” (Hollos, 2002:175).

Children who fail to pass through this evolution, are classified as physically challenged. In African societies, physically challenged children are not welcomed in the community, the community will call those children by bad names and scorn them. The parents of physically challenged or disabled children are regarded as cursed people. Communities often blame witchcraft, claiming that physically challenged children are bewitched. They do not see them as a gift from God.

Hollos's (2002) research in the Pare community (a tribe in Tanzania) shows that African communities do respect childhood as a biological stage because children are expected to take certain responsibilities according to their ages.

#### **2.4.2.2 Childhood as a social construct**

Childhoods are communally constructed in Africa; the community delineates the childhood stage and the adult stage (Norozi & Moen, 2016: 79; Ndofirepi & Shumba, 2014:233). Norozi and Moen argue that the notion of childhood is neither general nor natural, instead, it is communally constructed and a cultural process. They argue that the view of childhood differs from community to community and culture to culture and depends on the era people are living in (Norozi & Moen, 2016:75). The only shared view of childhood in different communities and cultures is that children are seen differently from adults (Norozi & Moen, 2016:79). Apart from that, each community has standards they set and expectations in all human stages of life. In Africa, all human beings who belong to a certain community or culture are expected to meet certain standards set by the community. Anyone who fails to comply is regarded as an outcast.

According to Ndofirepi and Shumba (2014:235), the child's wellbeing is situated in a web of kinships and connections in the communal relationship. The African communities that form part of this study use two main standards by which they qualify a native as part of and accepted by the community, namely initiation rituals and behaviours.

#### 2.4.2.2.1 Initiation rituals

"Rituals are symbolic, routine, and repetitive activities and actions through which we make connections with what we consider to be the most valuable dimension of life" (Kyalo, 2013:35). According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:380), African traditional religions consider rites of passage to be essential for human welfare, common identity, spiritual safety, and completeness. Kyalo (2013:35) argues that rituals are performed to qualify a person to become part of the community and to conform to the standard of that community. Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:380) argues that refusal to execute rites of passage, it is believed, can lead to undesirable existential penalties not just for one person, but for the household too.

According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:380), in traditional Africa, people are spiritually imperfect and defenceless when it comes to belonging and identity. Without the proper rites of passage, there will be bad luck, physical defects, and diseases. These events are described in terms of penalties from ancestors for the abandonment or even inappropriate execution of rites of passage. Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:381) points out that rites of passage are performed at particular revered places and spots acknowledged by the community, that is, mountains, jungles, rivers or shrines, and they are usually performed out of a communal view. In Africa, there are different rituals to be performed in the human life cycle, e.g., birth rituals, initiation into adulthood, marriage rituals, death etc. In this study, I only discuss birth rituals and initiation to adulthood.

#### 2.4.2.2.2 Welcoming a new-born in Africa

In Africa, certain rituals have to be performed at the beginning of human life (pregnancy) and after the birth of the child. The elation begins when the child is still inside his/her mother's womb. "The pregnant mother receives special treatment from family, relatives and even the community" (Mahlangu 2016:1). According to Baloyi and Manala (2019:1), "Children are considered a crowning glory in an African marriage – the more the children are conceived in a marriage, the greater the glory." They continue to say "There are certain expectations from family, and an African community, especially to married couples. From an African perspective, one of the purposes of marriage is childbearing" (Baloyi & Manala, 2019:1). A barren woman in Africa receives all sorts of insults from the family of the husband and the community. Even the husband may put pressure on the barren woman. For instance, "[h]aving a child is a source of pride and

status symbol of Ghanaian men, therefore a marriage without child(ren) stands on a very shaky ground” (Adu-Gyamfi, 2014:6). Baloyi and Manala (2019:1) point out that “evidence shows that in some instances those who cannot bear children are regarded as abnormal or outcasts.” Mahlangu (2016a:2) confirms that, “A married woman who does not have children feels very much miserably. The agonies of being childless are so immense that the woman stops at nothing to help herself bear children.” The birth of the child is not only celebrated by the family but also by the community.

“The birth of a new child is characterised by a community welcome, and the community invests in the child who is given a name from the departed family or community member” (Ndofirepi & Shumba 2014:236). According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:383), in Akan societies, naming a newborn happens on the eighth day after delivering a baby. Early in the morning on the eighth day, the close family members of the couple together with leaders of the community come together clothed in bright attire, demonstrating the mother's conquest during childbearing. The infant is placed on the lap of the domestic elder and the rites of passage are performed with water and some alcohol. The officiants put a forefinger into the water and in the alcohol and allow a drop of each to fall onto the tongue of the infant as they say the accompanying words. “After three drops of each liquid, the rest of the liquor is passed round for each member of the community present to take a sip and pronounce a blessing on the child” (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022:383). Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:383) argues that ceremonial naming recruits the baby to the spirit of honesty and discreet language. The name is an individual sign that connects the newly born baby to a specific household, clan, or tribe. The names selected narrate the stories. In some communities, newly born babies also get “ethnic marks,” which like names, unite individual persons to bigger societies. A newborn baby's umbilical cord may be buried at the household compound as a performance that joins this individual spiritually to society (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022:383). According to Murovhi *et al.* (2018:26), from the day the child is born, there are high hopes of the child showing good ethical values.

#### 2.4.2.2.3 Transition from being a child to being an adult

According to Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:379), initiation rites include ceremonial exercises that go along with the evolutions of life from one social position to another. Kyalo (2013:39) notes that in some communities, initiation rituals form part of a process of training young people according to their age. The shift to adulthood in early communities concurred with physical puberty or sexual development, but this is not always the case with boys' initiations. Communal puberty rituals are done to signal the transition from childhood to adulthood and to distinguish sexual roles. The

mutilation of the body marks the separation from childhood and the entry into adulthood (Kyalo, 2013:39).

Asamoah-Gyadu's view (2022:384) corresponds with Kyalo in that circumcision symbolises the evolution of boys and girls from childhood into boyhood and girlhood and helps them get ready for active sexual life. Circumcision, whether for boys or girls, symbolises the normal order of maturity (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022:384). Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:384) explains that "circumcision required sequestration in the bush for varying numbers of weeks and the rite was at once a test of bravado and a preparation for one's teenage years." In Ghana, both the Krobo and Asante have extensive rituals for girls to prepare them for marriage and motherhood (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022:384). The rituals are performed once menstruation has started, but it takes about three successive menses cycles to go through the ritual. There is an ethical side to the performance of Ashanti marriage preparation rituals as the girls have to stay virgins until they completed all the rituals (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022:384–385).

Many initiation rites consist of separation and restriction of certain behaviours. In most African communities, this initiation includes mutilation of the body (Kyalo, 2013:39). Those who do not go through the initiation are not regarded as part of the community or as adults because they have not been trained to be adults.

#### 2.4.2.2.4 The behaviour of children

Ndofirepi and Shumba (2014:235) explain that "[t]he community demands that the child forsakes individual good in order to submit to the collective interests." In Africa, children have a responsibility to show that they have been raised well and they have manners. Children are expected to respect their elders. According to Adu-Gyamfi (2014:7), "Children communicate with their parents and any adult in the family and in the community with the utmost respect and dignity – a value which is reaffirmed by the African Children's Charter." According to Murovhi *et al.* (2018:23), a Muvenda child is traditionally expected to show respect to the elders by kneeling when greeting, receiving with two hands and saying thank you. Murovhi *et al.* (2018:26) continue to say children are also expected to obey and will be sent to do something without looking for any payment as a way of displaying respect for the elders.

## 2.5 The paradigm shift in childhood construction

There has been a paradigm shift in childhood construction in Africa. Woodhead (1996:13) states that:

*“In many societies, the experience of childhood that have remained relatively stable for countless generations are now being transformed within a generation, and for many children, even within the span of their own childhoods.”*

Boakye-Boaten (2010:104) analyses the changing child duties and view of childhood in Africa in general, particularly in Ghana, arguing that there has been a shift in child rearing in Ghana. Taking examples from other African countries, he argues that this change was influenced by certain factors, namely education, economy, migration, government laws, and religion. These factors are discussed in short below.

In the past, before the time of schools, children in Africa worked hard, doing home chores, shepherding the flocks, grinding mealie meal and doing other hard labour. Their education centred around training them to do home chores, teaching them respect and teaching them to become the men and women of the future who will take care of their families. The emergence of formal schooling meant that children started working less because they had to wake up in the morning and go to school. Today, children are expected to go to school and they have the right to be educated. According to Murovhi *et al.* (2018:21), most parents have deserted the traditional practices of childrearing, many even resorting to nannies and crèches to rear children. South Africa, Nigeria and other countries are among those that shifted away from their original cultures to adopt the modern practice of institutionalised childcare and formal schools.

According to Boakye-Boaten (2010:112), the “colonial economy soon introduced the cash crop economy with the sole intent of making Africa the hob of raw material export.” According to Murovhi *et al.* (2018:23), South Africa, Nigeria and other countries became part of an amalgamation, causing culture to be destroyed by contemporary practices such as a shift away from a primitive economy to a cash economy, the relocation of employees to urban areas, as well as institutionalised childcare and formal schools.

Many families have left villages for urban areas to work and to stay there with their children. In the urban areas people embrace individualistic thinking, and communal thinking no longer applies. According to Boakye-Boaten (2010:113), biological parents, schools, churches and the media are the ones responsible for raising children in the urban areas, contrary to the village where a child is raised by the community and the extended family. Some parents no longer have time to sit with their children and guide them, they shift their responsibility to television and gadgets where children join social media. Reasons include that some parents work and they come back home late; they no longer make time to sit with their children. The result is that these children are raised by social media.

In some cases, children in African countries become involved in child labour, working to support their families. This too has changed the notion of childhood and child nurturing (Boakye-Boaten, 2010:112). However, in other African countries, governmental laws that recognise human rights and children's rights have changed the view of children. Some of the traditional practices in African culture are now seen as abusive.

Religion changed African childhood construction as well. Christianity has widely replaced African traditional religion (Boakye-Boaten, 2010:111). The majority of the first schools in colonial Africa were established by Christian missions. African children subsequently adopted the Christian religion and abandoned their native religion as the Christian religion preached against some African practices (Boakye-Boaten, 2010:111). Parents who adopted the Christian religion instead of their African traditional religion started to view and rear children according to the Christian religion.

## **2.6 Implications for children's everyday lives**

Mahlangu (2016a:2) laments the fact that despite the high regard for children in Africa, children face unprecedented abuses and suffering. Gecaga (2007:147) for instance shows how children are compelled into sexual involvement with older people due to situations outside of their control. These dreadful abuses are also real for many children in sub-Saharan Africa (Gecaga, 2007:147). According to Izugbara (2001:97), there is a belief among some Africans that sleeping with a virgin can bring them power, long life and wealth. Girl children face a double sword in Africa; they find themselves abused in the name of cultural beliefs and traditions. Sossou and Yagtiba (2009:1223) describe how among the Ewe-speaking people in Ghana and Togo, virgin girls are sacrificed at shrines to compensate for the sins of relatives who are dead. In some places, poor children are given money in exchange for sex. According to Sossou and Yagtiba (2009:1220), some parents of sexually abused children would negotiate with the perpetrators to pay them damages instead of taking them to court. This is done to alleviate their poverty.

Africa has the highest incidence of child labour in the world (Bhalotra, 2003:4). According to Gecaga (2007:146), in Kenya children between six and 14 years of age are hired as household employees. They are compelled by poverty to leave school so that they can work for remuneration to help support their younger siblings (Gecaga, 2007:146). These child workers labour in unethical, unlawful, hard and threatening conditions. These children are easy to control, cheap labour and in the end they are fired when they are no longer important or beneficial to those who use them. Many of these children are psychologically, physically and sexually exploited (Gecaga, 2007:146).

Gecaga (2007:149) mentions child desertion as frequent maltreatment of children in Africa currently. Teenagers hide the reality that they became pregnant before marriage by neglecting their newborn infants or by putting them into litter baskets or toilets (Gecaga, 2007:149). Some children are frequently left unattended so that their parents can enjoy life somewhere. According to Gecaga (2007:149), some of these children end up living on the streets. The street kids have to go without the guidance they would have had in a household space. As a result, they are exposed to many risks. Some children are used for crime, like drug trading. The majority of girls who live on the street end up in child prostitution (Gecaga, 2007:149).

Palm (2020:34) rightly points out that “[c]hildren have not always been served well by religious precepts.” Palm argues that Old Testament texts take the power that men hold for granted. Consequently, errors in how these scriptures are studied today can bring harm to children. Some Old Testament interpretations silence children, leaving them unseen and in the possession of their guardians. This can cause the mistreatment of children to remain concealed and can even defend it (Palm, 2020:56). Palm argues that the tendency to support the ingrained invisibility and silencing of children can be damaging, leaving children feeling like an object (Palm, 2020:57).

Having been involved in child ministry for more than 10 years, I have observed that churches often do not take care when selecting leaders for the Sunday school ministry. Leaders are selected for being trustworthy Christians and not based on whether they have some form of theological training.

De Beer and Yates (2019:1) confirm the statistics: “The large percentages of children who are marginal and vulnerable in South African societies are unheard of, and unheard in both churches and most theological classrooms”. Koopman (2016:194) argues that, “many children in Africa are, for various reasons, exposed to physical vulnerability.” The result is that, “[m]any churches are struggling to reach out to these social excluded children and to welcome and include them in the faith family” (Grobbelaar, 2016c:126).

Child abuse causes children to become aggressive, some lose their confidence, some commit suicide, some run away from their homes and live on the streets, some do not perform well at school, some become dropouts, and some resent the gender of the person who abused them, and some do not enjoy going to church. According to Meinck *et al.* (2016:910), evidence shows that victims of child abuse in sub-Saharan Africa consistently have poorer mental and physical health outcomes than other children. They are also at increased risk for HIV infection.

## **2.7 What causes the challenges African children face in their everyday lives?**

The next section analyses the causes of the problem, the factors that contribute to it, and the consequences of the situation. According to Osmer (2008:4), following the descriptive-empirical task, the collected data are interpreted to respond to the question: “why is this going on?”. For this task, data were gathered using a literature study to detect the causes of the way childhood and children are viewed within African thought and to examine its consequences for children. Deficit models and dysfunctional imagery of childhood in the history of social thought are studied from the perspective of childhood studies.

Factors that contribute to the undermining of children, child abuse, victimhood and vulnerability in African childhoods include culture (initiation schools, discipline/punishment, respect, taboos) and poverty (the pandemic, natural disasters, poor governance, war, unemployment, child labour, and social media. These are discussed below.

### **2.7.1 Culture**

Raman and Hodes define culture as a “set of beliefs, attitudes, values, and standards of behaviour that are passed from one generation to the next” (Raman & Hodes, 2012:31). According to Koramoa *et al.* (2002:417) it must be acknowledged that every culture has their way of child-rearing that is supported by age-old traditions. Each culture has its reasons why their practices are for the wellbeing and protection of children. African cultures have their own advantages and disadvantages when rearing children. However, some customs abuse children in the name of the culture. Examples of such harmful practices are discussed below.

### **2.7.2 Initiation school**

African circumcision is done in the bush by a traditional doctor. Silverman (2004:419) explains the reason for circumcising both males and females: “For some, circumcision is all about culture, a symbolic message concerning personhood, gender, cosmology, status, and community inscribed in the body.” Vincent (2008:432) adds another more contemporary reason for the circumcision of males: “It is believed that male circumcision eliminates the cells most vulnerable to HIV. In addition, a circumcised penis develops thicker skin that is resistant to HIV infection.” Sometimes girl children become victims of rape because some males who are circumcised believe that they can no longer contract HIV and they take advantage of this.

Male circumcision has complications and disadvantages. According to Brunsdon (2016:247), the South African media attracted the public’s attention to boys’ circumcision due to the high incidence of deaths at initiation schools. Children are being hurt in the name of male ritual traditions meant

to lead them to manhood (Brunsdon, 2016:247). According to Wilcken *et al.* (2010:908), infection and delayed wound curing, loss of penis glans, and loss of the entire penis are complications of circumcision. Some have even lost their lives after circumcision. According to Wilcken *et al.* (2010: 911), septicaemia, pneumonia and dehydration are the most common causes of death. Murovhi *et al.* (2018:30) reveal that in the Vhavenda initiation school for boys called “*Mula*,” boys are taught songs to disrespect women. When they come back, they disrespect women, including their mothers. This may well be one of the causes of the high incidence of gender-based violence in Africa. Young men are taught to disrespect and undermine women at the initiation schools.

At the ‘*Musevhetho*’ initiation school for girls for the Vhavenda tribe, there is a practice called ‘*Lunya*’. According to Murovhi *et al.* (2018:30), a piece of a reed is sharpened at both sides so that the reed has two sharp ends. This reed is put on the insides of their thighs. The initiates have to hold it that, it may not fall out when they walk a distance with their hands on top of their heads.

The above examples show how children are physically abused, some get sick, and some die in the process, in the name of culture.

### **2.7.3 Discipline/punishment**

According to Azi and Saluhu (2016:24), physical punishment involves the aggressive abuse of a child by an adult. They mention burns, lacerations, unexplained bruises, scratches, broken bones, and overall rough treatment as examples of physical abuse (Azi & Saluhu, 2016:24). In general, Africans believe in corporal punishment. According to Raman and Hodes (2012:32), “many cultures traditionally accept physical punishment of children.” However, “what is seen as child abuse in developed countries could be seen as normal or a way of discipline in Nigeria” (Azi & Saluhu, 2016:24). When children do wrong, they are beaten or abused physically so that they will not dare repeat the same mistake. According to Koramoa *et al.* (2002: 418), in Western Africa, even vaginal insertion is used to punish girls. Adults would insert pepper or ginger into the vagina. Girls who have been abused by vaginal insertion in this way often have complications with their health. Since children are expected to respect their parents/adults, they are not supposed to speak about their pain with the perpetrators. Speaking out is seen as disrespectful.

### **2.7.4 Respect**

An African child is expected to respect every adult in the community. They must regard all adults as their parents. In these traditions, adults view themselves as worthy of high esteem without considering that children also want to be respected. Landman and Yates (2018:3) conducted research among youths in Mpumalanga to gauge the youths’ views on respect. The youths in

Mpumalanga complained that adults do not set an example. This makes it difficult for the youth to respect them and to respect themselves. Some youths said that the adults do not permit them to raise their views, they decide for them; parents deny them; teachers punish them at school; the government is not willing to help them by giving bursaries and creating job opportunities. Because of these challenges, they lose respect for themselves and adults. They try to seek respect by using drugs, alcohol, and sex because they are not getting it from their families, their communities or the government.

Sometimes a false duty to respect adults can make children vulnerable to rape/sodomy by their relatives, neighbours and other residents in the community. Famuyiwa (1997:337) argues that “Most of the girls by reason of shame, fear or surprisingly respect for their usually older perpetrators, reported their experience to no one.” What is more, the matter of sexuality is a forbidden topic in many places in Africa.

### **2.7.5 Taboos**

In Africa, there is the view that there are certain things that children are not supposed to know when they are still young, they should only know these things when they are older. Most African parents shy away from discussions about sex with their children, it is a taboo. According to Agbemenu *et al.* (2018:4), myths and taboos concerning sexual matters are pervasive in Africa and are passed on to manage the sexual conduct of single individuals, especially females. Agbemenu *et al.* (2018:4–6) point out that grandparents are traditionally responsible for teaching their grandchildren about sexual matters because it is forbidden for the closest family to talk about sexual matters in their household. For instance, in Kenyan and Ghanaian traditional communities, youths are supposed to pass through initiation schools to be trained to be adults and after that, they have the freedom to get married. Children should not enquire about sex. Mothers use scare tactics to avoid these conversations. According to Koch *et al.* (2019:1), when girls enquire about sex or utter their sexual longings or want to explore their sexuality, they are met with annoyance by older people. They get replies that raise feelings of culpability and humiliation and leave them in confusion and at risk.

Most African parents lie about these matters to protect their children. Many African children are told that babies are bought at a hospital. Children grow up knowing that they cannot talk to their parents or ask questions about sexual matters. According to Koch *et al.* (2019:3), girls mention that this quietness about sexuality has influenced their lives negatively. They are often overwhelmed with remorse after starting sexual involvement due to this culture of guilt.

### **2.7.6 Poverty**

Chireshe and Plattner (2010:169) argue that poverty results from socio-economic unfairness. It puts different categories of individuals at risk of intellectual and physical health challenges. Poverty creates a lack of options and defies a person's dignity. Poor individuals feel unwelcome and are compelled to stay in small places and squatter settlements. Individuals who live in such places have to face contempt, social marginalisation, and denouncement.

De Milliano and Plavgo (2014:4) describe child poverty as a disregard of children's right to existence, growth participation and safety as described in the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child. Poverty in Africa makes the children vulnerable. Some of the causes of poverty are discussed below.

### **2.7.7 Pandemics**

Pandemics result in deaths and can cause unemployment, which makes children more vulnerable. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic left many people without jobs, leaving children in such households at the mercy of circumstance. Some companies closed and many employees were retrenched. During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, girl children found themselves much more vulnerable. According to Gecaga (2007:148), sexual abuse of young females is rife in households where children have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. Teenage girls are left behind the entire household's responsibilities, with no sustainable income. Ultimately, they become pregnant and/or get HIV/AIDS themselves, thus continuing the cycle of penury in the household (Gecaga, 2007:148). Groce and Trasi (2004:1) explain that there is a myth that if you are a man with HIV, you can be cured by sleeping with a virgin. Gecaga (2007:148) also confirms that "Older men who are infected with HIV/AIDS engage in sex with the young girls with the belief that they will be cured." Female children are often sexually abused because of this myth.

Gecaga (2007:149) also points out that HIV/AIDS has caused a rise in the number of children deserted by next of kin. There are roughly 14 million children globally of whom one or both their parents have passed away from AIDS Gecaga (2007:149). In Kenya alone, there are approximately 890 000 children without parents. These children have no parental supervision or love and are disadvantaged when it comes to primary needs like accommodation, nourishment, general well-being and schooling (Gecaga, 2007:149). Some orphans are compelled to leave school so that they can go and work to sustain themselves and their siblings (Gecaga, 2007:146). This leads us to child labour.

### **2.7.8 Child labour**

Gecaga (2007:146) notes that “Children comprise a massive global workforce that the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates to number 250 million.” Bhalotra (2003:5) mentions that there is an extensive child labour force in Ethiopia and Ghana; the children in Ethiopia start at an earlier age than those in Ghana. Most of the children in Ghana are involved in household activities, and Ethiopia they go to fetch wood for fuel or water and they tend the flock. In some households, every member has to be part of bringing income for the family to survive. It sometimes results in child enslavement, which hampers the future welfare of the child (Gecaga, 2007:145–146). According to Bhalotra (2003:4) child labour and poverty appear to be worse in Africa because of orphanhood caused by war, famine, and HIV/AIDS.

### **2.7.9 War**

War does damage to the economy of the countries involved. People lose their jobs, export, and import of goods become difficult, and food production slows down. Prices increase. For example, the war between Russia and Ukraine has caused a world economic crisis. According to Kammer *et al.* (2022:2), Russia and Ukraine are both main producers of certain commodities, and the upheaval has caused global prices to rise, specifically for oil and natural gas. African countries depend on imported oil from Ukraine, so the prices of petrol, diesel and the fuel used for cooking have increased. Kammer *et al.* (2022:3) continue to say that these steep price increases for food and fuel may spur unrest in some regions, from sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America to the Caucasus and Central Asia, while food insecurity is likely to further increase in parts of Africa and the Middle East. Beyond the anguish and humanitarian disaster due to Russia’s attack on Ukraine, the worldwide economy will feel the consequence of slowed development and swift inflation. Children are affected by these factors. When parents lose their lives or their jobs, children share in the burden, both emotionally and in practical terms.

### **2.7.10 Natural disasters**

Natural disasters can be one of the causes of poverty. Floods, droughts, earthquakes or hurricanes contribute to poor economies. Okolo and Wen (2023:12365) argue that catastrophes modify the stability of people and their investments. Cyclones and windstorms affect investment-driven manufacturing more than labour-intensive products. When huge earthquakes, swamps, or volcanic outbreaks bring loss of life and demolition, they lower the production probability boundary. Some children in Africa are exposed to exacerbated poverty due to natural disasters as people lose their homes, properties, investments and employment.

### **2.7.11 Unemployment**

The world is still in the grips of the after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Abodunrin *et al.* (2020:19), the shock to the global economy due to COVID-19 was quicker and more severe than the 2008 global financial disaster and even the Great Depression. Stock markets dropped by 50% or more, credit markets froze up, enormous insolvencies followed, unemployment rates rose above 10% and GDP contracted at an annual rate of 10% or more. Children found themselves suffering because their parents had no work. Many children have had to drop out of school or become involved in crime to get food.

### **2.7.12 Poor governance**

Bunge (2012:5) points out that many children pass away due to starvation and avoidable sicknesses every day. Adults in leadership positions are pinpointed as the root cause of this problem because they act carelessly with meagre resources, not considering the best interest of residents and the at-risk individuals in particular. Consequently, economically disadvantaged children who live in poverty are used by adults as low-cost workers or soldiers, and over a million children per year are compelled into being sex workers (Bunge, 2012:5).

According to De Beer (2016:212): “The economic disparities in our cities deal some children the greatest advantages regarding access to housing, education, health care and play, whilst others are excluded from liveable spaces and accessible resources.”. De Beer argues that children, especially at-risk children in cities, are treated as non-individuals, not complete human beings with rights like others in different spheres, and as a result, they are consistently excluded (De Beer, 2016:215).

### **2.7.13 Social media**

According to Ray and Jat (2010:561), sadly, the one specific shared feature of the electronic mass media has a harmful effect on children’s welfare: “Total media exposure time for most of the children exceeded the time spent in all other activities except sleep” (Ray & Jat, 2010:561). Children can easily fall victim to abuse by adults because of social media exposure.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

Chapter 2 started with the researcher positioning herself as researcher in the context of the study by explaining the childhood experience that compelled her to conduct this study.

Following the traditional worldviews of African communities, African childhoods are defined by the community. Children have to conform to the standards of the community. The communitarian African approach hides a hierarchical structure of personhood which undermines children and views them as less than full humans and worthy of being excluded from church activities (Mtata, 2009:85). Adults make all decisions for them. The African view of childhood has been affected by elements like tribe, traditional leaders, and gender.

The chapter also discussed the history of childhood construction by looking at the work of different scholars. African communities have their own childhood constructions, namely childhood as a biological stage and childhood as a social construct. There is an expectation that children will grow up biologically, but also according to the standards set by the community. The community decides when a child is a child and when he or she is an adult. In some parts of Africa, children have to go through initiation to qualify them to be part of their families and communities. Rituals at birth and initiation during puberty are examples of this phenomenon.

Some factors have affected the traditional worldview of childhood construction, for instance, education, the economy, immigration, government laws, and religion. These factors caused a paradigm shift in African childhood construction.

African children face different types of abuse in their families, communities and churches, and this influences their everyday lives. Some children are pushed into sexual involvement, forced into labour, or abandoned as children. Because of these abuses and underestimation, some children become aggressive, lose confidence, commit suicide, live on the street, show poor performance at school, drop out of school, develop a hatred of the opposite sex, some hate church, they have poor mental and physical health and are at risk of HIV infection. In churches, children are sidelined, they are not guided by trained teachers.

Cultural elements, poverty and social media are the main influences on African conceptions of childhood. The cultural issues include initiation schools, discipline/punishment, unquestioning respect for adults, and taboos. Poverty makes communities more vulnerable during pandemics, war, natural disasters and poor governance. They are at risk of unemployment, which in turn results in child labour.

The next chapter examines the challenges of African childhoods in the light of scripture. The discussion explores how African theologies have attempted to address these challenges.

## **CHAPTER 3      AFRICAN CHILD THEOLOGIES**

### **3.1    Introduction**

According to Holland and Henriot (1984:9), the normative task aims to understand the examined state in depth within its context by considering the living faith, biblical texts, church social teachings, and the meanings of customs. In this chapter, biblical and theological resources are consulted to respond to the challenges and opportunities related to African childhoods as explored in Chapter 2. Culture and poverty were identified as the main challenges in African childhoods; so the normative task examine these challenges in the light of the scriptures and to gain a biblical perspective. According to Osmer (2008:4), this task aims to determine what ought to be going on, i.e., what the best condition will look like in the light of Christian theological resources.

This chapter builds on the previous two by examining relevant child-focused theological literature. This chapter contains a review of the ideas of scholars who have influenced theology in connection to the lives of children. The scholarly work of Kenneth Mtata (2009; 2021) on a theological anthropology of children is highly relevant for this task due to its focus on the personhood of children in African theologies of community. The scholarly work of Chiroma and Chiroma (2022) on African childhood theology and the implications for teaching implementation to make teaching comprehensive, God-centred and life-changing, is equally important. This chapter engages with the third sub-question as it lays down normative principles for the partnership role of faith communities. The study of literature sources contributes to the normative element of this dissertation.

### **3.2    The concept of child theology**

Theologians worldwide have used diverse terms to describe the particular duty of reconsidering theology by keeping in mind children and childhood (Bunge & Eide, 2021: xvi). Children and childhood are neglected themes in theological studies (Bunge & Eide, 2021:xiii). Bunge and Eide (2006:574) situate the significance of child theology in the fact that the view of the child can aid the reinvestigation of the central dogmas and customs of a religious culture and uncover some of its abandoned or partial features. According to these authors, the duty of the theologies of childhood is to communicate a knowledgeable and strong acknowledgement of children and adults' responsibility to them. These theologies concentrate on the overlooked and susceptible children and youth. They are constructed from the scriptures, Christian customs, anthropoid knowledge, and the understanding from the sciences and humanities (Bunge & Eide, 2021:xiv). Bunge and Eide (2021:xiv–xv) continue to say that some modern theologians offer a practical

understanding that challenges the inadequate suppositions about children in both faith communities and communities, identifying wrongful conduct against children and emphasising parental and social obligation. These theologies stimulate and empower reverential conduct towards children in families, churches and communities (Bunge & Eide, 2021:xiv–xv).

Child theology as an academic and scientific field of research should inform and mobilise faith practice. Research in this field has at its aim to explore, describe, explain, advocate for, deconstruct, raise awareness, make a case for children and set an agenda for their vulnerability and capacities. According to Zimmerman (2015:2), child theology is a theology of disclosure and responses; it is an unexperienced theology, a verifiable and individual theology, solid, innovative and contextual, but also impermanent, serious and a conversation theology. According to Bunge and Eide (2021:xvii), child theology deals with the provocation and input of children. It considers their susceptibility and strong points and stresses adult obligations and errands.

Childhood studies that concentrate on the vulnerability and challenges of children is called the caretaker perspective, and childhood studies that give attention to the contribution of children is called the liberation perspective (Dillen, 2020:136). In recent times, child theology has moved from adults theologising for children to giving children a chance to theologise as well. According to Dillen (2020:129), the theology of children does not differ from the theology of adults or their teachers, rather, it is about a collaboration or partnership between adults and children. Both can reach new understandings when they work in partnership through conversations.

The focus of Zimmerman's (2015:1) research is on religious learning in Germany. According to Zimmerman, children are entitled to their faith. It is crucial to comprehend the theology produced by children and to establish communication with their faith interpretations. This can be achieved through conversation with the children. Zimmerman mentioned that there are three features to children's theology, which are *Theology by children*: which cherished children as theologians; *Theology with children*: which is about theologising with children; and *Theology for children*: viewing children as having a slight basic understanding (Zimmerman 2015:4).

### **3.3 Child theology in Africa**

According to Grobbelaar (2016a:63), child theology aims to reflect anew on God and God's contribution to this earth by seeing children seriously when creating or developing theology. According to Malherbe (2004:5), the African continent and African churches have been slow in formulating their local theology and discovering their children. One of the reasons for this slowness may be the strong influence of missionaries and other church leaders with Western academic minds who restrained the growth of the African theological response (Malherbe, 2004:5;

Mtata 2021:37). Mtata (2021:37) offers another reason in saying that "...this absence of childhood in African theological anthropology can be traced to the nature and the foundations of communitarian assumptions." Mtata (2021:33–38) argues that during the early century, the response of African theologians to the power of colonialism and the missionaries was to develop the ideas of the individual by looking at African heritage and culture. African theologies link understandings of person to society and pronounce what has been called "the communitarian ideas of individuality". The communitarian idea was emphasised, criticising the Western individuality that describes the person as rational and independent. This was strengthened by the development of the African notion of '*Ubuntu*'. Although this communitarian idea of the individual recognises the interconnectedness of people, African theologies did not completely admit its hierarchical features. While they were against the hierarchies of apartheid, economic, gender advantages, they could not notice the adultism element in their evaluation. As such, the communitarian African approach hides the hierarchical structure of personhood which undermines children and views them as not fully human and worthy of being excluded from the activities of faith communities (Mtata, 2009:85). According to Chiroma and Chiroma (2022:2), academics disregarded childhood studies because the needs of children were viewed as unimportant because the childhood stage is temporary (Chiroma & Chiroma, 2022:2). As a result, African theology centres around male adults, both those who are still alive and those who have passed on (Mtata, 2009:87).

Chiroma and Chiroma (2022:1) consider the influences on child theology in the African context. They examine the effects of African, western and biblical viewpoints on child theology to construct their impact on African child theology. Thereafter, they consider didactic practices that are all-inclusive, God-centred and life-changing. In their view, childhood theology cannot be dissociated from the communal assessment of gender, society and class (Chiroma & Chiroma, 2022:3).

In Africa the concepts of the communal and selfhood still influence the possibilities of child theology. However, collectivism can be transformed to include children and their trials and development requirements in Africa. The idea of *Ubuntu* is an example of a sense of African community that has become a philosophy. This development proves that Africa is not stagnant and the community concept still holds possibilities (Chiroma & Chiroma, 2022:4).

Chapter 2 considered the challenges that African children are facing and the causes of these challenges. The communitarian concept and the culture that has grown around it is one of the causes of some of the challenges African children are facing. However, the concept of community also has advantages that can also liberate children from their suffering. The Christian community can view the communitarian concept in a new way from a biblical perspective. Consider the words

in 1 Corinthians 12:26–27: “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it, if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is part of it”. *Ubuntu* is present in this verse, and child theology in Africa should embrace it. The church as the community of believers should understand that children are also part of the body of Christ as equals and not as inferior parties. If children are undermined or abused, the community of believers will suffer together, so they have to act in this situation.

Mahlangu (2016:1) argues that African churches should embrace the new evolution in child theology by interpreting the Bible according to the context of the challenges African children are facing. The predicament of the African child cannot be disregarded during theological reflection. Child theology imparts a new hermeneutics for the African theologian (Mahlangu & Grobbelaar, 2016:103). Mahlangu and Grobbelaar (2016:112–113) make it clear that children should be viewed in new ways in African churches as well. According to Weber and De Beer (2017:1), the dream of child theology in Africa is to develop a conducive continent for children by creating a theology with, for, about and by African children.

### **3.4 Child theology based on Old and New Testament perspectives**

Genesis 15:2 reads: “But sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” Nkurunziza (2004:121) argues that the Old Testament, like traditional African communities, appreciated children. Abraham, for instance, felt incomplete without children. In the Hebrew community, as in other ancient communities, children were viewed as weak vessels but were shielded by the dictatorship of their parents. The parents have the task of training their children through authoritarian compliance and hard work as a way to educate them for a better future (Nkurunziza, 2004:122). In the scriptural tradition, children are of importance to parents and the community and have to be trained and raised carefully. In the biblical tradition of Israel, children were at the centre of worship, prayers and ceremonies. The parents were to transfer, narrate and pass on their memories and culture to their offspring. The children were to become the guardians of memory, history and culture (Nkurunziza, 2004:122). Grobbelaar (2016a:45) mentions that in the Old Testament, there are many stories about the birth of children, and these children were symbols of hope and also brought liberation to God’s people. Weber and De Beer (2017:4) argue that scriptural history constantly states that offspring have a vital place as God’s people. The prophet Joel emphasises the prophetic awareness and vision that young people have, whereas the prophet Isaiah prophesied that a child will guide the people of God; children like Joseph and Samuel were called for a specific purpose outlined for them. Young people in the Hebrew scriptures were included in the gathering of God’s

people. It was a social, shared knowledge happening as they walked together (Weber & De Beer, 2017:5).

Luke 2:10–11 says: “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” God brought a new start for all his creation with the birth of a child in the New Testament (Grobbelaar, 2016a:46). Jesus was an active hearer and an active student because he engaged with the theologians in the temple, breaking the hierarchy that put children in the margins or at the bottom of the hierarchy (Weber & De Beer, 2017:4).

According to Nkurunziza (2004:122), the New Testament pictures children as the example of the ideal followers. Children represent the fundamental approach to discipleship, specifically transformation and humbleness. They are the models of humility and discipleship (Nkurinziza, 2004:122).

### **3.5 A child theology that will bring liberation to African childhoods**

#### **3.5.1 Theology for children**

##### **3.5.1.1 Child-attentive theological anthropology**

Mtata (2021:33) explains that in Africa, the human person can only be comprehended and interpreted in relation to other people. Mahlangu (2016:3) phrases this as follows: “This can also be explained in terms of the expression or saying, *‘umuntungumuntungabantu – mothokemothokabatho’*, that is, it is through others that one attains selfhood.” According to Mtata (2021:38, 45), African theologies hold that full personhood must be earned and that is why they are adult-centred. Some African Christians disapprove of baptising newborns or allowing children to be part of the Holy Communion as they think children are not complete human beings who should receive “holy things.” As such, Mtata (2021:47) argues that child-attentive theological anthropology starts by acknowledging the complete self-esteem, honesty, and selfhood of the child. This will circumvent the dangers of adult-minded and attainment-oriented ideas of the person and rectifies the African understanding of the child as someone who should not express views towards adults until they have attained something in life. Mtata continues to say that children in African theology should be acknowledged as full persons from the beginning and their selfhood should be seen as given and not attained.

According to Mtata (2021:47), child-attentive anthropology of selfhood and society focuses on the social and non-hierarchical elements of being a person. A strong view of selfhood as relational is more than the communitarian idea. It supposes the full humanity of each person, irrespective of

the life stage of that person, and respects the input of persons in their relationships and the whole of humankind. Children do not need to achieve full humanity by either the level of their understanding or some cultural standard. Their full humanity does not hinge on race, sexual category, ability to understand or age. Child-attentive theological anthropology has a high regard for children and the development of their moral abilities in their process of growing up (Mtata, 2021:49). Knoetze (2016:237–238) argues that “it is important to work from a biblical anthropology of Africa’s children because of the danger that the church can be more interested in the calling to transform Africa’s children than in the children of Africa as ‘ontological contingent gifts’.”

### **3.5.1.2 Holistic salvation**

According to Chiroma and Chiroma (2022:7), child theology has to view children the way God views them. They are created in the image of God, but they are also fallen human beings who inherited sin from Adam and Eve; they also need salvation. Bunge (2019:39) explains that, “to say children are sinful, also means they carry out ‘actual sins’; that they are moral agents who sometimes act in ways that are self-centred and harmful to themselves and others. These ‘actual sins’—against others or oneself—have their root in the ‘state of sin’ and a failure to centre lives on the divine.” This means that child theology should in essence be mission-oriented (Chiroma & Chiroma, 2022:7). The faith communities’ training of children should focus also on the salvation of the children because children can be saved as young as they are. Mtata argues (2021:51) that the correlation between adults and children must be grounded on God extending his unconditional love to all human beings. God’s love embraces everyone regardless of age, race, and gender.

Chiroma and Chiroma (2022:7) hold that child theology has to deliberate the principles of looking after and raising children. There should be kindness and adults should make intentional spaces to let the child grow in the fear of the Lord. Child theology should reflect on each child’s personality and distinctiveness to increase their abilities to the glory of God (Chiroma & Chiroma 2022:7).

According to Molla (2018:200), the misery of children is exacerbated by irrelevant explanations to vulnerable children, pietistic knowledge of religiousness, tradition, religious culture, training, and customs. She argues for a holistic approach towards holistic salvation and therapeutic treatment of vulnerable children. She appeals to all those who are taking care of vulnerable children, to listen to, recall, see, and recognise the misery of vulnerable children in Ethiopia. The pastoral care of vulnerable children should be holistic so that it becomes a ministry of care, emancipation, and liberation (Molla, 2018:200). Grobbelaar also states that holistic ministry to the child entails diverse actions of involvement, such as wellbeing services, ministration, proper training, nourishing and clothing schemes. These actions deal with the whole and address all the problems of children at risk, instead of concentrating on just one progressive area in separation from all the

other parts (Grobbelaar, 2016c:127). “The theory is that the holistic child development emphasis will engage with all four facets of child development, the physical, spiritual, cognitive and socio-psychological, to address their needs holistically and to provide these children with the opportunity to grow and flourish” (Grobbelaar, 2016c:127). The holistic child development method emerges from a more missional and sympathetic model. Its emphasis is more on misplaced and shattered children at risk. They stand outside the community and live lives of insufficiency. This approach takes care of child labourers, street kids, children afflicted by armed war, sexually abused children, children sick or afflicted by HIV, parentless children and children who are physically challenged (Grobbelaar, 2016c:136).

Molla contends that the salvation of at-risk children in Ethiopia should be holistic instead of individualistic (Molla, 2018:194). Christ Jesus died for everyone, and he can reach every heart and transform it. In the words of John 10:10: “...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (Bible, 2011). Christ came to bring holistic liberation.

### **3.5.1.3 Protection**

According to Chiroma and Chiroma (2022:7), the community of believers in Africa have to shield children from the different abuses they face every day such as sexual assault, child trading, child mistreatment, parental abandonment, and curiosa, among others. This is feasible if pastors help to generate a well-grounded child theology that views children the way Jesus views them. They argue that the faith communities in Africa have to reconsider child theology in terms of human rights and obligations. They should not view children as the bottom rank of a hierarchy but as persons formed by God. Based on the mere fact that children are created by God, they deserve to be treated with human dignity and respect.

Swart and Yates (2012:2) point out that when children are ill-treated, deserted and discriminated against in the community, the scholars and the faith communities ought to co-establish ministries of encouragement, concern, and service for the best interest of the vulnerable children. Mtata (2021:49) avers that if the faith communities consider children as full humans, it will be easy to embrace them, support and protect them, and also view them as the test of the honesty of society.

### **3.5.2 Theology with children**

According to Mtata (2021:48), the strong theology of individuality acknowledges the agency of children in society. Children’s needs are not the only concern for adults, children should be acknowledged as contributors to happiness, fulfilment, and the hope of communities and the entire society. Child theology in Africa should embrace a child-inclusive and non-hierarchical

theological anthropology that starts by acknowledging children's rights and decisions, equal opportunity, self-esteem, and full personhood (Mtata, 2021:51). The concept of child-inclusive personhood stresses anthropoid interconnection and support, the importance of functioning across lines of variance, of nurturing grounded on communal esteem, and collaboration instead of hierarchy (Mtata, 2021:51).

Chiroma and Chiroma (2022:7) put forward the view that child trainers have to contemplate the possibilities of theologising with children. Children are capable of expressing their own ideas verbally during conversations. They can have insight into their communities. They have ethnic principles and beliefs and can turn into something different from what they are.

According to Weber and De Beer (2017:2), the church needs to recognise that its relationship with children is reciprocal. Children have the ability to affect grownups as much as the grownups impact the lives of children. However, for children to be equal partners, there should be a conducive environment that is welcoming, sociable, and just. Mtata (2021:49) points out that children, even when they are babies, react to the standard of society life and participate. Even infants have the potential to give and accept love. They interrelate with and participate from the beginning. If we include children as representatives, we will gain an understanding of children as our conversational partners, and their understanding will help shape our theological concepts. This information can bring a shift in advanced methodologies for undertaking theology with children (Weber & De Beer, 2017:2).

### **3.5.3 Theology by the children**

Groome (2003:203) argues that "I've long been convinced that parents are the primary faith educators of their children. Now, I'm realizing that children can be powerful educators in the faith of their parents." Christ can reveal himself for who he is in the life of the children. Matthew 21:15 teaches: "But when the chief priests and the teachers of the law saw the wonderful things he did and the children shouting in the temple 'Hosanna to the Son of David, they were indignant'". Theology by children can bring liberation to children themselves and adults as well. If adults listen to children, they can gain new perspectives on how they can fight the challenges children are facing in their everyday lives. Christ told his disciples that they should be liberated first and embrace the spirit of humility by seeing children as their model for faith.

### **3.5.4 Child theology: A new African hermeneutic**

A particular responsiveness to children and childhood is a crucial part of the scriptural mission because, although there are children in every society, many contextualised theologies globally give little consideration to children (Bunge, 2016:97).

Mahlangu (2016:5) focuses specifically on Africa when he says that African scriptural scholarship stresses “comprehensiveness in terms of explanatory communities in Africa (academics, non-academics, masculine and feminine, offspring, wealthy and deprived, pastors and congregation, believers and non-believers)”. This comprehensiveness includes a general variety of explanatory approaches historical-critical as well as literary methods. It is glaring that African theologians have never spoken about the issues of the continent; the ill-treated, females, HIV/AIDS infected and afflicted, the deprived, etc. The predicament of the child in Africa challenges scriptural scholarship in Africa.

Mahlangu (2016:1) continues to argue that the background, continuum and environment of African hermeneutics can be enhanced by a hermeneutic of contextual applicability in studying Scripture through the spectacles of children in Africa. Despite the shocking circumstances encountered by the child in Africa, there has been very little scriptural consideration (Mahlangu, 2016:5). There should be a paradigm shift in the hermeneutical procedures of reading and interpreting the scripture in the African context. Children in Africa should be liberated from their challenges, some of which are mentioned in Chapter 2 (child labour, sexual and physical abuse, cultural abuse, etc.). Scripture should be read in light of the contextual issues children encounter in everyday life on the African continent. Grobbelaar (2016a:82) aptly points out that all theology is influenced by the situation/environment in which you find yourself. The Word of God offers perspectives on every problem or situation the children of Africa may encounter. Faith communities should stop being ignorant and seek God in his Word.

### **3.5.5 Faith communities and child theology**

Knoetze (2016:240) contends that theology is not merely about our faith, but also about how it is declared and executed by faith communities. Nakah (2012:119) explains that the faith community is the elected and adored community of God, his own precious people, and the society to whom he has devoted himself. The faith community is involved in endless reverence for God and compassionate outreach to the world; they are a harbour of affection and harmony, a pilgrim society leading to the everlasting place. Those of us who allege to be part of the faith community, we are not yet there to be radiant and unshakable, at least for now (Nakah, 2012:120). Faith communities include all persons found in any community – children, youth, young couples,

women, men, grandparents, single parents, physically challenged, the foreigners in our midst, etc. They have to deliberately heed the call of Jesus to treat children as confidants of the gospel who, like other people in the faith community, have a spiritual understanding that may grow the church of God.

Knoetze (2016:242) pleads for a theology of childhood in Africa to be a wake-up call to the faith community who thinks that it is now in charge of the complete gospel. According to Bunge (2016:98), the mission of child theology is to reinvestigate or reconsider central doctrines and beliefs of the faith communities while considering children and in collaboration with them. Weber and De Beer (2017:1), for instance, focus on the opinion, duties, and position of the child in the congregation and community as a crucial part of an accurate cross-generational congregational praxis.

DeVries (2001:172) maintains that the faith community can identify a diverse set of standards by listening carefully to the opinions of children and by integrating their comprehension into our knowledge of Christian belief. Engagement with the children should not be perceived as a second-class task for those who are not up to the essential occupations in the faith communities, nor should we look at children themselves as inferior residents in the church of God. While children surely require the guidance, shielding, and assistance of grownups, they are worthy of our complete admiration. Only in as far as we transform and become like small children will we start to see the completeness of God's future (DeVries, 2001:172).

### **3.5.6 Child theology: Faith communities as liberating spaces**

Transformation in African childhoods must begin by liberating the religious space – that is, faith communities - and specifically the adult members. Chapter 2 discussed many challenges that African children are facing; and the causes of these challenges are primarily related to the practices of African adults and the hierarchy in African communities. Grobbelaar (2019:1) calls for children to be involved as equal contributors in the development of child theology. He questions why children are still not involved as co-theologians and points out that liberation must start with the adults. If African theologians and Christian communities are not yet liberated from a hierarchical theological anthropology, it will be difficult to liberate children from their challenges and it will be difficult for them to be liberated by the children. African adults still do not see children as models of faith. In Grobbelaar's (2019:8) view, adult theologians should listen to children's views and insights, otherwise their understanding will remain incomplete. If adults fail to listen to children, they will only ever estimate how children feel and think. If adult theologians are liberated from the barriers that hinder them from including children as co-theologians, children will be included in doing theology as equal contributors (Grobbelaar, 2019:1). This can only happen if

there is a multi-faceted transformation, a change in our interpretations of children, theology and research (Grobbelaar, 2019:7). In the words in Matthew 18:3: “And he said: Truly I tell you if you don’t change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”. If our language about young people and theology does not transform our lives and attend to the missional passion of the ecclesiastical, we are wasting our time and vigour on following a wrong path (Grobbelaar, 2016b:62). Christ calls his disciples to be transformed so that they can do theology with children. This calling extends to African faith communities who value the hierarchical anthropology. It requires them to change their mindset and embrace Christ’s way of seeing children as equals. A humble heart can see children the way God sees them. Grobbelaar (2016b:90) so fittingly says: “When our lives are constantly released from our own partial theology through the impact that children have in our lives, we will be capable of appreciating children and speaking out for the inarticulate in our society.”

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Child theology is an academic and scientific field of research that has to inform and mobilise faith practice. Research in this field aims to explore, describe, explain, advocate for, deconstruct, raise awareness, and make a case for children. It acknowledges their vulnerability and capabilities. According to Malherbe (2004:5), the African continent and African churches have been slow in formulating their local theology and discovering their children. One of the reasons for this slowness may be the strong influence of missionaries and other church leaders with Western academic minds who constrained the growth of the African theological response (Malherbe, 2004:5; Mtata 2021:37).

In Africa, a human person is defined in terms of the community. African communities embrace the *Ubuntu* ethics, ‘I am because you are, you are because I am’. The African view of children is characterised by a hierarchy. At the top of the hierarchy are men, women come second, and children are at the bottom of the hierarchy. Mtata (2021:47) calls for African theology to acknowledge children as full persons from the beginning as their selfhood is given and not attained.

African faith communities should embrace a liberation theology that will liberate children from their predicament. Such a theology acknowledges the participation of children, it is child-attentive theology, it is mission-oriented and protects children. Theology *with* children is inclusive, allowing children to participate in activities. The faith community listens to them. Theology *by* children gives them space to interpret the scripture by themselves because Christ can reveal himself through the Holy Spirit to anyone, regardless of age.

Liberation should start with faith communities. They should view children the way Christ views them. They should embrace humility. Humility means that you learn from the least. Faith communities should embrace the new hermeneutic of interpreting the scripture to gain new perspectives on the predicament of children in Africa.

## **CHAPTER 4 REIMAGINING AFRICAN CHILDHOODS**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter is concerned with the pragmatic task. This task asks what actions God expects of his chosen people. The chapter addresses the last sub-question of this study. According to Osmer (2008:4), during the pragmatic task, strategies of action are determined to change the circumstances towards the desired outcome. The task also involves a synthesis of the research findings gleaned from a practical-theological methodology.

In this last phase of the study, strategic perspectives on the role of faith communities in the construction of life-giving African childhoods in holistic and integrated children's ministries are formulated. The need for an awareness of child theology within faith communities is also addressed in this chapter.

### **4.2 The role of faith communities in constructing African childhoods**

#### **4.2.1 Liberating the hierarchical marginalisation structure of African childhoods**

Children should be liberated from patriarchal, hierarchical marginalisation. The African hierarchical structure puts men on top, women in the middle, and children at the bottom of the hierarchy. This hierarchy is visible in some faith communities. Faith communities should do away with the hierarchical marginalisation of African childhoods by viewing children as a gift of God. They should reimagine the personhood of African childhoods and engage children. Faith communities should have intergenerational gatherings, create children ministries within the faith communities, and discover children's gifts. They should view African childhoods as the model for faith because they are created in the image of God.

##### **4.2.1.1 Children as gifts of God**

Bunge (2012:10) argues that faith communities should appreciate the presence of children and be glad for them. Children are not just reliant creatures or victims. They are also gifts from God and sources of happiness. Every child, whether biological or adopted, is a gift. They are not merely God's blessings for their parents, but they are blessings to society as well (Bunge, 2019:37). Numerous scriptures sketch children as gifts from God and as symbols of God's favour (Bunge, 2019:37). The words in Genesis 21:6 is a point in case: "Sarah said 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me'." A gift is something to handle with care to show appreciation to the giver. It is grace to be given a child, some do not receive

this grace. The members of faith communities should be taught to acknowledge that God is the one who creates children as gifts.

#### **4.2.1.2 Reimagining the personhood of African childhood**

Genesis 1:27 teaches: “So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” Bunge (2019:41) reminds us that even though children are still growing, they are fully and totally individuals, created in the likeness of God. They deserve to be esteemed and admired (Bunge, 2019:41). Whatever God created is good and perfect.

Chapter 2 mentioned that some children in Africa are abused in the name of culture because only adults are respected. Landman and Yates (2018:7) hold that faith communities should be examples by not merely teaching respect as a religious principle but also showing respect. Faith communities should teach their members to respect children because they are humans created in the image of God. When believers look at the children, they should see God and not objects to be exploited. When believers undermine and oppress African childhoods, they should know that they are attacking the Creator. If children are held in high esteem, respect towards adults will not be forced, it will come automatically because adults will be leading by example. Children will imitate them.

Faith communities should revisit the African hierarchical structure that relegates African childhoods to the bottom of the hierarchy and excludes children from church activities. Mtata (2009:101) reveals that children are often deprived of God’s grace in faith communities because they are seen as not yet fully human. Every human being is created to worship God. Isaiah 43:21 describes the people of God as: “...the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.” African children are full members of the body of Christ who must be treated the same as other members of the body. Their participation and their voice in the body of Christ should be valued.

#### **4.2.1.3 Intergenerational gathering in faith communities**

Bunge (2019:44) explains that if children are viewed as gifts of God and springs of happiness, they will be involved in worship services as true partakers and received as full participants. He adds that adults ought to worship frequently with their children. Rains *et al.* (2021:183) point out that authentic worship is made possible when there is an environment where children are invited into the worship practices as full participants and find their responses honoured as expressions of their relationship with God. Children must also uphold the Sabbath as sacred and join in

communal adoration (Bunge, 2012:14). It is important to involve children in the ministries of faith communities. According to Yust (2012:226–227), true intergenerational cooperation is required for learning and building learning societies of different ages with the ability to study, worship, and pray together as one. Weber and De Beer (2017:6) contend that the dream, mission, aims and actions of faith communities should reflect an integration of younger generations into the faith community in the present, not at some time in the future. A paradigm shift is needed. It demands that the entire faith community represents intergenerational principles as the equal family of God, instead of only embracing the modern fashions in ministry thinking (Weber & De Beer, 2017:6).

Faith communities should involve children and give them space to participate in the worship service. According to Rains *et al.* (2021:183), such a space can help children have true reverence. Children's reverence often imitates adult communal devotion. Older people or adolescents guide children to emulate communal devotion, rehearsing while inserting age-appropriate deeds. Children should be present in the communal adoration with their parents/guardians, imitating the adults' adoration. Children mostly learn by observing adults; when adults welcome children into the worship service, they allow them to have their own experience with God. God can work in everyone's heart without any limitations. Deuteronomy 31:12–13 commands us to:

*“Assemble the people men and women and children, and the aliens living in your towns so that they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully the words of this law. Their children who do not know this law, must hear it and learn to fear the LORD your God as long as you live in the land you're crossing the Jordan to possess.”*

Children should listen to the word together with adults and learn to fear the Lord when they are still young. They should not have to wait to be adults to serve God.

Weber and De Beer (2017:6) believe that establishing an intergenerational society demands transformation in the beliefs and customary arrangements of faith communities. The words in Galatians 3:27–28 are relevant here: “...for all of you who were baptised into Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Children belong to Christ as well. According to Botha (2016:5–6), children learn abilities and gain understanding, experience and self-confidence through involvement. Having children take part in an exercise like reading the Word of God in context is important because they have the liberty to voice out their opinions on the Word of God. Some examples of improving children's participation in the faith communities include singing an item, being the programme directors, and participating in Bible study, depending on the programmes of different faith communities. In this manner, children will no longer find intergenerational gatherings boring because they will know that they are part of the faith community's service, they are not spectators.

Roberto (2009:35) argues that the faith community should demolish an “adult-only” attitude by finding particular tasks for children in the faith community’s leadership, such as teenagers participating as educators in children’s faith development or as worship leaders (readers of the Word, ushers, instrumentalists, singers to beautify the worship space). Faith communities should furthermore create a space for young people to be part of faith community’s boards and meetings. They have to make an effort to include at least two participants from each age group. It is an opportunity to train the younger generation for leadership roles. Roberto (2009:35) also suggests that the faith community should coordinate a leadership or faith community traineeship for younger people to participate in faith communities and leadership roles. Faith communities should establish new faith community leadership positions that are headed by young people to release some of their distinctive and exceptional gifts to profit the community (Roberto, 2009:35). Beyond the faith community, children should be acknowledged as partners in avoiding and terminating brutality against them. This will create chances for child involvement, include children in policymaking, create child-friendly environments in faith communities, and encourage intergenerational discussions in households (Worldwide, 2019:8). Chiroma (2020:361) believes that young people should be lively contributors in suggesting, forming, and performing duties. If decisions are made by adults and young people are merely told what they should do, they will not take any accountability for the results of the decision. However, if they contribute to the planning and execution of the decision, they are compelled to be accountable for the results (Chiroma, 2020:361). The faith communities should not undermine the thoughts of children.

Weber and De Beer (2017:2) argue that children can bring new ideas and can be eloquent and creative when allowed to participate. Chiroma (2020:362) points out that listening to young people calls for the transformation of the African tradition. A paradigm shift will not be easy, but the conducive space to begin this transformation is in the faith communities where the Trinitarian correlation serves as a solid base for the intended intergenerational correlation. As the body of Christ, every member should participate (Chiroma, 2020:362).

Children’s ideas can help faith communities identify actions that would transform the body of Christ and even the communities around them. 2 Chronicles 34:1 tells us that, “Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem for thirty-one years.” As a king, Josiah was supposed to make policies and make decisions. He managed to do that when he was young because God was on his side. Chronicles 34:3 says that “in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David. In his twelfth year, he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of high places, Asherah poles idols.” The Spirit that dwells in the hearts of adults, is the same Spirit that dwells in the hearts of the children. The Holy Spirit is the helper and the teacher of everyone who believes in Christ.

African children should participate in God's mission in and through faith communities. God can use children to do mission work and to participate in other projects in faith communities. Grobbelaar is convinced of the value of children in ministry; children are not only a gathering field but also workers who gather the crop. Through the help of the Spirit of God, they have the fruit of the Spirit. God uses them as servants of his mercy and even as his voice and mediators to transform older people (Grobbelaar, 2016a:184). According to Bunge (2012:15), children should be taught about their beliefs and principles when they get the opportunity to assist the poor or to perform tasks with adults. Joel 2:28 promises that: "Afterwards I will pour my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy...". African children are included in this promise; the Spirit of the Lord can also use them to spread the Gospel.

Palm (2020:52) states that faith communities can make sure that children are seen and heard if they create a consistent environment for children's opinions in child-friendly faith communities, and by revisiting customs according to the scriptures to accommodate children. This will provide the opportunity for worthwhile child involvement, which can bring continuous change in social standards (Palm, 2020:52).

According to Weber and De Beer (2017:6), intergenerational methods do not mean discarding all age-particular ministries. There is still a place for child ministries, as discussed below.

#### **4.2.1.4 Creating children's ministries within faith communities**

It is good for faith communities to have contextual children's ministries – ministries that address the needs of local communities. Faith communities must ask themselves the following questions: What about the many children who are, for various reasons, exposed to physical vulnerability? What about children in need whose parents are not of the Christian faith – what about the many unseen children in our midst? (Koopman, 2016:194). Children's ministry can help children get to know each other better and build relationships. It also helps children's ministry volunteers get to know the children better and build relationships with them, especially those who have challenges such as abuse at home, school and society, and those who are poor. Helpers at children ministries and faith communities' youth pastors can openly engage children about avoiding mistreatment and they can create a safe environment to report mistreatment (Worldwide, 2019:7).

Children's ministries can also help those children who do not have anyone to guide them at home. Some children come to gatherings alone or they follow their neighbours because their parents are not active members of the faith community. In addition, Yust (2012:224) mentions that the majority of parents or guardians are unsure of how to nurture Christian spirituality in their households. Some remember nurturing children at a time when the broader society mainly

strengthened Christian principles and customs and they did not have any idea of how to develop Christian distinctiveness without this support system. Some do not know family spiritual customs because their household foundation was not Christian or only customarily Christian without dynamic commitment to devotion.

Faith communities also need other programmes as part of their holistic child ministries, like children's camps, conferences, outings, trips, or sports. These holistic ministries help children to love their faith communities and the resources they offer for life-giving experiences of childhood. Children like playing and going out and that space should be created within faith communities as well. A children's ministry should be a conducive space that makes it easy for child ministry volunteers to notice the different gifts of children so that they can serve in the intergenerational gathering.

#### **4.2.1.5 Discovering children's gifts**

Every age group has gifts that they can use to serve others, but we often misinterpret or have presuppositions about one another's gifts (Chiroma, 2020:362). Bunge (2012:17) urges parents and other older people to help children discover their gifts. They should not merely be assisted in finding what they like or what generates the most money, they should discover how they can best use their gifts to create a transformation on the earth and to participate in the commonwealth. Faith communities should discover the gifts or talents of children when they are still young. For example, some children know how to sing and play instruments. Children can use their gifts while they are still young to serve God and God's people. Mahlangu (2016:4) notes that God has given the gift of childhood as a distinctive time for cherishing children's God-given gifts and capabilities.

When faith communities allow children to use their gifts, it becomes a good opportunity for them to learn from the children. In this way, bi-directional communication and mutual learning can be stimulated.

#### **4.2.1.6 African children as models of faith**

Bunge (2012:11) calls on faith communities to pay attention to and listen to the perspectives, views and experiences of children. The New Testament shows us that children do not only learn from adults, they can also be good witnesses, examples of faith for older people, springs of encouragement, and agents of Jesus (Bunge, 2019:41). If children are seen first and foremost as gifts of God and as examples of faith, they will be appreciated and adults will be free to learn from them (Bunge, 2019:43). Matthew 18:3 teaches this lesson: "And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'." Children

have certain character traits from which adults can learn. If faith communities deny this gift of children, they are closing the doors to the kingdom of heaven for themselves. This requires the spirit of humility among African adults, many of whom were raised within a hierarchical structure. Doing ministry without children's participation is doing ministry without God or God's revelation. In other words, denying children is denying God. Who are we worshipping if He is not in our midst? Faith communities should embrace the spirit of humility to see the greatness of the Lord in African children. 1 Corinthians 27 aptly says: "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

#### **4.2.2 Reimagining African culture**

Chapter 2 visited the factors that contribute to the undermining and abuse of children, making them vulnerable victims. One of these factors is culture. African culture includes negative elements such as initiation schools, taboos, undue respect of elders and discipline/punishment. Faith communities should liberate children from harmful practices within African culture.

##### **4.2.2.1 Revisiting African taboos**

Faith communities should have a practical-theological engagement with African children by listening to them and engaging them about any topic, for instance, human sexuality. The issue of African taboos mentioned in Chapter 2, which entails hiding the truth from the children to protect them, should be revisited. Faith communities have to challenge these taboos when talking about sex with children (Worldwide, 2019:7). Some children do not have anyone to talk to them about human sexuality. Mashau (2008:26) makes a case for the topic of human sexuality to be considered in Christian households. Christian families should disregard the taboos when it comes to human sexuality. They must educate their children about sex (Mashau, 2008:26). Jibiliza (2022:2) points out that in some households, parents do not have an opportunity to engage with their children in their adolescent years because of work. As an example, he mentions that the Methodist faith community fulfils the significant role of raising those children and providing them with Christian principles of affection and correction. Faith communities as the family of God should educate children about human sexuality. Eriksson *et al.* (2014:1662) argue that faith communities play a significant role in the lives of their followers, and research about how they may be able to influence young people's attitudes about sex is essential. Faith communities have to strengthen their capability to teach young people a more comprehensive approach to human sexuality and HIV avoidance. African children need to know the truth as it is. The Word of God has many resources that can facilitate theological reflection about the meaning of life-giving and life-denying African childhoods.

Joshua 8:34–35 reads: “Afterwards, Joshua read all the words of the law — the blessings and the curses — just as it is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the foreigners who lived among them.” Joshua read all the words of the law, including the laws that talk about sexuality, in the presence of all. Joshua did ask some of the children to go out because they were not supposed to hear some of the law, but parents were gathered with their children, they received the same message.

Children must be equipped so that they can be comfortable and so that they can have a basis to talk about matters associated with sexual ill-treatment and manipulation. Children should receive age-appropriate instruction (Palm, 2021:10). The leaders of faith communities should create a solid awareness to stop quietness around sexual brutality because sex has been a taboo topic of discussion in faith communities (Palm, 2021:10). If African children hear the topic of sexuality being discussed in faith communities, it will help them to talk about it. According to Palm (2021:10), giving the space for discussion will help children and society report offences. This will do away with the fear the researcher discussed in Chapter 2, disguised as respect, where adults abuse children sexually and tell them not to talk.

#### **4.2.2.2 Revisiting discipline/punishment and circumcision**

Some of the practices of African culture are supposedly derived from the Bible, but verses are taken literally without doing exegesis. According to Grobbelaar and Jones (2021:82), in the present-day circumstances in South Africa, faith communities should be more involved in fighting against the use of bodily punishment in households and schools by educating their followers by expounding the scriptural verses supposedly encouraging bodily punishment. There should be a more accountable approach in and for our South African context.

Faith communities need to help members discern or take note of dangerous practices like unreasonable discipline/punishment and circumcision. According to Brunsdon (2016:271):

*“At a contextual level, the sociological, psychological and cultural trends and forces bearing upon the practice need to be articulated and investigated in order to nurture discernment about the wisdom and ethical implications that are involved when participating in a dangerous rite.”*

Circumcision is present in the Bible, but it symbolises the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants. In the African cultures, it is done with a different purpose, it is a rite of passage into adulthood. 1 Corinthians 7:19 revisits circumcision: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s command is what counts.” As described in Chapter 2, the African circumcision for a boy child is done in the bush. Pastors should help their members to

prioritise the health and the lives of their children and acknowledge that their children are gifts from God who should be nurtured and protected from harm. Circumcising a child is not a sin, nor is remaining uncircumcised a sin. Those parents who want to circumcise their children for health purposes should be advised to take their children to health professionals who will conduct safe and lawful circumcision. Those who do not want to circumcise their children should also be supported by faith communities. Colossians 2:11 clearly says: “In him, you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self-ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ.”

Brunsdon (2016:273) ventures to say that challenging Africans on various levels of analytical reflection can present them with different options to prevent the risks of cultural traditions that are respected by the majority. Asamoah-Gyadu (2022:391) argues that in the construction of pastoral practices and approaches, the connection between biblical material and customary principles should be examined wisely. These rites of passage should be reframed in ways that esteem human rights and help those who have chosen the Christian faith to still accomplish their duties towards the societies in which they are raised (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2022:391).

### **4.2.3 African children and their needs**

#### **4.2.3.1 Taking care of their physical needs**

Swart and Yates (2012:2) point out the responsibility of faith communities when children are ill-treated, abandoned and victimised in communities. The academy and faith communities should co-establish ministries of support, training, and service to benefit those children. Bunge (2012:9) in turn states that older people must shield children, provide for their essential needs, and pursue fairness to all children. Even if children are complete individuals from the commencement of their existence, they are also reliant on adults and they are vulnerable.

Muzingili and Mushayamunda (2015:590) work corresponds to that of Swart and Yates (2012) and Bunge (2012) as they state that the responsibility of the faith community to take care of the orphans and vulnerable children is at the core of the Christian faith. There are numerous verses in the Christian scriptures that command believers to take care of widows and orphans (Muzingili & Mushayamunda, 2015:590). The words in James 1:7 are a good example: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

These and other pericopes demonstrate to us that being thoughtful towards children involves a pursuit of fairness and loving one’s neighbour (Bunge, 2019:42). A ministry that ignores orphans

and vulnerable children is a human ministry. Van Niekerk and Breed (2018:6) argue that failure to improve hope and nurture children will have consequences for the child's life of faith. Jesus's ministry was accompanied by giving. Faith communities should represent Christ by taking care of the physical needs of African children. According to Grobbelaar (2016:183), faith communities have to be hospitable spaces where vulnerable young people are acknowledged and showered with the love of Jesus Christ. Matthew 25:44–45 teaches that,

*“They will also answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me’.”*

When the faith community chooses to ignore vulnerable children, they are ignoring Christ himself. According to Muzingili and Mushayamunda (2015:590), taking care of orphans by raising them and providing accommodation, has always been an important practice amongst moral persons.

Muzingili and Mushayamunda's (2015) article investigates the responsibility of faith communities to take care of orphans and vulnerable children in rural parts of Zimbabwe. The research was done among members of the Matsai community Bikita District, Masvingo province. The research dealt with orphans and vulnerable children and their guardians, who were under the authority of the Church of Christ. The research discovered that the faith community made a huge difference by taking care of orphans and vulnerable children in rural areas (Muzingili & Mushayamunda, 2015:589).

Palm (2020:54) suggests that faith communities can also focus on specifically susceptible children, such as those with ill health, refugees or the parentless, and create a safe environment for susceptible children. Faith communities can establish orphanages to care for orphans and vulnerable children. Children will grow under the care of the family of faith. In some African countries, registered orphanages can apply for funding to help vulnerable children. Many governments and businesses in Africa and worldwide fund non-profit organisations. Faith communities can build orphanages or provide food, clothes and other donations to existing orphanages in their communities. Faith communities can form a relationship with child protection systems in their societies (Worldwide, 2019:3). They can also visit orphanages/shelters and teach those children the Word of God and provide counselling and mentoring.

Another approach is adoption. Ndogo (2016:130) argues that dealing with street kids and destitute households nowadays requires an innovative method to shield the defenceless, especially children. There will never be sufficient organisations to accommodate all the susceptible homeless or orphans. The faith communities should motivate families to take the matter of adoption seriously, to take care of the orphans or vulnerable children. Proverbs 28:27 says, “He

who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receive many curses.” Families should be the hands and the feet of Jesus Christ. According to Bunge (2012:24), faith community leaders should emphasise the importance for adults and societies not to take care only of the needs of their own children, but all children.

It is the responsibility of the faith communities to teach its members to take care of the vulnerable children, by even adopting them. Children should grow up in a healthy family environment with parents/guardians taking care of them.

Following their research at Matsai on the Church of Christ, Muzingili and Mushayamunda (2015) suggest that faith communities should start schemes to enhance their sustenance and funds. A shortage of funds is always a problem in rural areas, so schemes like growing vegetables, keeping birds or piggery production may go a long way to create resources for the orphanages. Markets such as the surrounding communities, the nearby schools, hospitals and the businesses in townships can be seen as targets (Muzingili & Mushayamunda, 2015:601–602).

Members of the faith communities should be motivated to give for the kingdom. The leaders of faith communities should teach their members to understand giving, not only of money, but they can also give other resources or their skills by volunteering to help and serve orphans and vulnerable children. Muzingili and Mushayamunda (2015:594) explain that the Church of Christ in Matsai depend on volunteers from the faith community who frequently help orphanages with buckets of water and firewood. Each orphanage has a volunteer from whom they can get help should they require anything. Where donations are not enough, the Church of Christ gives to the orphanages.

Faith communities should also provide for the educational needs of vulnerable children. The Church of Christ in Matsai, for instance, ensures that all the orphans and vulnerable children in their society are going to school. The faith community settles the tuition payments and supplies writing materials required by these children (Muzingili & Mushayamunda, 2015:593). Faith communities can also provide education. They can establish pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, as well as universities or colleges to let the children grow under God’s guidance. According to Bunge (2019:42), there are numerous Christian models, both historical and current, that pursue fairness for the children by establishing children’s homes, schools or paediatric hospitals.

The faith communities in Africa should understand that they are just stewards and they must be faithful in their calling, knowing that they will be accountable for their actions towards African

children. Faith communities should not only take care of the physical needs of the African child, they must take care of their psychological needs as well, which is discussed in the next section.

#### **4.2.3.2 Taking care of psychological needs**

According to DeVries (2001:168), children have their own struggles and unique questions, and adults need to listen to them. It is crucial for faith communities to be attentive to African childhoods and to respond to any questions they have about life in general. Some children cry in silence, and their cries are manifested in their actions. Faith communities in Africa have to listen to the cries of vulnerable children and accept transparency in the body of Christ (Otu, 2023:88).

Otu (2023:102) avers that faith communities are summoned as the body of Christ to be a listening community of God, to be present to hear ignored cries and untold narratives of ill-treated children. According to Chiroma (2017:87–88), faith communities and youth pastors have a duty to build young people's self-esteem and to offer a therapeutic space. They should condemn unfairness, speak to facts and provide a space where young people can tell the truth and explain their stories of disgrace.

Otu (2023:87) feels that faith communities in Africa, specifically ordained priests, historically did not adequately acknowledge the dignity of African childhoods in faith communities. Children are frequently pushed behind the curtains when it comes to spiritual and pastoral counselling.

African children, according to Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2014:2), require a profound pastoral encounter that introduces the Spirit of God as the Consoler and Therapist with respect to their hurt and misery. This presents the faith community with the challenge of creating a ministry that gifts children with hope, resilience and healing despite their dire circumstances by offering support and a sense of community (Coetsee & Grobbelaar, 2014:2).

Coetsee and Grobbelaar (2014:2) argue that faith communities have to be therapeutic places for African children. A therapeutic society is a group of persons with concern for the welfare of its followers and with a determination to deliberately share this welfare with all members of the community. Healing communities can also be defined as being considerate to persons with an emphasis on correlations rather than compositions and constructions (Coetsee & Grobbelaar, 2014:2).

The faith community must take care of its children with love, like a mother who deeply loves her children, those who are young and vulnerable (Otu, 2023:97). Ill-treated children are the sons and daughters of God and are worthy of pastoral counselling and therapeutic services. The wail of the ill-treated African child is the wail of faith communities (Otu, 2023:100).

Faith communities should shift from ignorance and carelessness and embrace African children. They should give children a special place in the house of the Lord. Otu (2023:100) aptly suggests that the faith community should embrace African children by paying attention to the wounded and shift away from a culture of silence by exposing the child abusers (Otu, 2023:100).

Palm (2020:47) argues that faith communities can provide consistent and uninterrupted assistance to child victims. They can acknowledge and react to child exploitation if they are linked to a broader child safety organisation and do not attempt to do it alone. Faith communities should work with other organisations that fight against child abuse, like the police, social workers, psychologists, etc. Some cases should be handled by police as well. For example: if a child is raped and the faith community is aware of the matter, they should refer it to the police and then provide pastoral care as part of an interdisciplinary approach, if available.

Chiroma (2017:88) asks for the dual duty of faith communities to be stressed. At times the faith community will function as a salt, maintaining what is upright in the community or making life more enjoyable and pleasing. At other times the faith community will function as a light, uncovering unfairness and lies and discrimination, liberating people from different kinds of oppression and unfairness. The faith community looks at overlooked persons, shows the right way, acts as mediators and considers the broader world to bring new life in Christ (Chiroma, 2017:88).

Gunnestad and Thwala (2011:169) paid attention to the correlation between faith and the recovery of children and youth from their tough circumstances. The article demonstrates how faith can influence children in their difficult circumstances. It can be a basis for recovery from tough situations or make them more susceptible to suffering. They collected data by questioning orphans in Swaziland, and kindergarten teachers in Swaziland and Zambia wrote about challenging times during their childhoods and how they overcame or handled the situation.

Different approaches can be followed to provide therapy to African children, especially those who are victimised. Five approaches are discussed below:

#### 4.2.3.2.1 Devotion

According to Gunnestad and Thwala (2011:176), children may pray as a way of controlling challenging circumstances, or someone intercedes for them. From a spiritual point of view, prayer can be beneficial because the wounded have the opportunity to describe their circumstances to someone. It can shed light on the status quo and cool an individual down. There is someone who is paying attention and who is capable of controlling or dealing with the situation. It is regarded as a way of establishing the heart's ease and bringing transformation (Gunnestad & Thwala,

2011:176). When a child or an individual seeks God in prayer, God can listen and answer the prayers by giving peace, joy and hope to the wounded.

#### 4.2.3.2.2 Communion

Faith communities can help by giving real assistance in addition to transcendent, ethical and social aid (Gunnestad & Thwala, 2011:178). Faith communities should be there (physical presence) for the wounded as a way of building resilience.

Chiroma (2017:88) points out that faith communities can be conducive environments for young people to narrate their stories, to be consoled by others, and to truly come to comprehend that none of the harm they suffered can diminish their value as a person formed in the likeness of God.

#### 4.2.3.2.3 Hope, trust and courage

Gunnestad and Thwala (2011:179) propose that since faith is concerned with circumstances of which the result is uncertain, it corresponds to that in which one has faith. Hope is an essential element that establishes resilience. Hope gives individuals the courage to hold on in tough circumstances. Courage can come from praying, from listening or studying the promises in the Word of God, from communion with each other, or from a combination of these aspects. Faith creates resilience because it brings anticipation of a better future and it provides vigour and power to hold on. Hope is a serious fundamental determination in anthropoid inspiration (Gunnestad & Thwala, 2011:180).

#### 4.2.3.2.4 Values and good models as a guide

Gunnestad and Thwala (2011:180) show that another approach to helping children is to teach them good morals. This includes morals like care for others, trustworthiness, loyalty, viewing everyone as worthy, being sociable, etc. Morals can help children to stay away from wrongdoing, clashes and other bad behaviour, and it can guide them to make good decisions.

Bible narratives that relate stories of people who have passed through difficult situations, can give strength by providing good examples. Individuals who have gone through the same situations as a person who is suffering and who have survived can also be good role models. This can help children see that tough situations can happen to anybody (Gunnestad & Thwala, 2011:181).

#### 4.2.3.2.5 Experience of meaning – counselling

Counselling can help a child understand their circumstances and make sense of them. In situations where a child is not coping spiritually, counselling came in as an aid to redefine the situation and accepting it (Gunnestad & Thwala, 2011:182).

Palm (2020:53) explains that children can feel culpability and disgrace when ill-treated, specifically sexually. Faith communities can use innovative techniques to help children comprehend that it is not their fault and that their bodies belong to them. This means that these communities have to discard the taboos on talking about sex. Faith communities can also participate in building resilience and self-esteem in children (Palm, 2020:53). At a household level, faith can provide real confidence and assistance instead of justifying ills or overlooking children's needs (Palm, 2020:53).

Faith community leaders can confront offenders within faith communities and provide counselling and answerability, using their moral and divine power in the lives of households to help perpetrators of violence against children to comprehend and repent their wrongdoing (Palm, 2020:53). Some perpetrators are in the faith communities and others in the wider community, and they should be approached. They also need salvation because Christ came for the sick. If counselling is done only for children and the perpetrators do not receive attention, they will continue to abuse children because they will think there is nothing wrong with what they are doing.

#### **4.2.3.3 Taking care of children's spiritual needs**

##### 4.2.3.3.1 Mentoring as spiritual formation

Chiroma (2015:72) focuses on mentoring to encourage teenagers' spiritual development instead of just coaching them to manage stress. His article explains how youth pastors should adopt mentoring to enable teenage spiritual development. He starts from the point of view that teenagers' spiritual development is necessarily about developing their relationship with God (Chiroma, 2015:75). Spiritual development is an exercise of spiritual formation and progression (Chiroma, 2015:76). Spiritual formation rests on God's will for the Christian, and the Christian has to go about this mindfully. It includes positive maturity in a determined direction. It involves the complete human being in that it concerns itself with personality, ideas, aims, feelings, and deeds. The personality of Christ is its aim and level of measure (Chiroma, 2015:77). Mashau (2008:18) points out that it must be our mission to allow every child to have a personal encounter with God, to be trained according to his Word, and to journey with God all the days of their life. Christ is the source of confidence, happiness and redemption (Mashau, 2008:18).

Teenagers' spiritual formation must be approached holistically. The starting point should be that teenagers should be developed, they should not be seen as troublemakers who should be dealt with (Chiroma, 2015:79).

#### 4.2.3.3.2 Nurturing children's spirituality

##### *Empowerment*

Dillen (2011:4) explains that the word empowerment describes the act of encouraging the power within individuals. As children start to discover their own spirituality, they acquire the language to describe their spirituality and their knowledge (Dillen, 2011:4). The issue of faith is a personal matter. Every individual should have a personal relationship with his/her Maker. Faith communities should empower African children to have a personal relationship with God. Faith communities can empower children by blessing them and through discipleship and modelling.

##### *Bless the children*

Matthew 19:15 tells us: "When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there." Faith communities are given the mandate of praying for African children as a form of empowering them. In this way faith communities bring them to God, praying for their spirituality, the challenges that they are facing, and asking God to keep them. Faith communities need to have dedicated prayers for children. For example: at the beginning of the year, there can be dedicated prayers when children resume school and also during examination times, asking God to provide for their needs. One example is the words in 1 Chronicles 29:19 "And give my son Solomon the wholehearted devotion to keep your commands, statutes and decrees, and to do everything to build the palatial structure for which I have provided". It is only God who can keep someone on the right track of loving him and following his word. Faith communities should take prayer seriously. The faith communities' leaders should motivate the faith community members to pray for their children daily.

Praying for or blessing children is also about speaking positive words over them, words of hope, not words of oppression/discrimination and discouragement. African childhood-related challenges must not discourage faith communities from speaking words of hope. Christ is our hope as we are taught in John 10:10 "...I have come that they may have life and have it to the full."

##### *Discipleship*

According to Beagles (2012:151), discipleship means walking alongside someone to mentor his/her spirituality. It is not an individual journey. We should adopt Christ's approach when he was

training his disciples. He aimed to empower them so that they could replicate him and empower other people.

Matthew 28:19–20 gives the mandate: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of age.” This is the mandate given to the faith communities as well, to make disciples. African children are not excluded in this matter. Faith communities should transfer the relationship with Christ to African children so that their lives can please God and replicate Christ’s life. Knowing Christ and knowing who He is in someone’s life, can liberate children from the challenges they are facing in Africa. Christ is the Liberator, the source of joy, peace and strength.

Discipleship can be addressed easily in children’s ministry and families. According to Chiroma (2016:5), it is crucial to recognise capable mentors. Children’s ministry volunteers should be people who can walk alongside children or conduct discipleship. They should know their flocks, they should pick up the challenges each child is facing and they can intentionally have a curriculum designed for mentoring children's spirituality.

### *Modelling*

Faith communities should empower children by being role models. If they preach about loving your neighbour as yourself, they should demonstrate it by embracing children and seeing them as equals. You cannot request someone to do what you are failing to do. Chiroma (2015:84) argues that teenagers learn spiritual life through modelling. They look at older people and the way they practise their Christian faith and try to be like them. Bunge (2012:14) mentions that Christian scholars have acknowledged the significance of moral role models in the lives of children. Being moral role models means that adults or caregivers are committed Christians themselves and try to live according to God’s Word (Bunge, 2012:14).

Chiroma (2020:360) points out that adults should be ready to mix with young people, to practise what they preach. Such demonstrations should be frequent and done with humility because it is not an easy thing. Faith communities are faced with the challenge of rethinking the way they do things and treat children. They should be aware that children are watching every step they take. If their Christianity is fake, children will replicate it. Whatever they do, it must be intentional, aiming to empower children. They need to understand that children learn mostly by observation.

#### **4.2.4 Creating an awareness of child theology within faith communities**

##### **4.2.4.1 Preaching**

The leaders of faith communities should create awareness about child theology through preaching. Sermons should be designed specifically to address children. Faith communities should be taught how God views children and that they must view children the same. They should also be taught that African children should be valued, nurtured, protected, and treated as equals. The African hierarchical structure can be revisited using sermons and Bible study groups. Yust (2012:230) argues that a decent intergenerational sermon will make it simple for households to reflect at home. He continues to say that when pastors agree that intergenerational evangelisation is feasible and they preach messages that declare the gospel to all generations, they start an intergenerational discussion about faith that is also significant for domestic life. Adults can listen to children's knowledge authenticated as truthful interactions with the gospel and can continue the discussions with children at home after church (Yust, 2012:230).

Palm (2020:49) suggests that pastors should use their spiritual liberty in South Africa with the other human rights to guide faith communities and their members towards liberal social views that go against all types of abuses against children. Faith communities can raise awareness and maintain the community, particularly in rural areas, all the while confronting male-controlled structures that make children vulnerable. This corresponds with many sacred societies that have acknowledged their essential duty to stop violence against children by challenging the male-controlled family model (Palm, 2020:50).

##### **4.2.4.2 Reinterpreting abused scriptures**

Faith communities must deal openly and positively with deep-rooted habits of abusing scriptures in faith traditions to defend or indirectly support negative adult/child hierarchies (Worldwide, 2019:1). Faith communities will be able to combat violence against children when they revisit abused scriptures that defend abusive behaviour towards children. Some verses in the Bible are emphasised more than other verses to defend abusive traditions within the faith communities, families and within the wider community. One example is the words in Ephesians 6:1–3: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord for this is right. Honour your father and mother, which is the first commandment with a promise, so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” In some faith communities, these verses in Ephesians 6:1–3 are emphasised more than the words in Ephesians 6:4: “Fathers, do not exasperate, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” The result is that children are abused, undermined, and silenced in their faith communities, families and in the wider communities. This verse should be interpreted

responsibly and the other verses that talk about the obligations of the parents and faith communities towards their children should be emphasised as well. According to Palm (2020:49), a cautious contextual approach to scriptures rather than a verbatim method provides an alternative to theologies where the Bible was distorted to defend captivity, discrimination and apartheid.

#### **4.2.4.2.1 Conducting training**

Faith communities should create workshops to train parents, child ministry volunteers, mentors and counsellors; as they (leaders) are trained to interpret the scriptures, do mission work, offer pastoral counselling, and take care of different ministries, etc. In this manner, children will be taught by trained volunteers in children's ministries. This will help faith communities do away with the practice of allowing anyone to interact and journey with children. Adults are trained by qualified pastors. Children also need a trained teacher, we should not take them for granted, they need solid theology as well.

If parents are trained on how to engage with their children on their relationship with God and other matters at home, African children will be better cared for. According to Worldwide (2019:3), indigenous faith communities often play the role of training and guiding families, be it officially or unofficially. For example, parents should be motivated to create time to be with their children, to teach them how to use social media and to monitor how they use it. They can guide families with regard to the parent/child relationship and the shaping of spiritual and moral beliefs over their lifespan. Chiroma (2015:80) suggests that faith communities must train people who will be responsible for doing discipleship and faith formation, and who work as advisers and counsellors for young people with regard to their spiritual life. The faith community leaders should train mentors and counsellors to provide counselling and mentoring for children, especially children who are victims of abuse. These people will then be able to identify and help children who are for instance grieving due to death, who have suffered abuse, who fail at school, or those with suicidal thoughts, etc. Pastors can provide aimed assistance to households to change cruel parenting practices, stop physical punishment and embrace hope in children's lives (Palm, 2020:54). Leaders can refer their members who are gifted in a certain field, (like counselling) for theological or other professional training.

#### **4.2.4.3 Sending members to theological schools**

The leaders of faith communities can play a significant role as primary figures by acknowledging or identifying brutality against children, offering urgent assistance, giving advice, referring, and providing the faith community with information so they can eliminate these problems (Worldwide,

2019:3). The faith communities' leaders can advise and motivate the members of the faith communities to go for theological training as well, so that they can come and help in different ministries in the church. For example, there are courses like pastoral counselling/care that members can study so that they can help victimised children.

#### **4.2.4.4 Forming relationships between different generations within the faith communities**

The different generations need each other so that they can learn from each other. This is possible if there is a good relationship between the adults and children within the faith communities. Christian believers and faith communities must contemplate intergenerational relationships (Chiroma, 2020:353). Intergenerational relationships can offer genuine occasions for mentorship and answerability, while also enabling the young (Chiroma, 2020:361). Ware (2011:7) compares the family with the Trinity of God. He argues that the Trinity offers a model for acknowledging every member of the family as fully equal in their worth and self-respect as people who are formed in the likeness of God. He continues to say that the family reflects the parity in the three persons of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They have different tasks and they each perform their task in an eternal correspondent structure of power and compliance, yet they are completely identical to God. The faith communities should acknowledge both this parity and this distinction and aim to strengthen this in what the faith communities inspire and preach (Ware, 2011:7). God is the God of relationship, not merely in the three persons of God but with each individual (Chiroma, 2020:3567).

### **4.3 Conclusion**

To co-construct liberating African childhoods, faith communities have a certain role that they need to play. They have to deal with the hierarchical marginalisation of African structures that relegate children to the bottom and view them as not yet fully human. Faith communities should view children as gifts of God, created in the image of God, which implies that children should be cherished and heard. Faith communities should worship with the children in the same space and allow them to participate in intergenerational gatherings. They should create children's ministries within their faith communities. Children's ministry will help them discover the gifts of the children who can serve within the faith community and they can come to view children as models of faith.

Faith communities should also revisit African culture. Children should be liberated from harmful practices. One harmful practice is African taboos which cause parents to hide certain information from children to protect them. Adults should be free to teach children with open and free communication in trustful relationships. Faith communities should teach their members to respect

children and not to expect unquestioning respect for all adults. Respect should be reciprocal. Faith communities should teach their members about improper discipline or punishment and the disadvantages of traditional circumcision by revisiting and reinterpreting texts that talk about these topics. Faith communities should take care of the needs of African children. African childhoods should be liberated physically, psychologically and spiritually as well.

The leaders of faith communities should raise awareness of child theology within faith communities by preparing sermons on child theology or the importance of children. They should reinterpret abused scriptures and train child ministry volunteers and parents to take care of African children. They can send members to theological schools as well so that they can come and work in children's ministries as teachers or counsellors. Lastly, they can form and enhance relationships between the different generations within and through faith communities.

## CHAPTER 5 FINDINGS

This research study discussed the view of children in African thought. Children are traditionally viewed as not fully human yet. This view has its roots in the hierarchy of personhood in Africa, where men are at the top of the hierarchy, females in the middle, and children at the bottom (cf Mtata, 2009:99). This view of the personhood of children makes African children vulnerable for abuse. This study aimed to determine how faith communities can become partners in the construction of life-giving African childhoods and to explore and describe the nature of the partnership role of faith communities.

### 5.1 Relevance of the study

Child theology is recognised since the 1990's in Africa, making this study highly relevant. It advocates for the voices, safety, visibility, and care of children. This dissertation addressed three important concepts: African childhoods, faith communities and child theology. Sadly, even though theological scholars have been writing about child theology, African children are still undermined, abused, and seen as not fully human in some faith communities. This study contributes to the reimagining of life-giving African childhoods within and through faith communities. Moreover, the Osmer methodology chosen for this study helps to identify the problems African children are facing and their causes. It also allowed for theological reflection and the formulation of some strategic perspectives.

### 5.2 Research findings

*Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the study, including the problem statement, literature review, research aim and objectives, research methodology and ethical considerations.*

In Chapter 1, the challenges that children are facing in Africa were identified. Tragically, it has become a general truth that many children globally are exposed to a wide variety of dehumanising practices as part of their daily lives. Children become victims of different abuses, like physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse. The perpetrators of this abuse are adults. The marginalisation of children was also noticeable in some faith communities, where children are separated from intergenerational gatherings and their voices are muted because they are seen as not fully human and as the church of tomorrow. The chapter also offers a literature review of childhood as a social construct, child theology and African childhoods. The research questions and sub-questions, as well as the research aim and objectives, were formulated in Chapter 1.

The researcher chose to use the four tasks of Osmer's approach to practical-theological interpretation to answer the research questions. The tasks are descriptive, interpretative, normative and pragmatic. Chapter 1 suggested that Osmer's approach be employed to identify the following:

- the daily challenges African children are facing;
- underlying trends and patterns in the constructions of childhood in African thought;
- theological resources that can serve as normative ideas for conceptualisation;
- a strategic role faith communities can fulfil to respond to the identified challenges.

*Chapter 2 explored and described children's daily lives in Africa and African faith communities and discussed how it is connected with constructions of childhood in African thought. Furthermore, the chapter explored and described from a childhood studies perspective historical and contemporary ideas associated with African childhoods that can provide insight into why children's lives are affected by these ideas.*

In Chapter 2 the descriptive and interpretative tasks were completed. Information was collected through a literature study to gauge what is going on in children's daily lives in African communities in general and in faith communities specifically. The researcher starts the chapter by explaining what compelled her to research African childhoods and faith communities. The researcher explained that she grew up in an African background where hierarchical structures of personhood dominated, not only in the community context but also at home and within faith communities. Children were at the bottom of the hierarchical structure. Children's voices were not heard, and their feelings were ignored.

The traditional view of childhood in Africa was discussed to understand the history of how Africans view childhood. Children are traditionally seen as immature, irrational and incompetent. In Africa, the child is defined by the community. *Ubuntu* is very important in Africa. Children should pass through initiation to qualify as adults in African communities. The elements of traditional African life and the worldview that influenced childhood construction in Africa, centring around tribes, traditional leaders, and gender, were discussed.

Childhood as a social construct was also explored in this chapter. The history of childhood construction in the Western view was discussed, followed by childhood construction in Africa. In Africa, childhood construction can be explained by two different theoretical positions, which are childhood as a biological stage and childhood as socially constructed. When the child is born,

Africans have certain expectations about the growth of a child. They expect the child to sit, crawl, walk, etc. Childhood as a social construct of the community determines the end of the childhood stage and the start of adulthood. There are certain rituals that children must pass through when they are born. The first one is welcoming a newborn to the family and the second one is the initiation during which children graduate from childhood to adulthood. There are also certain behaviours that African children are expected to display in the community to show that they have manners.

The chapter then turned to the paradigm shift in social construction. Some factors influenced the change in the African childhood construction, including education, economy, migration, government laws, and religion. The implications of child abuse were discussed. Children in African communities are vulnerable to sexual abuse, poverty, child labour, and child abandonment. They are unseen and their voices are muted in the faith communities as well. Some become aggressive, some lose their confidence, some commit suicide, some run away from their homes and live on the streets, some do not perform well at school, some become dropouts, some have hatred of the opposite sex who abused them, and many do not enjoy going to the gatherings of faith communities.

The underlying trends, patterns or causes of children's suffering were analysed by asking the question: "Why is this going on"? The factors that contribute to the undermining of children, thus to child victimhood and vulnerability in African childhoods are cultural (initiation schools, taboos, respect, discipline/punishment) and poverty-related (pandemics, natural disasters, poor governance, war, unemployment and child labour).

**Chapter 3** identifies theological resources from a child theology perspective that can be used to reimagine African childhoods.

The normative task was addressed in Chapter 3. In this chapter, biblical and theological resources were consulted to respond to the challenges and opportunities related to African childhoods as discussed in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, the concept of child theology was discussed from a Western perspective. Child theology in Africa was also discussed. African scholars have been hesitant to formulate an African theology, partially because of the influence of colonialism and missionary endeavours. Mtata argues (2009:85) that the communitarian African approach hides the hierarchical structure of personhood, which undermines children and views them as not fully human and worthy of being excluded from faith communities' activities.

The chapter considers child theology in light of the Old and New Testaments. The child theology that can bring liberation to African childhoods was discussed in Chapter 3. This can be described

as theology for children, theology with children, and theology by the children. Theology for children includes child-attentive theological anthropology, which acknowledges children as full human beings who must be respected and held with dignity. Theology for children is mission-oriented; children are worthy of the grace of God and they need salvation and liberation as well. Finally, children should be protected from all risks.

Theology with children implies that children should be included in church activities and they must be seen as equal human beings created in the image of God. Theology by the children refers to the fact that children can be used by God to influence adults. Child theology as a new African hermeneutic must read and interpret the scriptures to bring solutions to the vulnerability of African childhoods.

According to Bunge (2016:98), the mission of 'child theology' is to reinvestigate or reconsider the central doctrines and beliefs of faith communities by considering children and in collaboration with them. Lastly, child theology should liberate the liberator. The African faith communities should be liberated from viewing children as not yet fully human and should start to include them as part of God's family.

**Chapter 4** *formulates strategic ideas for the partnership role(s) of faith communities in the construction of life-affirming African childhoods.*

In this last chapter, the pragmatic task was undertaken to formulate strategies for the partnership role of faith communities in African childhood. In Chapter 4, the discussion maintained that African childhoods should be liberated from hierarchical marginalisation structures within faith communities. Children must be seen as the gifts of God; and they must be seen as the image of God. If adults do this, they will be reimagining the personhood of African childhoods. Children should be included and should participate in intergenerational gatherings of faith communities, like worship services, leadership positions, and mission work. The faith communities should create children's ministries as well. A children's ministry is a conducive space that makes it easy for the teachers to notice the different gifts of the children who can serve in intergenerational gatherings. If faith communities allow children to participate in intergenerational gatherings, it will be a good opportunity for the adults to learn from the children and bi-directional communication and mutual learning can be stimulated. This means that faith communities should view African childhoods as models of faith.

Chapter 4 reimagines African culture. Faith communities should liberate children from harmful practices within the African culture that may harm children and their dignity. They should revisit African taboos, discipline/punishment, and circumcision. Faith communities should liberate

children by providing for their needs, including physical needs, psychological needs and spiritual needs.

The leaders of faith communities should create awareness of child theology within faith communities through preaching, by offering training for parents, child ministry teachers, and mentors or counsellors who take care of the children. Awareness can also be raised by encouraging some faith community members to go to theological schools so that they can help lead some of the different ministries that take care of the children within the faith communities. Lastly, the relationship between the different generations within faith communities should be enhanced. The different generations need each other so that they can learn from one another.

### **5.3 Limitation of the study**

Also studies encounter limitations. One of the limitations of this study is that most of the literature that the researcher consulted supported her views, rather than challenging it. The study also did not include an empirical component, which can be considered a limitation in practical-theological research.

### **5.4 Further areas for research**

This research aimed to discover the significance of children within faith communities by reimagining African childhoods. It also explored how faith communities can become partners in constructing life-giving African childhoods.

The following question can be considered for future research purposes: How can faith communities foster child theology in families that will create a safe environment in households and in the community in which children live?

### **5.5 Concluding remarks**

Every child is created in the image of God. They are human from the beginning of their lives. Therefore, they should be treated as equals within faith communities. By using a child theology lens this research creates awareness of the God-given place and position of children within faith communities. Furthermore, it challenged the hierarchical structure of marginalisation within African faith communities and in African adults' lives and worldviews.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abodunrin, O., Oloye, G. & Adesola, B. 2020. Coronavirus pandemic and its implication on global economy. *International Journal of Arts, Languages and Business Studies*, 4.

Adebe, T. & Ofusu-Kusi, Y. 2016. Beyond pluralizing African childhoods: introduction. *Childhood*, 23(3):303–316.

Adu-Gyamfi, J. 2014. Childhood construction and its implications for children's participation in Ghana. *African Journal of Social Sciences*. 4(2): 1-11

Agbemenu, K., Hannan, M., Kitutu, J., Terry, M.A. & Doswell, W. 2018. "Sex will make your fingers grow thin and then you die": The interplay of culture, myths, and taboos on African immigrant mothers' perceptions of reproductive health education with their daughters aged 10–14 years. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 20:697–704.

Anderson, R.S. 2001. *The shape of practical theology*. Madison: Intervarsity Press.

Ansell, N. 2017a. *Children, youth and development*. New York: Routledge.

Ansell, N. 2017b. *Aries's centuries of childhood*. New York: Routledge

Asamoah-Gyadu, J.K. 2022. Initiation ceremonies/incorporating/identity formation. In: *International Handbook of Practical Theology*. Berlin/Boston: Facet. p. 379.

Azi, A.S. & Saluhu, A.I. 2016. The effect of child abuse on the academic performance of school children: implication on the Nigerian Economy. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Arts, Sciences*, 3(3):23–27.

Baloyi, M.E. & Manala, M.J. 2019. Reflections on challenges of preferring the male child in an African marriage—a practical theological observation. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 40(1):1–9.

Bhalotra, S. 2003. Child labour in Africa. OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers 4. *Organisation for Economic-Co-operation and Development*. Paris: Facet. pp. 1–79

Bible. 1984. *The Holy Bible*. New international version. Minto: The Bible Society in Australia.

Bible. 2011. *Holy Bible*. New international Version. Nairobi: Bible Society of Kenya

Boakye-Boaten, A. 2010. Changes in the concept of childhood: implications on children in Ghana. *Journal of International Social Research*, 3(10).

- Bogin, B. & Smith, B.H. 1996. Evolution of the human life cycle. *American Journal of Human Biology: The Official Journal of the Human Biology Association*, 8(6):703–716.
- Brunsdon, A. 2016. Hurting children and the dangerous rite of ritual male circumcision. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Theologies of childhood and the children of Africa*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 246–273. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.tcca02.08>
- Bunge, M.J. 2006. The child, religion, and the academy: developing robust theological and religious understandings of children and childhood. *The Journal of Religion*, 86(4):549–579.
- Bunge, M.J. 2012. Biblical and theological perspectives and best practices for faith formation. In: Lawson, K.E., ed. *Understanding children's spirituality: theology, research, and practice*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock. pp. 3–25.
- Bunge, M.J. 2016. Task, sources and significance of theologies of childhood. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Theologies of childhood and the children of Africa*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 92–112. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.tcca02.03>
- Bunge, M.J. 2019. Historical perspectives on children in the church: resources for spiritual formation and theology of childhood today. In: Lawson, K.E. & May, S., eds. *Children's spirituality*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock. pp. 34–46.
- Bunge, M.J. & Eide, M. 2021. Introduction: strengthening theology by honouring children. In: Bunge, M.J., ed. *Child theology: diverse methods and global perspective*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. pp. xiii–xxv.
- Chireshe, R. & Plattner, I.E. 2010. Poverty in developing Africa: overarching themes. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 20(2):169–170.
- Chiroma, J.A. & Chiroma, N.H. 2022. Childhood theology and implications for pedagogy. *Theologia Viatorum*, 46(1):a115. <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v46i1.115>
- Chiroma, N.H. 2015. The role of mentoring in adolescents' spiritual formation. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 14(1):72–90
- Chiroma, N.H. 2017. The menace of Boko Haram and the violation of young people dignity in Northern Nigeria. *Journal of Theology*, 77–93.
- Chiroma, N.H. 2020. Intergenerational issues. In: Agang, S.B., Forster, D.A. & Hendricks, H.J., eds. *African Public Theology*. Langham. pp. 353–364.

- Coetsee, D. & Grobbelaar, J. 2014. Equipping lay facilitators to support emotionally wounded children in Africa by means of healing communities. *In die Skriflig*, 48(1), Art. #1712, 11 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i1.1712>
- De Beer, S. 2016. Child-inclusive cities: towards a liberating praxis with the children. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Welcoming Africa's children: theological and ministry perspectives*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 210–234. <http://www.dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.waccs13.07>
- De Beer, S. & Yates, H. 2019. Doing theology with children: exploring emancipatory methodologies. *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 75(1):a5840. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5840>
- De Milliano, M. & Plavgo, I. 2014. Analysing child poverty and deprivation in sub-Saharan Africa. CC-MODA – Cross Country Multiple Overlapping Deprivation Analysis. *Journal of UNICEF Office of Research*: Florence. pp. 1-41
- DeVries, D. 2001. Toward a theology of childhood. *Interpretation*, 55(2):161–173.
- Dillen, A. 2007. Between heroism and deficit: challenges to research on children's spirituality from a Christian theological standpoint. *Concilium*, 5:57–68.
- Dillen, A. 2011. Empowering children in religious education: rethinking power dynamics. *Journal of Religious Education*, 59(3):4–11.
- Dillen, A. 2020. Children at the center? Practical theology by, about and with children. In: Dillen, A. & Gartner, S., eds. *Discovering practical theology: exploring boundaries*. Leuven: Peeters. pp.127-155.
- Eriksson, E., Lindmark, G., Haddad, B. & Axemo, P. 2014. Young people, sexuality, and HIV prevention within Christian faith communities in South Africa: a cross-sectional survey. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 53:1662–1675.
- Famuyiwa, O.O. 1997. Child abuse and neglect in sub-Saharan Africa. *Psychiatric Bulletin*, 21(6):336–338.
- Gecaga, M. 2007. The plight of the African child: reflections on the response of the church. *Studies in World Christianity*, 13(2):142–159.

Grobbelaar, J. 2016a. Doing child theology: history and methodology. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Welcoming Africa's children: theological ministry perspectives*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp 42–87. <http://www.dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.waccs13.02>

Grobbelaar, J. 2016b. 'The grammar of combining the vocabulary of theology, children and Africa'. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Theologies of Childhood and the Children of Africa*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 51–91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.tcca02.02>

Grobbelaar, J. 2016c. Holistic children's ministry: history and challenges. In Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Welcoming Africa's children – theological and ministry perspectives*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 115–163. <http://www.dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.waccs13.04>

Grobbelaar, J. 2019. Doing theology with children: some challenges for adult theologians. *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies*, 75(1):a5636. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75.1.5636>

Grobbelaar, J. & Jones, C., eds. 2021. *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa: some ethical perspectives*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

Groce, N.E. & Trasi, R. 2004. Rape of individuals with disability in the age of AIDS: the folk belief of "virgin cleansing". *Americas*, 5:6.

Groome, T. 2003. Children and parents: two-way partners in faith development. In: Osmer, R.R. & Schweitzer, F.L., eds. *Developing a public faith: new direction in practical theology*. Danvers: Clearance Center. pp. 203–212.

Gunnestad, A. & Thwala, S.L. 2011. Resilience and religion in children and youth in Southern Africa. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 16(2):169–185.

Holborn, L. & Eddy, G. 2011. *A research paper by the South African Institute of Race Relations*. Sponsored by Donaldson Trust. Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Holland, J. & Henriot, P. 1984. *Social analysis: linking faith with justice*. Rev. ed. Washington: Orbis.

Hollos, M. 2002. The cultural construction of childhood: changing conceptions among the Pare of northern Tanzania. *Childhood*, 9(2):167–189.

Izugbara, C.O. 2001. Tasting the forbidden fruit: the social context of debut sexual encounters among young persons in a rural Nigerian community. *African Anthropologist*, 8(1):96–107.

- James, A. & James, A. 2008. *Key concepts in childhood studies*. London: Sage.
- Jibiliza, X. 2022. A qualitative pastoral care model on teenage care in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 103(1).
- Kammer, A., Azour, J., Selassie, A.A., Goldfajn, I. & Rhee, C. 2022. How war in Ukraine is reverberating across world's regions. *Washington: IMF*, 15. March.
- Knoetze, H. 2016. The history of theologies of childhood in African churches. In Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Theologies of childhood and the children of Africa*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 220–245.
- Koch, R. Yates, H. & Kitching, A.E. 2019. Adolescent girls' voices on their need for sexuality education: a cry for mutual sexual emancipation. *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 75(1):a5495. [https://doi.org/ 10.4102/hts.v75i1.5495](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5495)
- Koopman, N. 2016. Public theology and the plight of children in Africa. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Welcoming Africa's children-theological & ministry perspectives*. Durbanville: AOSIS. pp. 193–209.
- Koramoa, J., Lynch, M.A. & Kinnair, D. 2002. A continuum of child-rearing: responding to traditional practices. *Child Abuse Review: Journal of the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, 11(6):415–421.
- Kyalo, P. 2013. Initiation rites and rituals in African cosmology. *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 1(1):34–46.
- Landman, C. & Yates, H. 2018. "The church should teach us to do respect": voices from rural youth in Mpumalanga, South Africa. *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 74(3):a5272. [https://doi.org/ 10.4102/hts.v74i3.5272](https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5272)
- Mahlangu, E. 2016a. Theology disrupted: doing theology with children in African contexts. *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies*, 72(1):a3513. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3513>
- Mahlangu, E. 2016b. Matteson theory about aids orphans in Zambia, shattered hearts. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 72(1):a3513. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3513>
- Mahlangu, E. & Grobbelaar, J. 2016. Child theology in Africa: A new hermeneutics? In: Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., ds). *Welcoming Africa's children: theological ministry and*

*perspective*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 88–114.

<http://www.dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.waccs13.03>

Malherbe, J. 2004. Child theology in Africa? Paper presented at the Hear the Cry conference, held in Nairobi, Kenya from 17–21 May. pp. 1–7.

Mashau, T.D. 2008. *God's road map for human sexuality: discipling your child to make sexual choices that honour God*. Edleen: Acad SA.

Meinck, F., Cluver, L.D., Boyes, M.E. & Loening-Voysey, H. 2016. Physical, emotional and sexual adolescent abuse victimisation in South Africa: prevalence, incidence, perpetrators and locations. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 70(9):910–916.

Molla, R.S. 2018. Pastoral care in the living web for at-risk children in Ethiopia. *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 28(3):189–202. DOI:10.1080/10649867.2018.1547957

Mtata, K. 2009. A critique of African theology's anthropology: why children are excluded from the table. In: Bloomquist, K.L. ed. *Theological practices that matter*. Geneva: Lutheran University Press. pp. 85–101.

Mtata, K. 2021. Children in African theologies of community and the human person. In: Bunge, M.J., ed. *Child theology: diverse methods and global perspective*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books. pp.33–51.

Murovhi, A., Matshidze, P., Netshandama, V. & Klu, E. 2018. Traditional child rearing practices in Vhavenda families South Africa. *Journal of Gender, Information and Development in Africa (JGIDA)*, 7(1):21–37.

Muzingili, T. & Mushayamunda, M. 2015. Going beyond spiritual synoptic into child protection: the contribution of church in caring of orphans and vulnerable children in rural Zimbabwe. *Journal for Studies in Management and Planning*, 1(7):589, 564.

Nakah, V. 2012. The African church and the child in the midst: a theological reflection. *International Congregational Journal*, 11(1).

Ndofirepi, A.P. & Shumba, A. 2014. Conception of “child” among traditional Africans: a philosophical purview. *Journal of Human Ecology*, 45(3):233–242.

- Ndoga, S.S. 2016. Childhood in the book Proverbs and in Shona proverbs. In Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Theologies of childhood and the children of Africa*, Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 113–131. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.tcca02.04>
- Nelson, R.A. 1995. Children at worship: the church of today. *Word and World*, 15(1):76–82.
- Nkurunziza, D.R. 2004. African theology of childhood in relation to child labour. *AFER*, 46(2):121–138.
- Norozi, S.A. & Moen, T. 2016. Child as a social construction. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 6(2):75–80.
- Okolo, C.V. & Wen, J. 2023. Economics of natural disasters and technological innovations in Africa: an empirical evidence. *Environmental Science and Pollution Research*, 30(5):12362–12384.
- Osmer, R.R. 2008. *Practical theology: an introduction*. Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans.
- Otu, I. 2023. Child protection in the church as family of God. *Journal of Moral Theology*, 3:87–105. WEC Book Series, No.3.
- Palm, S. 2020. Seen but not heard? Engaging the mechanism of faith to end violence against children. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Jones, C., eds. *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa: some ethical perspectives*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media. pp. 33–64. <http://doi.org/10.18820/97819284809052>
- Palm, S. 2021. Webs of harm? Online child sexual abuse and theologies of the digital. <https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/palm-webs-of-harm>
- Rains, S.C., Schroeder, J.R. & Bruner, R. 2021. Ministry and worship with children among churches of Christ in the United States: a quantitative and qualitative investigation. *Christian Education Journal*, 18(2):172–188.
- Raman, S. & Hodes, D. 2012. Cultural issues in child maltreatment. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 48(1):30–37.
- Ray, M. & Jat, K.R. 2010. Effect of electronic media on children. *Indian Pediatrics*, 47:561–568.
- Roberto, J. 2009. Becoming intentionally intergenerational: models and strategies. *Lifelong Faith*, 3(1):33–55.

- Roux, E. 2020. Recognising and responding to complex dilemmas: child marriage in South Africa. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Jones, C., eds. *Childhood vulnerabilities in South Africa: some ethical perspectives*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media. <http://doi.org/10.18820/97819284809052>
- Silverman, E.K. 2004. Anthropology and circumcision. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 33:419–445.
- Smit, D. 2016. Welcoming children? On building culture of trust. In: Grobbelaar, J. & Breed, G., eds. *Welcoming Africa's children: theological and ministry perspectives*. Cape Town: AOSIS. pp. 1–41. <http://www.dx.doi.org/10.4102/aosis.2016.waccs> 13.01
- Sossou, M.A. & Yagtiba, J.A. 2009. Abuse of children in West Africa: implications for social work education and practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 39(7):1218–1234.
- Swart, I. & Yates, H. 2012. Listening to Africa's children in the process of practical theological interpretation: a South African application. *HTS: Theological Studies*, 68(2):1–12.
- Van Niekerk, M. & Breed, G. 2018. The role of parents in the development of faith from birth to seven years of age. *HTS: Theological Studies*, 74(2):1–11.
- Vincent, L. 2008. 'Boys will be boys': traditional Xhosa male circumcision, HIV and sexual socialisation in contemporary South Africa. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 10(5):431–446.
- Ware, B.A. 2011. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: the Trinity of theological foundation for family ministry. *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry*, 12:4–11
- Weber, S. & De Beer, S. 2017. Erratum: doing theology with children in a South African context: children as collaborators in intergenerational ministry. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 72(1):a3572. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3572>
- Wilcken, A., Keil, T. & Dick, B. 2010. Traditional male circumcision in eastern and southern Africa: a systematic review of prevalence and complications. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 88:907–914.
- Woodhead, M. 1996. *In search of the rainbow: pathways to quality in large-scale programmes for young disadvantaged children*. Early childhood development: practice and reflections number 10. Bernard van Leer Foundation: Hague
- Worldwide, I.R. 2019. *Why faith? Engaging faith mechanisms to end violence against children*.

Yust, K.M. 2012. Being faithful together: families and congregation as intergenerational Christian communities. In: Lawson, K.E., ed. *Understanding children's spirituality: Theology, research, and practice*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock. pp. 223–237.

Zimmermann, M. 2015. What is children's theology? Children's theology as theological competence: development, differentiation, methods. *HTS: Theological Studies*, 71(3):1–6.

## APPENDIX A: DECLARATION FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR



Director: CME Terblanche - BA (Pol Sc), BA Hons (Eng), MA (Eng), TEFL  
22 Strydom Street  
Baillie Park, 2531  
Tel 082 821 3083  
cumlaudelanguage@gmail.com

### DECLARATION OF LANGUAGE EDITING

I, Christien Terblanche, hereby declare that I edited the text titled:

**African childhoods and Christian faith communities: A practical-theological engagement**

for **Sylvia Ramashau** for the purpose of submission as a postgraduate study for examination. Suggestions were indicated in track changes and application was left to the author.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CME Terblanche', with a stylized circular flourish at the end.

CME Terblanche

Cum Laude Language Practitioners (CC)

South African Translators Institute accr nr: 1001066

Full member of the Professional Editors Guild