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TOWARD A VISION FOR MINISTRY TO CHILDREN IN PANAMÁ

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**Introduction**

In 2004, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization issue group identified the dominant issue in children’s evangelism: “Children represent arguably the largest unreached people group and the most receptive people group in the world. Yet the Church is largely unprepared to take up the huge opportunities for mission to children.”[[1]](#footnote-1) They stress the imbalance in missional priorities when children, who make up one-third of the target population, attract less than 15 percent of mission resources.[[2]](#footnote-2) Secular psychoanalyst, Robert Coles, agrees that children’s spiritual lives have “been somewhat neglected, even shunned. … we might well learn what a great Teacher said of the spiritual life: ‘Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God.’”[[3]](#footnote-3)

## Intention

In light of the spiritual needs of children, this project will integrate biblical and theological insights, review scholarly material, and consider best practices for preparing committed Christian lay believers so they, in turn, disciple Panamanian children to reach their peers with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Local church members, called and empowered by the Holy Spirit, are well suited to provide nurturing communities where children can experience nearness to the presence of God, foster loving relationships, and encourage the imaginative creativity of children to become agents of transformation in their world.

Scope and Setting

The context for applying this project is the Spanish-speaking Assemblies of God (AG) churches in the Republic of Panamá, where I have served as a missionary to children since 1992. The General Council of the AG of Panamá has 725 official churches with an estimated 375 evangelistic campaigns, home growth groups, and daughter or affiliate churches for a total of 1,100 congregations and 1,955 credentialed ministers[[4]](#footnote-4)

For the present discussion, the term “children” will refer to the range from birth to twelve years of age. Panamanian children (up to age fifteen) compose 29 percent of Panamá’s total population of 3.5 million inhabitants.[[5]](#footnote-5) While 85 percent declare themselves Roman Catholic, religion does not insulate most Panamanian children from broken homes, where they usually end up living with their mother and a series of live-in male partners.[[6]](#footnote-6) Extended family and friends hold together the unraveling fabric of society. Children typically exhibit boisterous, gregarious personalities, common among coastal people groups. They love to play sports (mostly soccer and baseball), but some youth paddle dugout *cayuco* canoes ocean to ocean), listen to music, and spend long hours with their friends. Most children have access to the Internet, perhaps via smart phone or personal computer, but more likely at a nearby Internet café where they use social media and surf the web inexpensively. Due to the Panamá Canal, a growing service sector, strong exports (tropical fruits, precious metals, and minerals) the unemployment rate continues to drop even in a worldwide recession. The socio-economic pyramid, however, narrows sharply at the top for the wealthy few and broadens widely at the bottom for the lower classes; 29 percent of the people live below the poverty line. [[7]](#footnote-7)

For the present consideration, the term “teacher” will refer to a lay believer who ministers to children in local churches. For the most part, these individuals have no formal education as teachers. Each Panamanian citizen receives compulsory primary and secondary education from the Ministry of Education and 92 percent of the population over fifteen years of age can read and write.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the school classroom, the primary method of instruction consists of memorized repetition. According to Jorge Echazábal Contreras, Director of the Institute for Ministerial Excellence in Panamá, even university level professors merely unload information on the students.[[9]](#footnote-9) Strikingly similar to Pablo Freire’s “banking” concept of education, the procedure neglects involving the adult students in the process of developing critical thinking skills via self-teaching methodology.[[10]](#footnote-10) The rote memory technique often crosses over into the church classroom as simple reproduction of church dogma.

Ruth Steele, National Director of the Christian Education Department of the AG of Panamá for twenty-five years, estimates women make up 80 percent of the teaching corps of the church. Almost all of these teachers completed secondary school education, and a growing number of these individuals take continuing education courses at the institute or university level.[[11]](#footnote-11) What these teachers lack in pedagogical training and logical processing skills, they more than make up in spiritual fervency.

In general, Panamanian children need what all children need: provision of basic physical needs, healing and understanding for fractured families, and satisfying relationships of love and acceptance. Specifically, Panamanian children need a living and authentic relationship with Jesus Christ as opposed to a dead religious ritual. They need hope and direction to arrest the fatalistic mindset prevalent in their society and a calling that gives purpose and significance to life, no matter their socio-economic status. In addition to loving family, Panamanian children need a significant adult in their life—someone who understands the difficulties children face and can teach them how to successfully navigate through those challenges.

Panamanian teachers have needs specific to their context. As lay children’s ministers, they need affirmation of their spiritual fervor, guidance in opening up to new modes and methods of teaching, and a greater understanding of child development. Practical training for the significant contribution they make toward that development plays a crucial role in empowering teachers for ministry with children. Addressing the needs of children and teachers begins by discovering what the Word of God reveals about how God calls, uses, and empowers children.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Biblical and Theological Insights on God Calling,**

**Using, and Empowering Children**

Child characters in the Bible rarely attract the focus of biblical investigation. For instance, young David’s stories are well known, but often considered as a prelude to the real story that occurs later as an adult. Esther Menn cautions against this disparity saying, “Some of the child characters in the Bible are ignored in biblical scholarship and highlighted primarily in children’s Bibles.”[[13]](#footnote-13) God’s dealings with children inform the Church of themes for implementing effective strategies that allow Him to continue working through children as He has done throughout the Sacred Witness and human history.

God calls, empowers, and uses children as agents to accomplish His missional purpose of redemption, in both the Old and New Testaments. God selects some children who develop into well-known biblical characters, while other children God uses remain anonymous. The four child biblical characters examined below represent God’s dealings with the forty-three children or groups of children mentioned in the Bible.[[14]](#footnote-14) While one readily recognizes Samuel and John the Baptist, the little servant girl and the boy with the loaves and fish remain nameless. Nevertheless, each child knew God’s presence, lived in community, acted creatively, and served as agents of God’s mission.

## Old Testament Examples of Children God Used

*The Calling of Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1-10)*

The preparation for Samuel’s call began at the steps of the temple, near the manifest presence of the Lord in the ark.[[15]](#footnote-15) Hannah prayed to the Lord, who had closed her womb (1 Sam. 1:5-6), asking that if He gave her a son, she would, in turn, give him back to God (1 Sam. 1:11). Unbeknownst to him, Eli’s prayer that God grant her request set in motion the foretold demise of the Elide house and the initial establishment of God’s “true priest” in young Samuel (1 Sam. 2:35).[[16]](#footnote-16) Victor Hurowitz, analyzing 1 Samuel 3:17-18, considers the entire chapter as a “prophetic call narrative” (similar to Exod. 3-4; Isa. 6; Jer. 1; Ezek. 1) with the minor departure from expected literary format easily explained by the author accentuating the uniqueness in the calling of such a young child taking up the “heavy yoke of prophecy.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The text emphasizes that Samuel served God while still a child (1 Sam. 2:18, 26; 3:1). Hannah returned him to the Lord to serve in the temple with Eli (1:23-28) at about three years of age, the customary age for weaning. Samuel wore a linen ephod (2:18), used only by priests, indicating his status as a priest in training.[[18]](#footnote-18) At the age of twelve, the approximate time when Samuel received a call from God, he began fulfilling age-appropriate priestly duties. Samuel attended to the sanctuary and assisted the aging priest with failing sight.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The narrator uses light as a metaphor of hope for God’s revelation that would shine bright again in a willing vessel. The priests and people disobeyed God’s revealed Law through Moses; as a result, revelations were “universally rare.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Eli’s vision was dimmed (3:2), both physically and prophetically. The “lamp of God” (v. 3, MKJV) had not yet gone out. In the midst of Israel’s spiritual night, the Spirit of the Lord chose Israel’s next prophet leader. Samuel slept in the temple near the ark of God, the throne of the divine presence. From the holy place, God called the boy.

From childhood through adulthood, God’s presence called and empowered Samuel. After Samuel received Eli’s counsel, the Lord came as before and “stood” next to where the boy lay (1 Sam. 3:10), indicating the actual appearance of God and not merely a dream.[[21]](#footnote-21) Gill suggests “the essential Word of God, the Messiah” took on human form calling a child into His service.[[22]](#footnote-22) Samuel’s later growth and empowerment as a prophet (“let none of his words fall to the ground” v. 19, MKJV) resulted from the fact that “the presence of YHWH was with him.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The narrator concludes Samuel’s call by assuring the reader that everyone in Israel acknowledged the young man Samuel as a “true prophet of GOD” (v. 20).[[24]](#footnote-24) God confirmed it again with His presence when He revealed himself by the “Word of Jehovah” to Samuel in Shiloh (v. 21, MKJV).

Samuel’s call narrative (1 Sam. 3) indicates that God calls a person of any age based on one’s nearness to the presence of God. Presence facilitated the calling and validated the well-known ministry of the boy-turned-prophet. By contrast, an unnamed little girl exercised great faith affecting the course of one man’s life and the destiny of two nations.

*Naaman’s Wife’s Servant Girl (2 Kings 5:1-19)*

Menn examines the stories of young David and the little Israelite servant girl who find solutions to problems, intervene when adults are threatened or ineffectual, offer theological insights into God’s ways, and even enter into international conflicts. The narrative sustains the ironic contrast between the “great” and important, primarily referring to Naaman, and the “small” and insignificant, represented by the Israelite servant girl.[[25]](#footnote-25)

According to the record of 2 Kings 5:1, Naaman, an adult male and exalted military hero, was a *great* man. Through him God passed judgment on evil King Ahab (1 Kings 22:34) and delivered Israel into Syria’s hand.[[26]](#footnote-26) Consequently, his master “held him in the highest esteem”
(2 Kings 5:1). The King of Aram offered a very large recompense (v. 5) in exchange for Naaman’s healing and the petition on his behalf provoked an international conflict (v. 7). Naaman expected a grand performance from the prophet to bring healing from the leprosy (v. 11), yet all his grandeur and honor could not protect this “truly great man” (v. 1) from his incurable skin disease.

In contrast, the Israelite servant was a *little* girl. Her “wish” (2 Kings 5:3, MKJV) for her master’s healing leads to the command to bathe seven times (v. 10) with the result of his flesh becoming like that of a “little boy” (v. 14, MKJV). Elisha turned down the generous gift of gratitude, preferring “nothing” from Naaman (vs. 15-16). The little Israelite servant girl held the lowly status of a female and a slave, yet despite her diminished status, this pious little maid possessed great faith. She internalized the stories her parents told her of God’s wonders accomplished through the prophet.[[27]](#footnote-27) She practiced honesty, lending credibility to her testimony so that Naaman acted upon it immediately (v. 4) and entered it on record before the kings of two nations (vs. 4-6).

The story hinges on her childlike wish that Naaman could be “with” the prophet in Samaria. “Simple presence is what she wishes for Naaman, just as proximity and immediacy are what children want most from their parents and others whom they love and trust to make things right.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Naaman denied the young slave girl closeness to her loved ones, the very thing she wished for his healing. Raiding parties most likely murdered her parents, or at best killed her father and forced her mother into conjugal servitude.[[29]](#footnote-29) In that light, the magnitude of the little slave girl’s great faith in God and unselfish empathy for Naaman outshine any supposed greatness of the leprous hero. Menn alludes to that contrast: “Children emerge as leaders, protagonists, and witnesses in the Bible perhaps not in spite of their youth but because of it.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Naaman took back dirt from the land of the true God (2 Kings 5:17) after calling himself Elisha’s “servant” several times (vs. 15, 17, 18). In the end, God receives worship from the big commander and from the little girl, both serving as His servants on foreign soil.[[31]](#footnote-31) The heart of a child longs for proximity to the source of love, protection, and provision. The little servant girl demonstrates a child’s simple faith in nearness to God’s representative, which contributed to a miraculous healing.

 New Testament Examples of Children God Used

*John the Baptist Filled With the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:15-17)*

Similar to Samuel, John the Baptist’s infancy narrative began in the temple. Standing before the Holy of Holies, Zechariah heard the angelic promise of the miraculous birth of his son. In Luke’s eyes, John the Baptist served as “the last and greatest of the Hebrew prophets.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Lou H. Silberman suggests that the Lukan infancy narratives of John and Jesus conjoin the miraculous birth stories of Samuel and Isaac: “Samuel anticipates John; Isaac, Jesus.”[[33]](#footnote-33) God intervened very early in assigning the pivotal roles Samuel and John the Baptist played in redemptive history.

The Spirit filled John the Baptist before birth and continued using him mightily throughout his life. Several commentators emphasize that John received the fullness of the Holy Spirit before birth.[[34]](#footnote-34) This reinforces the fact that the Spirit filled his mother, Elizabeth, after the babe leaped in her womb upon hearing Mary’s greeting (Luke 1:41). “As the climax of God’s agents in Israel,” only Jesus Himself, conceived by the Spirit, exceeded John’s empowerment for the service to which God called him.[[35]](#footnote-35) The example of John the Baptist informs the Church that the Spirit fills and empowers whomever He chooses—no matter how young.

*The Boy with the Loaves and Fish (John 6:1-14)*

The miraculous feeding of the 5,000 stands as the only event of Christ’s life recounted in all four gospels (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:33-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14). The Johannine account contains two unique details: (1) Jesus sat with His disciples (John 6:3)[[36]](#footnote-36) and (2) he mentions the boy (John 6: 9).[[37]](#footnote-37) Both details enlighten the disciples and the Church regarding service in the kingdom of God. A short while later Jesus reintroduces the miracle as an object lesson encouraging His disciples to trust Him (Matt. 16:9; Mark 6:52; 8:19).

After crossing the Sea of Galilee and climbing the mountain with the multitude, Jesus sat down with His disciples, as did a rabbi. The following discourse and action, therefore, serve a didactic purpose for the disciples and the multitude. Philip, along with Andrew and Peter, originally from Bethsaida (John 1:44), knew the countryside better than the other disciples. In addition, Philip probably held the position of provider, just as Judas carried the purse. Already knowing what He would do, Jesus asks Philip where they might buy bread to feed the large crowd. John includes his own commentary that Jesus purposed “to stretch Philip’s faith” (John 6:6). Andrew, native to the region, found the “little boy” with the food. Clarke and Gill surmise that the “youngster” carried the provisions of Jesus’ companions, sold bread and fish to the crowd, or belonged to someone following Jesus.[[38]](#footnote-38) Whatever the reason, he played the role of catalyst to the miracle, providing the seed for multiplication in the Master’s hands.

That seed provision appeared from the hands of a small boy carrying five barley loaves and two small fish. Wheat and barley grow abundantly in Canaan, though people considered barley “coarse and ordinary,” “very mean fare,” and what horses, camels and poor people ate.[[39]](#footnote-39) Regarding the two small fish, the Synoptics specify “fish,” while John uses the word meaning a morsel to go along with the bread, probably indicating pickled or salted fish. Jesus took a meager, common meal and miraculously multiplied it to feed 5,000 people. The sign miracle convinced the crowd that Jesus was the Messiah, the Prophet to come (Deut. 18:15). They believed, albeit immaturely at first, simply because Jesus filled their stomachs (John 6:26).

John Howard explores how minor characters contribute to the development of the plot and purpose of the Gospel of John by outlining the chiastic structure of the six miracles that John presents as signs pointing to the seventh sign—Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension to glory. The multiplication of the loaves and fish occupy the fourth and pivotal position in the chiasm.[[40]](#footnote-40) Seen in this light, John places the miracle facilitated by an anonymous boy as the hinge unfolding his presentation of the gospel of belief. This little lad participated in the only sign recorded in all four gospels pointing to Jesus as Messiah. The biblical witness instructs the body of Christ that God uses every willing servant, in spite of menial status or limited resources.

*Jesus Cares for the Child (Mark 10:13-16)*

Accounts of people bringing their children to Jesus appear in the Synoptic gospels (Matt. 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). Roy Zuck points out that Jesus loves young children and is never too busy for them.[[41]](#footnote-41) Mark’s account, the Gospel of action, makes two distinctions in the narrative that amplify how Jesus cares for children. First, Jesus responded in great irritation at the disciples and, second, He took the children up in His arms. Albert Barnes explains that Jesus “*Was much displeased* because, first, it was a pleasure *to Him* to receive and bless little children.”[[42]](#footnote-42) On the second point, Peter Spitaler picturesquely describes the disciples as “gate keepers” denying access to the “in-door space,” nearness to the Master, that only Jesus controls.[[43]](#footnote-43) The goal of physical contact with the Teacher frame the story beginning with the parents’ reasonable request of “touch” (Mark 10:13) and culminating when Jesus takes the children in His arms and blesses them (v. 16). The frame displays a parallel structure so that Jesus’ “blessing” (v. 16) reverses the disciples’ “rebuke” (v. 13).[[44]](#footnote-44)

This account records one of the three incidents in Mark’s Gospel where Jesus became truly angry (Mark 10:14).[[45]](#footnote-45) The other two occasions of anger occurred when Jesus healed the withered hand on the Sabbath (3:5) and when He cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem (11:15-17). Jesus considered interfering with children coming to Him on a par with hardness of heart toward healing a man on the Sabbath and coldness of heart through commercializing His Father’s house.

Jesus considers the life of a child so precious He admonishes drowning (Matt. 18:6) as preferable to defiling the soul of a child.[[46]](#footnote-46) Zuck heightens the warning by explaining that the meaning of the verb “offend” includes “to despise, disregard, or treat with contempt” as if they amount to nothing.[[47]](#footnote-47) The Church runs the risk of incurring this same anger of her Lord for the omission of applying Kingdom priorities to children’s ministries. On the other hand, “Those who give attention to children and their needs are following the example set by Jesus himself!”[[48]](#footnote-48)

## Theological Examples of God’s Use of Children

Imago Dei

A clear theological understanding from the very beginning of the scriptural text establishes “children as human beings who are created in the image of God.”[[49]](#footnote-49) W. Sibley Towner’s valuable contribution considers different interpretations of *imago Dei* (Table 1) and affirms “…from a biblical perspective, children, too, are made in the image of God, thereby underscoring the full humanity and dignity of all children.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Genesis 1:26-28 supplies the principal witness of *imago Dei.*[[51]](#footnote-51) The passage portrays children as the special divine blessing for obeying God’s command, “Be fruitful, and multiply” (v. 28, MKJV).[[52]](#footnote-52)

Biblical scholar, J. Richard Middleton presents an interpretation of *imago Dei* “as the royal function or office of human beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world,” with the authorized task of sharing with God as caretakers and rulers over the creatures and resources of the earth.[[53]](#footnote-53) Two of Middleton’s points illuminate *imago Dei* relative to children. First, the author of Genesis 1 boldly takes hold of the *imago Dei* symbol; he wrests it from serving merely as a seal of approval over one divinely appointed king and instead democratizes the “ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, by applying it to all human beings, male and female.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Israel recognized that earthly representations of Pharaoh validated him as the divine representative on earth. After Israel left Egypt, God radically changed that understanding. In creation, God placed His image upon all humanity, not a chosen few or one individual. Middleton’s second point relates the royal cult worship to the social order. This interpretation of *imago Dei*, with its prohibition of graven images for worship, breaks apart not only the idolatrous practice, but also dismantles the greater priest-controlled social system that robs individuals of freedom just as it robs them of access to the true God.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Genesis 1:26-28 and the other texts cited affirm that all human beings bear God’s image from infancy to old age. If one considers the *imago Dei* as an “innate propensity toward relationship,” one can easily see that this capacity exists from the earliest awareness of relating with others until fully developed maturity.[[56]](#footnote-56) The text also affirms that flowing from right relationship with God people practice a careful stewardship, a “nurturing ‘dominion’” over all creation.[[57]](#footnote-57) Regarding the dismantling of the religious-social system barrier, Middleton grants equal access and agency with God for all image bearers, which includes children.[[58]](#footnote-58) While the present discussion of *imago Dei* considers the impact of God’s image in children, the emerging Child Theology movement advances the consideration toward God’s view of the child in Kingdom perspective.

*Child Theology: Placing “A Child in the Midst”*

Keith J. White, the founder and Chair of the Child Theology Movement, a scholar, and lifelong advocate for at-risk children, believes that Child Theology is neither a theology of childhood, nor an exploration of children’s spirituality, nor a biblical framework for children’s ministry, nor a discussion of how to nurture children.[[59]](#footnote-59) Child Theology is:

A process of theological reflection starting with the question: “What does it mean for us today to respond to the teaching and example of Jesus when He placed a little child in the midst of His disciples so that they could be encouraged to change and become lowly like little children in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?”[[60]](#footnote-60)

The Child Theology Movement begins with the discussion of a “child in the midst” from Matthew 18:1-5 and parallel passages such as Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48. Haddon Willmer collaborated with White on a previous definition that the child in the midst “is like a lens through which some aspects of God and His revelation can be seen more clearly.”[[61]](#footnote-61) Willmer called the child a “converting corrective” to the disciples in their quest for kingdom greatness because they did not expect the child to have anything to teach them.[[62]](#footnote-62) From the pedagogy of liberation perspective, Freire makes a similar argument that both teachers and students “simultaneously become knowing subjects.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

White explores the Gospel of Matthew keeping in mind the child placed by Jesus (Matt. 18:2). He calls it “foregrounding the child,” which among other things corrects commentaries that regard children in Matthew merely as background material or metaphors.[[64]](#footnote-64) A real child stood there, not a metaphor, and likely remained standing in the midst of the disciples through the parable of the Lost Sheep. Jesus declares the Father does not will that “one of these little ones” be lost (v. 14), which makes a critical difference to the interpretation of the whole of Jesus’ teaching seeing one of the selfsame “little ones” standing there.[[65]](#footnote-65) Some writers interpret Matthew 18:3-4 as referring not to little children, but to disciples who become like children. Since the child continued sitting on Jesus’ lap, a preferable reading refers to both children literally and adult followers who acknowledge helplessness and dependence.[[66]](#footnote-66) In addition, Jesus would not use any person, let alone a powerless child, as an illustration without genuine love and interest in his or her well-being.[[67]](#footnote-67) White concludes that Jesus’ action and teaching in chapter 18 provide the principle clue for understanding the entirety of Matthew’s Gospel.[[68]](#footnote-68)

This approach to Matthew’s Gospel results in three glimpses of understanding the message in a new light. First, as integral components to the Gospel narrative, children give clues to its meaning. Second, placing a child in the midst expresses a “unique sign or acted parable,” which shows a new way of understanding the cross and the kingdom of heaven. Third, Jesus, the kingdom of heaven, and the child in the midst form an important triad. Each part illuminates the other two so that to marginalize one part despises the other two, or to receive one part accepts the other two as well.[[69]](#footnote-69) White explains, “You cannot follow (and that includes welcoming and accepting) Jesus without welcoming children. You cannot reject (and that includes refusing and marginalizing) children without rejecting Jesus.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Jews believed a messenger of the king deserves the same treatment as the king himself. Shocking to His disciples, Jesus chose a child as His envoy; in other words, the disciples should receive a child in Jesus’ place.

White summarizes Jesus’ final stage of the journey and last period of teaching His disciples (Matt. 17:14-21:16) as the section of narrative where “children become a key sign of the kingdom.”[[71]](#footnote-71) This summary also provides a concise synopsis of the key elements of Child Theology.

Read in this way, Matthew 18 (in the context of the narrative so far) allows the little child to be a *recipient* of the kingdom of heaven, a *model* of what it means to enter the kingdom of heaven, a *sign* of the humility required in the kingdom of heaven, and also one who, when welcomed, becomes the *means of welcoming* Jesus.[[72]](#footnote-72) (emphasis added)

The view of the child, as placed by Jesus, creates a more open relational dynamic in the community life of the Church where adult teachers and child students both consider themselves as learners under Christ. Having considered theological and biblical contributions addressing the needs for ministry to children in Panamá, attention now turns to experts’ understanding of the relationship between the child, God, and church.

**Expert Reflections on Child-God-Church Relationship**

## Developmental Theory Observations

The scope of this project addresses children ages birth to twelve years. As an organizational device, discussion follows chronological age groupings aligned as closely as possible with the stages of major developmental theories. The examination and synthesis of multiple facets of human development lay the groundwork from which conclusions emerge for application to the ministry model. The study of ages birth to three years provides the framework for what teachers instruct parents for home application. The study of ages three to twelve years focuses on drawing out applicable truth leading to strategies that help teachers reach and disciple children in their churches and communities. The following two questions present the goal of the developmental theories investigation: (1) How do children develop in body, mind, and spirit toward a relationship with God? and (2) How do teachers (defined as lay leaders in the context of the local church) contribute toward developing that relationship?

Doris Blazer addressed two similar questions regarding early childhood development in the Kanuga Symposium on *Faith Development in Early Childhood*.[[73]](#footnote-73) James W. Fowler opened and closed the symposium, prompting Blazer’s comment, “Fowler’s theory of faith development is especially useful” for programs of early childhood development and education.[[74]](#footnote-74) After reviewing a century of research on children’s spirituality, Donald Ratcliff characterizes Fowler’s contribution as the most enduring stage theory related to religious and spiritual development (see description in Table 2).[[75]](#footnote-75) Fowler and his associates recognize and appreciate the influence of Erikson’s Ages of Man developmental stages (see comparative descriptions in Table 3) and Piaget’s early cognitive development theories on their own faith development theory.[[76]](#footnote-76)

Ana Maria Rizzuto establishes her primary thesis that all children by age six construct a God representation.[[77]](#footnote-77) She poignantly describes children’s reactions tending toward either belief or unbelief from the child’s perspective spanning four developmental stages. Daniel Stern contributes the concept of the four selves, which develop from infancy into early childhood, emergent, core, subjective, and verbal. James Loder proposes that the “study of human development is fundamentally the study of the human spirit embedded in the real stuff of a lifetime.”[[78]](#footnote-78) He further argues, “The human spirit is to humanity what the Holy Spirit is to God
(1 Cor. 2:10).”[[79]](#footnote-79) His Interdisciplinary Methodology of human development can work well with the theological understanding of the human as spirit pursuing truth in answer to the two guiding questions above.[[80]](#footnote-80)

*Birth to Eighteen Months*

Erik H. Erikson’s term, the “Infancy” period, covers from birth to eighteen months of age.[[81]](#footnote-81) It is characterizes as a period of “basic trust versus basic mistrust.”[[82]](#footnote-82) This period carries additional labels such as “Sensori-motor,” “Primal,” “Undifferentiated Faith,” “Senses Mirroring, and “Emerging Ego.”[[83]](#footnote-83)

In the first year to eighteen months, Erikson posits that as the infant safely and routinely participates in everyday rituals such as feeding, tending, cleansing, going to bed, getting up with powerful ones on whom he or she depends, trust overcomes mistrust.[[84]](#footnote-84) The baby experiences the world as a safe and trustworthy place. Fowler highlights the initial emergence of selfhood and faith through the victory of the strength of hope.[[85]](#footnote-85) In Erikson’s concept of infant basic trust, Loder sees “the human ground for faith.”[[86]](#footnote-86)

In addition to caring for their infant’s basic needs, parents enjoy spending time looking closely into their baby’s face while talking, singing, or making baby talk. During this “Primal faith” stage, the infant can learn a deep sense of trust, a relatedness to those nearby, largely through body contact (“somatic bodily sharing of meanings”) and sharing love.[[87]](#footnote-87) The stage corresponding to Fowler’s “Primal faith,” Rizzuto labels “Senses Mirroring.”[[88]](#footnote-88) One of her helpful insights, Fowler notes, describes the infant or young child’s reaction moving toward belief or unbelief, depending on his or her experience of the world. A child moving toward belief might say, “I am fed, held, nurtured. I see me on your face.” A child not receiving mirroring of the senses expresses, “I am not fed, held; I am hungry and uncared for. I cannot see me,” which leads toward unbelief.[[89]](#footnote-89)

During the second stage of core self-relatedness (between six to eight months), Daniel N. Stern highlights the phenomenon of Representations of Interactions that have been Generalized (RIGs).[[90]](#footnote-90) The most common example is the game of peek-a-boo, a social interaction converted into patterns of familiarity and expectation. This leads to the construction of “evoked companions,” a sense of self with others even when absent. [[91]](#footnote-91) The “evoked companion” concept demonstrates how the infant develops a capacity to construct a God representation, which Rizzuto amplifies. Her third thesis explains that the God representation takes form in the “transitional space” between parent and child, as a “transitional object” and an initial “transitional representation.”[[92]](#footnote-92) It symbolically assures the child of his or her parents’ security and care, which Fowler compares to “the Linus blanket.”[[93]](#footnote-93)

Loder suggests that within the ego structure, human nature contains “a cosmic loneliness that longs for a Face that will do all that the mother’s face did for the child, but now a Face that will transfigure human existence, inspire worship” and will never leave or forsake, even unto death.[[94]](#footnote-94) Jesus’ face shines the glory of God into the hearts of humble seekers (2 Cor. 4:5-6), but only through faith and by the power of God’s Spirit communicating with human spirit. On the hidden plane of spirit-to-Spirit, human development transitions upward through progressive stages. Loder employs the phrase “the secret secretes” meaning the hidden part of human nature never exists completely sealed off, so that eventually it leaks out into the open.[[95]](#footnote-95) From a nonreligious perspective, Erikson notes that being called by name and calling caregivers by name provides the primordial experience of the numinous, the transcendent.[[96]](#footnote-96) Fowler states that this experience leads to the sense of an “evoked companion that is transcendent.”[[97]](#footnote-97) With something as simple as a peek-a-boo game, an infant begins learning trust in mother and father and progresses toward trust in God.

*Eighteen to Thirty-six Months*

The “Early Childhood” period from eighteen to thirty-six months, which Erikson depicts as “Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt,” Piaget identifies as “Pre-operational” (ages two to seven). Fowler calls it “Primal” or “Undifferentiated Faith,” continuing the period begun at birth.[[98]](#footnote-98) Rizzuto describes this age as “Self-object,” while Loder labels this period as “Conformity and the Root of Human Freedom.”[[99]](#footnote-99)

Fowler sees Piaget’s preoperational knowing and thinking as particularly helpful in exploring the revolution of language as symbols representative of objects, persons, and feelings. As the power of the imagination grows, make believe and fantasy become as real to the child as everyday life.[[100]](#footnote-100) In this context of invisible playmates, roughly between two and three years of age, the earliest conscious God‐representations occur, per Rizzuto’s first thesis.[[101]](#footnote-101) White prefers describing it as not a fully developed God language, but rather images of God.[[102]](#footnote-102)

During this stage, the young child gains sufficient autonomy to win the victory over shame and doubt. Strength of personhood continues emerging, what Erikson calls “Will.”[[103]](#footnote-103) For Loder, the foundation of human freedom, a psychological sense of “I,” establishes the theological significance of this period, not Erikson’s issue of autonomy versus shame. [[104]](#footnote-104) Loder continues affirming this “is on the basis of grace, the eternal ‘yes’ of God,” not “on the basis of repression and being good.”[[105]](#footnote-105)

Stern’s clinical work on the communication between infants and parents sharing affective states yields a fruitful observation for faith development. “Affect attunement” is a complex three-step process of communicating and experiencing shared feelings.[[106]](#footnote-106) First, the parent reads the child’s affective state from outward behavior; second, the parent performs a behavior that mirrors the child’s feelings going beyond imitation of the original behavior; third, the child reads the parent’s restatement of his affective state. Fowler considers this an important contribution to the study of faith in early childhood for it indicates how the triadic structure of faith emerges as both parent and child attend to third realities. Rizzuto reflects a similar idea in the “Self-object” stage. The statement “I feel you are with me” depicts growing belief. The statements, “I cannot feel you are there for me. I despair,” characterize unbelief, as interpreted by Fowler.[[107]](#footnote-107) The reliable presence of parents and other significant adults (i.e. teachers) reassures the toddler of self-identity and nurtures developing God conceptions. Caring adults create a sense of belonging in community by connecting with the child via affective communication.

*Three to Six Years*

In the “Play Age” period, from three to six years of age, Erikson describes the crisis of “Initiative versus Guilt.”[[108]](#footnote-108) This stage continues Piaget’s “Pre-operational” (two to seven years) while beginning Fowler’s “Intuitive-projective Faith” stage.[[109]](#footnote-109) Rizzuto sees first the “Idealized” (three to four years) and later “Aggrandized Parental image” (four to five years) stages.[[110]](#footnote-110) Loder labels this stage as “Sex, Death, and the Origin of Worship.”[[111]](#footnote-111)

Themes of play, imagination, and sexual identity figure prominently in the developmental theories for this period. Loder notes that Erikson and Freud both emphasize play, in which assimilation predominates over accommodation from Piaget’s perspective. David Heller, a clinical psychologist, used play as his chosen methodology for eliciting children’s conceptions of God. He reports the themes of playfulness and gaiety figured prominently in their view of God, as four to six year-olds expressed that God “is highly related to pleasure, to fantasies, and to simple aspirations,” like skiing, drawing, and parties.[[112]](#footnote-112)

The birth of the imagination appears as the emergent strength of Fowler’s “Intuitive-projective Faith” stage. Imagination grasps the stories and powerful images of the experience-world and intuitively unifies the child’s understanding and feelings toward ultimate existence. Parents function as the child’s primary exposure to the world of relationships. Through personal experience with parents, the child progresses toward developing a belief or unbelief in transcendent reality, as Rizzuto reflects in her third and fourth stages. The “Idealized Parental image” stage reflects expressions growing toward belief as, “You are wonderful—the Almighty.” Unbelief appears as, “I thought you were omnipotent. You failed.” Rizzuto’s fourth stage, “Aggrandized Parental image,” includes expressions demonstrating a developing belief as, “You are love. You love me.” The contrasting expressions, “You do not love me. I do not count” express developing unbelief.[[113]](#footnote-113) Fowler warns that this stage contains unbridled fantasy and imitation for the child so that the stories, actions, examples, and even moods of significant adult caregivers can permanently influence the child. The visible expressions of faith carry tremendous weight upon the young impressionable imagination.

In addition to a growing imagination and playfulness, analysis of early childhood raises the topic of a child’s sexual awakening, along with theorists’ discussion of Freud on human sexuality. Both Coles and Fowler demonstrate that Rizzuto masterfully refutes Freud’s view of religion and his version of the “God representation” notion coming from a boy’s *Oedipal* struggle and castration anxiety.[[114]](#footnote-114) Loder corrects Freud’s use of *Oedipus Rex* as misguided because the context of the original setting deals with death and spirituality, not solely about sexual and familial relationships. Loder adds, “the bottom line is that sex is simply nature’s answer to death.”[[115]](#footnote-115) He links it to his original premise that spirit gives meaning to all of human existence, including sex. Sexuality represent but one aspect of the central issue of “the quest of the human spirit for being-outside-oneself,” which he later describes as the origin of worship.[[116]](#footnote-116)

In the context of the classroom, giving the preschool child’s imagination room to play within ritualized routines such as Sunday School songs and Bible stories permits the child to form God representations while constructing firm foundations for faith. Parents continue to serve as the most important contributors toward a child’s developing belief. The teachers’ role increases and serves as motivating mentors.

*Seven to Twelve Years*

The “School Age” period covers from six to twelve years of age.[[117]](#footnote-117) Erikson’s term for this stage pits “Industry versus Inferiority,” and corresponds to the “Concrete Operational” stage by Piaget.[[118]](#footnote-118) Fowler views this age as the “Mythical-literal Faith,” while Loder coins the term “Work and the Ambiguity of Achievement” to describe this age of children.[[119]](#footnote-119) In this faith development stage, Fowler explains: the child “begins to take on for him- or herself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to his or her community.”[[120]](#footnote-120) The episodic quality of the previous Intuitive-Projective faith transitions into a linear, narrative understanding of coherence and meaning (mythical), yet the concrete operational child cannot see the conceptual meaning layered within the narrative (literal). “For this stage, the meaning is both carried and ‘trapped’ in the narrative.”[[121]](#footnote-121) Thoughtful teachers deliver the message via narrative and help students unpack the meaning within, to the degree their cognitive development permits.

According to Erikson, the “whims and wishes of play” from the previous stage give way to the child learning “to win recognition by producing things.”[[122]](#footnote-122) Erikson identifies this as a most decisive stage socially because becoming industrious involves working alongside and directly with other people. Loder agrees that the main task consists of developing cognitive and social competencies, yet he qualifies Erikson’s depiction of inferiority for the theologically more accurate concept of human worth relative to work.

The motivation for work, from a theological perspective, comes from what God does in the world. “When work and worth are confused, as they are in an achievement-oriented society, achievement becomes addictive …” and obsessive.[[123]](#footnote-123) Society determines worth based on accomplishments recognized and sanctioned by the community at large. The faith community ascribes worth based on standing before God’s grace, as Luther’s personal awakening dramatically illustrates.[[124]](#footnote-124) Intrinsic worth surpasses the value of any extrinsic achievement.

During each developmental stage, significant adults have considerable potential for influencing the child’s relationship with God, for good or for ill. In defining “selfhood,” Fowler intertwines the subjective evolutionary experience of becoming a person with the external and necessary relation to other selves. He concludes, “We are indelibly social selves.”[[125]](#footnote-125) Rizzuto’s research indicates that as the child constructs his or her God-representation, the child draws upon the qualities in personal life experiences with parents or surrogates that supply analogies to a transcendent, almighty, or caring Other.[[126]](#footnote-126) Blazer rightfully focuses on “enabling and supporting the child’s primary caregivers in their role as faith educators.”[[127]](#footnote-127) Alice Honig agrees with Blazer, stating, “The roots of faith development lie in the earliest experiences of confidence in caregivers.”[[128]](#footnote-128) Closing his chapter on the development of selfhood and faith, Fowler concludes that God created people for relations of “true mutuality.”[[129]](#footnote-129)

The social development of school age children intertwines all aspects of human development. Peers and other adults outside the immediate family exert increasing influence on the child. Astute teachers recognize and harness that influence of positive peer pressure and adult role models by forming relationship-building care groups.

Adults who care about children’s faith development reflect a positive emerging trend among churches, theologians, denominational leaders, and missiologists. Strategic priority for children and children’s ministries are encouraged and increasing in the academy through the “burgeoning field of childhood studies,” in theological education and in world evangelization.[[130]](#footnote-130) This growing tendency recognizes that investment in children’s ministries yields fruitful results.

## Receptivity of Children

The receptivity of children affords a tremendous opportunity for missional activity primarily in two facets. First, they are receptive for salvation, which makes them a promising target for mission outreach efforts. Second, God chooses and uses willing vessels, which makes them effective agents of change.

Children between the ages of four and fourteen possibly form the largest people group in the world. According to Luis Bush, it “is suffering, neglected and exploited” but, at the same time, it “is without question the most receptive people group on the planet.”[[131]](#footnote-131) They represent a spiritual harvest ripe for the picking, especially considering studies that corroborate the assertion that children respond to the gospel more readily than do adults. Research indicates that between 85 percent and 60 percent of people become Christians between the age of 4 and 14.[[132]](#footnote-132) Families, churches, and children’s ministries must seize the pre-teen years as a primary window of opportunity to reach children for Christ. During these critical years between 4 and 14, children develop their frame of reference for life, especially theologically and morally.[[133]](#footnote-133)

When the Spirit of God convicts a young boy of sin and convinces him of Jesus’ unconditional love, his innate receptiveness predisposes him to respond. Then when a new Christian little girl experiences the Spirit moving upon her heart, she desires for God to use her. Time spent in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit satisfies the deep yearnings of the human spirit that humankind has attempted to fill throughout the ages.

Joyce Ann Mercer discusses five elements of experience that offer a phenomenology of children’s receptivity to transcendence. The first three elements mirror Pentecostal experience. First, a child learns about spirituality based in experience, not merely words about a phenomenon. Second, the child experiences a heightened awareness or a sense of “being in touch” with something big or ultimate. Third, the encounter with transcendence goes beyond description, defying rational cognition. “Alternative languages” (art, music, drama, and dreams) reflect the experience better than do traditional descriptions.[[134]](#footnote-134)

The similarities to Pentecost practically unpack themselves. First, a child receives power, most often in an intensely personal experience, when the Holy Spirit comes upon him or her (Acts 1:8). Second, by virtue of experiencing God’s power, the child becomes a witness in a global campaign, something bigger than she has ever known (Acts 1:8). Third, tongues comprise the Pentecostal’s alternative language (Acts 2:4), without discounting the Spirit’s creativity in using art, music, and drama for witness as well. The Spirit-filled child may personally experience the fulfillment of the prophecy that “young men will see visions” and “old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:17, MKJV). The Holy Spirit, who gave the disciples Pentecostal power to “be witnesses” to Jesus “to the end of the earth” (v. 8, MKJV), also endues children with power as His agents to change their world.

## Four to Fourteen Window: Agents of Transformation

In 1992, Bryant Myers presented to the Evangelical Foreign Mission Association (EFMA) a sobering picture of *The State of the World’s Children*, later published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research.*[[135]](#footnote-135) Myers indicates that 85 percent of people become Christians between the ages of four and fourteen.[[136]](#footnote-136) Based on Myers’ presentation to the EFMA, missiologist Dan Brewster coined the phrase “4/14 Window”[[137]](#footnote-137) to reflect a global reaction throughout denominational and independent missions agencies to the growing awareness that missional priorities exclude children.

Missiologist Luis Bush wrote a small booklet with huge impact entitled, “The 10/40 Window: Getting to the Core of the Core.”[[138]](#footnote-138) In 2010, he championed a new missional focus in the pamphlet entitled, “Raising up a New Generation from the 4/14 Window to Transform the World.”[[139]](#footnote-139) While the *10/40 Window* referenced a geographic frame, the *4/14 Window* describes a demographic frame, from age four to fourteen. Bush asserts, “In human development there is no more critical period than the decade represented by the 4/14 Window.”[[140]](#footnote-140) Not only are children the most receptive to the gospel, but from a missional standpoint “they are often the most effective agents for mission.”[[141]](#footnote-141) On behalf of the 1.2 billion children and youth in the 4/14 Window, he challenges the Church to envision raising up a generation of mobilized agents for transformation in all spheres of global society.

Bush figures as one of the latest visionary leaders promoting the idea of children at the vanguard of societal change. Cevallos recounts three motivations for William Fox, founder of Sunday School Union in 1803: (1) rescue children from corrupt parents for a rebirth of the society; (2) preach the Word of God; and (3) motivate good people to work on their behalf.[[142]](#footnote-142) Cevallos reluctantly points out that the goal of societal rebirth through holistic ministry to children has waned in past decades. Thankfully, transformation again takes the forefront with the 4/14 Window emphasis. Based on Luke 2:52, a holistic model following Jesus’ growth physically, mentally, socially and spiritually, Cevallos envisions the Church reorienting the missional focus toward forming children as “agents of transformation.”[[143]](#footnote-143) Menn highlights the fact that the events in the life of young David and the little servant girl recognize children as “agents of change” in international conflicts.

Freire’s concept of education, where students become objectified containers for teachers to fill, stifles the creative and transformative tendencies of students. His examination maintains the status quo of the oppressors over the objects of their oppression—the marginalized people who deserve integration into healthy society. According to Freire, “marginals” are not individuals living on the outside of society, but rather people who function inside the structure of society living as “beings for others” who transform the socio-political structure in order to become “beings for themselves.”[[144]](#footnote-144) While the consideration of political oppression lies beyond the scope of this paper, the principle of children becoming “beings for themselves” illustrates how the Church might best evangelize, educate, and prepare children.

Children have tremendous potential as agents-in-training to accomplish their God-given potential. Marcia J. Bunge and collaborators in *The Child in the Bible* strongly caution against reducing biblical understandings to one perspective alone. A central finding of the study concluded that children have “multifaceted views of themselves.”[[145]](#footnote-145) Children receive ministry, but they also minister to others and model behavior worthy of emulation (e.g. Samuel serving, 1 Sam. 3-4; David slaying Goliath, 1 Sam. 17; and Jesus teaching in the temple, Luke 2:40-52).[[146]](#footnote-146)

## Children’s Spirituality

Children’s spirituality takes on many different forms; subsequently, defining it results in a variety of emphases grouped around a few commonalities. From a human rights perspective, the social sciences recognize “the child’s right to spiritual development,” as “an integral component of human development and an irreducible component of human rights law.”[[147]](#footnote-147) The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognizes children’s rights to protection, provision, and participation, including freedom of religion.[[148]](#footnote-148)

Considered from either a religious or a non-religious perspective, David Hay and Rebecca Nye did a comprehensive study of children’s spirituality, which Ratcliff characterized as “ground-breaking.”[[149]](#footnote-149) It identifies the core of children’s spirituality using the “grounded theory” approach constructing from children’s own words a general picture of children’s spirituality.[[150]](#footnote-150)

They define the central category of spirituality as “relational consciousness.” “Relational” refers to the context where the child relates to him or herself, other people, things, and God or the divine. “Consciousness” refers to a heightened state of reflection, perception, and awareness.[[151]](#footnote-151) From this core, the child relates to the following categories of spiritual sensitivity: (1) Awareness-sensing, which concerns itself with the here-and-now, tuning, flow, and focusing; (2) Mystery-sensing, which deals with awe, wonder, and imagination; and (3) value-sensing, which centers on delight, despair, ultimate goodness, and meaning in life.[[152]](#footnote-152)

From an Evangelical Christian research perspective, Ratcliff and Holly Catteron Allen define children’s spirituality as “the child’s development of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, within the context of a community of believers that fosters that relationship, as well as the child’s understanding of, and response to, that relationship.”[[153]](#footnote-153) Fowler’s definition of faith, while not using the term spirituality, provides a parallel understanding: “Faith, in addition to a sense of relatedness to ultimate being or ultimate reality, includes a sense of relatedness to the world, the neighbor, the self, in light of that ultimate relatedness.”[[154]](#footnote-154)

Sofia Cavalletti’s work, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, set out to document “the child’s spiritual and religious capacities.”[[155]](#footnote-155) Working with children ages three to six in private and parochial centers of catechesis, first in Rome then later around the world, she developed four assumptions that serve as her expression of children’s spirituality. First (and most important), children experience God. Second, children’s experience of God touches the totality of their existence and occurs naturally in every culture around the world. Third, developing religious potential “… is *systemic* to human health.” Fourth, the meaningful *signs* (understood as “symbols”) of the Judeo-Christian religious language “…describe, evoke, and express the multidimensional aspects of a child’s experience of God” (emphasis added).[[156]](#footnote-156) She wraps up her observed assumptions and use of Christian symbols all within the nature of God as love. Children have an “exigence,” which she defines as a “hunger waiting to be assuaged; it is like a coiled spring ready to burst forth,” to love and be loved.[[157]](#footnote-157)

Children’s spirituality, in definition and practice, centers on relationship. The teacher who fosters and models healthy relationship with others and with God reaps a harvest of confident, spiritually mature students. Having inspected biblical, theological, and experts’ contributions, the next section will focus attention on the application of truth for a model of ministry to children in Panamá.

**Toward a Vision of Jesus Calling, Using, and**

**Empowering Panamanian Children**

## Foundational Themes

The investigation of the biblical text, scholarly material, and expert contributions yields four themes for integration into ministry to children for Panamanian AG churches: (1) nearness to God’s presence, (2) relationship in community, (3) creative imagination, and (4) agency leading to activity. After explaining each theme and discussing from which source or sources of investigation it arises, application for implementation in the ministry model ensues. Where needed, recommendations for change follow the consideration of truth applied to the current situation. Current effective strategies will remain in place if they support the development of the theme.

Roland Allen notes that before Pentecost, the apostles operated based on an intellectual theory; after Pentecost they acted under the impulse of the Spirit.[[158]](#footnote-158) In concluding the explanation of each theme, I fervently desire that the impulse of the Spirit guide the implementation of each particular missional strategy for the Panamanian children’s ministry.

A natural flow exists from theme to theme and culminates by children transitioning from objects of mission into agents in God’s mission. Experiencing God’s presence satisfies the deep human need for love and acceptance. It also leads to an openness to the call of God— as in the case of young Samuel. The Godhead exists in community and humans, also made in God’s image, naturally long for mutually affirming relationships. Children flourish in nurturing environments as their trust grows in the world of relationships surrounding them. From the foundation of this confidence, they can experiment letting their natural inquisitiveness and imagination release God’s creative energy through them. A newly created perspective on their place in the world propels them to act. Imagination parallels idealism, which fuels the motivation toward missional action. The children who belong to the church, in turn, bring new friends to church who experience nearness, relationship, imagination, and agency. Similar to mission praxis, these four themes cycle from ideological elements toward action-orientation until the process starts anew with a fresh context comprised of new children joining the group.[[159]](#footnote-159) The unchurched children receive salvation as objects of the church’s mission. The churched children mature in their faith and walk with the Lord while strengthening their sense of belonging as they serve as agents of God’s mission.

For AG churches in Panamá, children’s ministry gatherings typically take place Sunday mornings for the Sunday school hour before or after service, occasionally for children’s church concurrent with the adult service, and less frequently during the Friday evening midweek service, when children customarily sit with their families. They meet in classrooms, an unused portion of the sanctuary, or outside under a tree or patio roof, tropical weather permitting. Larger churches with sufficient resources purchase Sunday school quarterlies for teaching material, but most teachers must find or develop their own curriculum. Unfortunately, overworked, undertrained teachers often repetitiously depend on old-fashioned methods rather than availing themselves to innovative teaching techniques.[[160]](#footnote-160) Monthly teacher training seminars offer new methods, share creative resource ideas, and make available applicable teaching materials. Annual congresses present current trends in Christian education, promote annual materials for vacation Bible school, and model the use of available technology.[[161]](#footnote-161) Effective teacher preparation recognizes all mission originates with God, where student and teacher clarify the call and receive empowerment in His presence.

*Nearness to God’s Presence*

The boy Samuel served God in the temple, sleeping near the ark of God (1 Sam. 3:1, 3), a symbol of the manifest presence of God among His chosen people. God came and stood near Samuel when He called the boy (vs. 4-10). Nearness to the presence of God converts a child into a candidate for the call of God. Samuel grew from a boy to a man Israel recognized as a prophet established by God. The people ascertained that “GOD was with him” (v. 19) and God “revealed himself to Samuel in Shiloh” (v. 21, MKJV). Nearness facilitated the calling and God’s presence validated the ministry. The little servant girl expressed a faith-filled wish that leprous Naaman simply be “with” the prophet in Samaria (2 Kings 5:3). What Naaman denied her as a slave, proximity to loved ones, she unselfishly wished for him—resulting in his physical healing and religious conversion. Menn concludes that God delights in using children because of their childlikeness, not in spite of it.[[162]](#footnote-162) The heart of a child yearns for immediacy and closeness.

Meaningful times of worship spent in the presence of God grant children an opportunity for a divine encounter. Musical expression penetrates deeply into the core of the individual touching emotional and spiritual realities. Panamanian teachers already make this a priority because they themselves have experienced the life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit during times of worship when the gifts of the Spirit operated. The creative Spirit can use diverse modes of worship for children to experience His presence, such as contemplating nature, dramatizing Bible stories, interpretive movement, or meditation while listening to praise music. God has spoken to Panamanian children in similar settings, calling them into His service, and He desires to increase their number. This facet of ministry to children functions well in Panamá and should continue in the gatherings at church and elsewhere.

Most meetings for children take place at the church facilities. Changing the meeting place beyond the church building establishes a presence in the children’s neighborhood. The teacher and believing children open a home near where unreached children live and meet periodically for the purpose of experiencing God’s presence. The strategy of evangelistic cell groups successfully implements this principle. Committed church members who feel a burden for their neighbors open their homes for meetings tailored to the needs of unchurched people. Lively Spirit-led worship leads to times of prayer for needs. A salvation message from different portions of the Word of God always concludes the gathering with an invitation to follow Jesus. Children also lead these home gatherings with their peers, reflecting the theme of agency in missional activity.

Subsequent to Pentecost, the Spirit-filled people of God represent the manifest presence of God sent out into the world. The locus of encounter with God, as symbolized by the ark in the Old Testament, now inhabits the presence of Spirit-filled believers as they engage the people in their sphere of influence. As children draw near to God individually, they naturally draw nearer to one another in community.

*Relationship in Community*

Observations on relationship from human development theories illuminate how the evolution of self-concept (psychological “I”) intertwines with the social self (I-with-others), as well as the powerful influence significant adults exercise on children’s concept of God and faith development. Children discover their own identity in relation to the people and things that surround them. They discover their relationship to God, in large part, through their interactions with primary caregivers and important adults. That truth provides additional motivation for teachers to take advantage of opportunities afforded them in the classroom or during non-traditional instruction time with their young disciples.

The various understandings of children’s spirituality share a commonality that relatedness to ultimate being corresponds to a child’s relationship to self, others, and things. A child hammers out those internal definitions on the anvil of experience within the child’s spirit in social context. The local church setting provides a safe workshop environment with the spiritual tools and understanding mentors to accompany the child in the process. Learning through relationship applies to the adults as well as the children.

Jesus readily accepted children as full members in the body of Christ and, furthermore, He used them as an example from which adults may learn. Child Theology places a child in the midst, by Jesus, and encourages the teacher and child to consider themselves both as learners under Christ, which challenges the typical teacher-student roles as practiced in Panamá.[[163]](#footnote-163) Achieving the benefit of adult and child interacting together on equal footing in the context of a nurturing faith community requires a slight attitude adjustment from the adult Panamanian perspective. Bringing a child into the monthly teacher seminars could provide a hands-on illustration of how the dynamics play out by facilitating a discussion with the child sharing from his or her perspective and the lead teacher from his or her perspective. As individual teachers implement this technique, their children will foster fuller participation in the life of the local group.

In practice, this theme incorporates several expressions. Small group dynamics, either in breakout groups at church or individual homes, create the atmosphere for building kinship bonds between the children. Enjoyable activities create a sense of solidarity that each individual child forms part of a vibrant community. Having fun in a church setting also breaks the traditional stereotype of dull, boring religion. Interactions with other people who make up the Church in real life settings, outside the usual institutional church facilities, raise the child’s awareness that authentic Christian living happens everywhere, not just at church. In conjunction with such outings, teachers deepen the existing commitment to the cultural importance of family as they expand the children’s biblical understanding of the family of God.

Cavalletti contributes to this theme of community with her description of the child’s “exigence” to love and be loved.[[164]](#footnote-164) Teachers play a primary role of creating the secure atmosphere where children can give and receive love on a horizontal plane with trusted adults as they also learn to love and be loved by God on a vertical plane. Teachers in Panamá love their pupils. What they might lack in strategies, they learn from monthly seminars, which provide strategies for loving discipline plans, guidance on affirming and inclusive language, and examples of rapport-building exercises for small group dynamics. When teachers lack in spiritual guidance, they depend heavily on the direction of the Spirit moving them and their students in Pentecostal power under the impulse of the Spirit. In such a Spirit-led community, a child trusts caring adults and gains confidence, which inspires the imagination to create a vision for a hopeful future.

*Creative Imagination*

Experts in human development signal the imagination as a major contributor to a child’s growing awareness of God, especially for a younger child. Peek-a-boo, the simple game infants and toddlers enjoy playing with parents, factors into creating future God-representations. Teachers need not fully understand the complex developmental concepts of transitional space or evoked companion in order to instruct and encourage parents and care givers regarding the value of healthy playtime interaction with children. Ritualized routines, such as oft-repeated and familiar Sunday School songs, stimulate the cognitive processes of early childhood that contribute toward construction of the foundations for faith.

The growing imagination of school age children fuels the mythical element of faith development. In the same way that boys identify with a super hero and little girls with a heroine or princess, Bible characters, presented in larger than life adventures, capture their imagination and channel their energies to act out the stories and become their favorite Bible hero. Wise teachers reinforce this hero worship tendency with emulation of a hero’s character, faith, and obedience to God. Children in Coles’ interviews not only considered Jesus as a hero, but as “a children’s Savior,” and as a personal guide “…who survived childhood and later suffering, and is still very much present.”[[165]](#footnote-165) Jesus serves as a role model because children can imagine Him as a child and that comforts them. Teachers who effectively bring the sacred stories to life influence the children’s view of themselves, for the biblical figure takes on a life-identifying role for the child; this, in turn, brightens the future of a downcast child.

The healthy exercise of the child’s imagination arrests the downward spiral of despondency due to the typical fatalistic mindset prevalent in Latin society. By nature, young children exhibit optimism. They learn pessimism through life’s hardships and disappointments. Teachers who display positivity in light of adversity, who do not stiffen or turn rigid in the face of ambiguity, help children use their imagination to envision a brighter future. The eschatological hope of heaven provides weak motivation for a young child who sees the rest of his or her life as an endless eternity. A caring teacher can help the child understand that the kingdom belongs to children right now and those who become like children. A supportive teacher reminds them that Jesus energetically received little children with open arms, to the chagrin of His disciples (Matt. 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). He miraculously multiplied the donation from the lad with the loaves and fishes (Matt. 14:13-21; Mark 6:33-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14). He severely warned against placing any obstacle in the way of a little one believing in Him (Matt. 18:6; Mark 9:42; Luke 17:2). Jesus’ words and deeds offer a strong kingdom motivation made real for the present reality of Latin children.

The thrust of the present theme collides against the disappointing status quo practice of typical Panamanian teachers who make use of the same teaching methods week after week, either due to lack of initiative or lack of inspiration. The voracious imaginations of children demand a variety of teaching styles and creative methods. RDM’s *Faith in Action Series Ministry to Children* supplies one example of practical material available in Spanish that provides creative use of stories, music, object lessons, drama, games, and puppets.[[166]](#footnote-166) In addition to making materials available, monthly seminars improve teachers’ creative impact by guiding them in “local theologizing,”[[167]](#footnote-167) considering their local context as the world from the perspective of the children in their neighborhood. As fellow residents, they understand the historical situation. They serve as teachers because, when they reflect on the reading of Scriptures, the Holy Spirit propels them to engage in the context, addressing scriptural answers to the felt needs of the children around them. As local theologians (in practice), they represent an untapped potential available to children’s ministry leadership. In addition to the usual dissemination of information and instruction, annual and monthly gatherings serve as logical networking opportunities for collaboration among the teacher corps. It provides opportunity for sharing successful ideas, strategies, resources, and dialogical reflection on the situation of the children to whom they minister.

The same Creator Spirit who hovered over the waters (Gen. 1:2) gives freely to teachers needing a spark to ignite creativity and works through a child’s imagination bringing them to a fuller awareness of God. Spirit-filled Panamanian teachers love God and have access to the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:9-16) as well as to His creativity—their greatest resource. For young children, the world of fantasy and reality combine into one. In this preoperational knowing, the Holy Spirit can harness the power of biblical stories and images so that the reality of Jesus penetrates the child’s intuitive understanding and feelings toward ultimate reality. Awareness of God’s great love and plan for humankind motivates them to action.

*Agency Leading to Activity*

The four biblical narratives cited concerning children (1 Sam. 3:1-10; 2 Kings 5:1-19; Luke 1:15-17; John 6:1-14) clearly demonstrate that God’s missional activity includes using children as His agents. In the case of Samuel and John the Baptist, what God began at infancy or childhood carried forward into fruitful Spirit-directed ministry for the rest of their lives. In the case of the unnamed girl and boy, the record of any future ministry remains silent, yet the impact of the recorded incident lives on through the testimony of Scripture. All four examples serve Panamanian children as a pattern for following and trusting God as His agents of transformation.

The Spirit of prophecy that Samuel received at his calling (1 Sam. 3:1-10) is the same Holy Spirit that filled John the Baptist from his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15-17). Panamanian boys and girls may not identify with the significance of the Holy Spirit filling an unborn baby, but their teachers understand that the Spirit fills children of all ages and empowers them for a lifetime. This motivates them to pray for children to receive the baptism in the Spirit with the goal of releasing them into ministry. Beginning in childhood, Samuel operated in his calling with great power and authority; God’s presence with Samuel authenticated his ministry to the Israelites. Samuel’s example clearly demonstrates that God works through children.

In the narratives of the little servant girl (2 Kings 5:1-19) and the boy with the loaves and fish (John 6:1-14), each child served as God’s catalyst for the miracles of healing and provision. One interpretation suggests the little lad may not have offered Jesus his lunch, as often recounted in Sunday School; instead, he carried provisions for Jesus and the troupe of disciples, or sold food to the crowd. If so, Panamanian children, who can relate to this reality, readily identify with the lad. As bearers of God’s image, children can understand that they have a God-given role with God-given authority to fulfill God’s mission on earth.

Panamanian children presently serve as ministering agents of transformation inside and outside the church. Children do light work projects on church facilities. On the annual “Day of the Child,” many churches put the children’s ministry in charge of all aspects of the services by assigning children as greeters, ushers, worship leaders, preacher, and altar workers. Child evangelists preach at children’s camps and at evangelistic crusades. Evangelistic teams of children hand out tracts door-to-door, in shopping malls, and at bus stops. These commendable ministries bring in new people, encourage a high level of commitment, and create a strong sense of belonging for the child within the faith community. Adding holistic ministry and community service would introduce a minor corrective that communicates the Church’s concern for the whole person.

Considering the theme of agency from the teacher’s perspective, training seminars perform a disservice to adult teachers using pedagogical instead of more appropriate andragogical methods. Jorge Contreras Echazábal, the director of the Institute for Ministerial Excellence in Panamá, notes that all too often, teacher training sessions in the church use teaching methods better suited for children than adults.[[168]](#footnote-168) Teachers must know how to implement methodology that works well with children (pedagogy), but they themselves deserve methodology applicable for adult learners. Adult learning (andragogy) foments a high level of participation and responsibility from the adult student.[[169]](#footnote-169) Unlike the future orientation for children’s education, adults want immediate, practical application of the teaching, not simply theory. The process of learning does not center on the professor or the student, but rather on the environment, textbooks, materials (i.e. self-taught modules), and additional resources (i.e. libraries, Internet, multi-media).[[170]](#footnote-170) Teachers, empowered with the accountability for their own learning, take on the responsibility of contextualizing the message for their local body of believers, their children’s class, or small group gathering. That includes adapting the application of these four themes for the best fit to the needs of the specific context. The Holy Spirit gives insight to the teachers in the same way He enables children and young people for service.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter quoted from Joel saying, “‘I will pour out my Spirit on every kind of people: Your sons will prophesy, also your daughters; Your young men will see visions, your old men dream dreams’” (Joel 2:28-30; Acts 2:17). The Holy Spirit declares that He fills children with the power to be agents of transformation in the world.

Child Theology’s contribution highlights the agency of children taking on more leadership and dovetails with the initial signs of Pentecost. In Matthew 18, Jesus placed the child as a sign of the Kingdom. On Pentecost, signs of wind, fire and tongues accompanied the empowering by the Spirit. Panamanian children need that empowerment from the Spirit in order to operate as the visible sign of the Kingdom as indicated by Jesus. Praying and receiving the baptism in the Spirit eternally impacts the child, his or her family and friends, and fulfills God’s desire to pour out His Spirit on all children.

Nearness and presence produce love and acceptance. Feeling accepted opens the door to take the risk of entering into meaningful relationship in a loving community. Healthy mutual relationship establishes trust. Safety in a trustworthy environment removes limitations to creativity. Freeing the imagination and encouraging creativity builds confidence. Out of confidence flows the outward gaze toward the needs of other people. The responsibility of agency leads to missional activity. Children welcome new friends to join them in experiencing nearness to God and His people. In the flow of this process, children play the role of team member and the teacher serves as coach, playing the significant role of facilitator.

## Significant Role of Teachers

The traditional ministry model employed by some denominations, Bible institutes, and theological seminary often overlooks the significant role of the children’s Bible class teacher. Keith J. White proposes a fresh focus on Jesus and children by encouraging the academy to rethink the restrictive definition of “minister,” pointedly asking, “What about Sunday School teachers?”[[171]](#footnote-171) Rethinking their role properly elevates the importance of lay teachers to children, expands their access to resources, increases awareness of the validity of their ministry, and enhances ministerial preparation on their behalf. Panamanian teachers could benefit from this elevated focus; they could enjoy greater availability of training materials, sense personal validation of their ministry, and discover improved methods for communicating the gospel.

The ministry of Jesus expressed the ultimate contextualization of the gospel in language, culture, and form; in like manner, local lay believers make the best indigenous communicators for ministering within the target context of Panamanian children.[[172]](#footnote-172) They understand the cultural and historical setting; they speak the same language and idioms; they have “moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14) and share the life setting of the children with whom they minister. This cultural closeness affords them opportunities for life-changing impact on children.

As God provides the gifting, a teacher can also serve as an “Adult Guarantor” to a child or young person. By example and presence, this person (not the child’s parent), “guarantees that authentic adulthood is possible” for the child.[[173]](#footnote-173) Loder considers this concept one of Erikson’s major contributions. Theologically, he considers it a calling for the adult who inspires a child to change his or her world for Jesus and in conformity to His nature. Panamanian teachers aspire to that high calling and, under the Spirit’s guidance, they strive for that level of influence in a child’s life. With God’s help, this project will contribute to their success in achieving the goal of reaching and preparing Panamanian children to fulfill Christ’s mission.

**Conclusion**

This project addressed the opportunities and needs presented for ministry to children in Panamá. The investigation of biblical, theological, scholarly materials, and expert contributions, followed by the subsequent application of the emerging principles to the ministry model, fulfilled the intentions of the project. Through the project, teacher preparation gained a more complete understanding of the aspects of human development that play a role a child’s relationship with Jesus. Teachers now have a framework for structuring their ministry to children around four core themes designed to nurture maturity within the group and produce growth in the number of students. Implementation of this project’s strategy positions the intended target group of Panamanian children for eventual transition from objects of mission to God’s partners in mission. During the ten years that comprise the 4/14 Window, children readily respond to the salvation message. With proper subsequent motivation, children will become agents of transformation— reaching their peers and changing their world.

The truth that God called, used, and empowered children throughout the biblical record encourages and motivates the next generation of little girls and boys to follow the biblical examples. It also inspires teachers to prepare their young disciples for effectual participation in Christ’s mission. Insights from *imago Dei* and Child Theology discussion reflect that children have authority as authentic representatives of Christ to the world. The Panamanian Church has unrealized potential for release into the schools, parks, and neighborhoods of Panamá.

Reflections from experts on developmental theory and children’s spirituality emphasized the importance of relationships in the individual’s development and in knowing God or transcendent reality. Children need hospitable environments conducive for growth on the vertical plane of their awareness of and relationship with God simultaneous to the horizontal growth of their relationships with peers and influential adults. The most effective practice for living out the Christian faith occurs in the context of the body of Christ with coaching from respected mentors.

Encapsulating the four themes that emerged, experienced teachers can facilitate groups where children can experience Spirit-led encounters in the presence of God. The love of God shared in fellowship with other believers establishes mutual trust and releases the imagination of a child. Encouraging creativity builds confidence, which helps a child look beyond his or her own needs to the needs of others. The accountability of agency leads to sharing Christ with others and fulfilling their missional activity as integral members of the body of Christ.

This project’s theme of nearness to God’s presence appears first in order and in importance, recognizing all mission endeavors start with God. Unless God works through His Spirit (Zech. 4:6), all efforts fail at establishing an outpost of the Kingdom among the people of Panamá. The voice of the Spirit calls out to Panamanian children who, like young Samuel, remain close and sensitive to Him. The Spirit flows through willing servants who testify to the power of God’s anointing, like the little servant girl. The Holy Spirit seizes upon the spiritual fervor of Panamanian teachers empowering them as catalysts of change for the next generation.

Through the process of this integrative project, I gained increased appreciation for the honor and high calling of a teacher (1 Tim. 5:17) and attained a new desire to assist teachers in their valuable contribution to the advancement of God’s Kingdom. The incredible intricacy of the human creature inspires worship, as the Psalmist said, “I will praise You; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psa. 139:14, MKJV). That complexity finds its fulfillment in the surprising simplicity and all sufficiency of God’s design for relationship with Him. The human spirit seeks out the divine Spirit from which it first received breath because His provision satisfies humanity’s need. *Soli Deo gloria*.

**Appendix**

Table 1. Nine Proposals on the Table Interpreting the Image of God

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| No. | Description | Sources |
| 1 | Consisting primarily in spiritual endowments such as memory, self-awareness, rationality, intelligence, spirituality, even an immortal soul | Philo, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Friedrich Schleiermacher |
| 2 | Manifested in our ability to make moral decisions, which presupposes free will and a knowledge of good and evil | G. W. Bromiley, Michael Morrison |
| 3 | Also seen in the sometimes denigrated or “base” human emotions, especially love, qualities not shared with animals | Augustine, a view rejected by Gregory of Nyssa |
| 4 | Expressed in the unique human capacity for self-transcendence, from which in turn, beauty and the recognition of beauty emerge | Farley |
| 5 | Seen in the external appearance of human beings | Gunkel, Humbert, von Rad, Zimmerli |
| 6 | Displayed when the human being serves as God’s deputy on earth, an idea often expressed in royal ideology | Hehn , von Rad, Wildberger, W. H. Schmidt |
| 7 | Seen fully in the person of Jesus Christ and interpreted in relationship to other biblical passages, such as Colossians 1:15; cf. 2 Corinthians 4:4 |  |
| 8 | Seen primarily as the human being’s relationship to God as God’s counterpart or partner, the “thou” who is addressed by the divine “I” | Buber, Brunner, Westermann |
| 9 | Signifying “existence in confrontation” and, more particularly, the “juxtaposition and conjunction” of male and female | Karl Barth |

Source: W. Sibley Towner, “Children and the Image of God,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 309-310.

Table 2. James W. Fowler’s Model of Faith Development

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Level  | Ages  | Faith Type  | Characteristics |
| Stage 0 | 0 - 3 years | Infancy, Undifferentiated  | Deep sense of trust, relatedness through “somatic bodily sharing of meanings,” and love  |
| Stage 1  | 3 - 7 years | Intuitive- projective | Egocentric, becoming aware of time. Forming images that will affect their later life. |
| Stage 2  | 6 - 12 years | Mythical-literal  | Aware of the stories and beliefs of the local community. Use these to give sense to their experiences. |
| Stage 3  | 12 years and beyond | Synthetic-conventional  | Extending faith beyond the family and using this as a vehicle for creating a sense of identity and values. |
| Stage 4  | Early adult  | Individuative-reflective  | The sense of identity and outlook on the world are differentiated and the person develops explicit systems of meaning. |
| Stage 5  | Adult  | Conjunctive  | The person faces up to the paradoxes of experience and begins to develop universal ideas and becomes more oriented towards other people. |
| Stage 6  | Adult  | Universalizing  | The person becomes totally altruistic and they feel an integral part of an all-inclusive sense of being. This stage is rarely achieved. |

Source: James W. Fowler, “Strength for the Journey: Early Childhood Development in Selfhood and Faith,” in *Faith Development in Early Childhood*, edited by Doris A. Blazer (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1989); James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981); J. Fowler, Fowlers’ Faith Stage Theory,” ChangingMinds.org, http://changingminds.org/ explanations/learning/fowler\_stage.htm (accessed November 29, 2010).

Table 3. Erik Erikson’s Stages of Development with James W. Fowler’s Application to Faith Development for Early Childhood

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Level  | Ages  | Name  | Characteristics |
| Stage 1  | 0 - 18 months | Infancy | Ego Development Outcome: Basic trust vs. basic mistrustBasic Strength: Drive and Hope Fowler: virtue of selfhood and faith emerges, strength of hope over mistrust  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Stage 2  | 18 - 36 months | Early Childhood | Ego Development Outcome: Autonomy vs. Shame and DoubtBasic Strength: Self-control, Courage, and Will Fowler: sufficient autonomy wins victory over shame and doubt, strength of personhood emerges  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Stage 3  | 36 - 60 months | Play Age | Ego Development Outcome: Initiative vs. GuiltBasic Strength: PurposeFreedom and initiative give rise to the virtue of purpose, emergence of conscience, internalization of community norms and values  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Stage 4  | 6 - 12 years | School Age | Ego Development Outcome: Industry vs. InferiorityBasic Strength: Method and Competence |
|  |  |  |  |
| Stage 5  | 12 - 18 years | Adolescence | Ego Development Outcome: Identity vs. Role ConfusionBasic Strength: Devotion and Fidelity |
|  |  |  |  |
| Stage 6  | 18 - 35 years | Young Adulthood | Ego Development Outcome: Intimacy and Solidarity vs. IsolationBasic Strength: Affiliation and Love |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |
| Stage 7 | 35 - 55 or 65 years | Middle Adulthood | Ego Development Outcome: Generativity vs. Self-absorption or StagnationBasic Strength: Production and Care |
|  |  |  |  |
| Stage 8 | 55 or 65 - death | Late Adulthood | Ego Development Outcome: Ego Integrity vs. DespairBasic Strength: Wisdom |

Source: Adapted from J. W. Fowler, “Strength for the Journey” and Arlene F. Harder, “The Developmental Stages of Erik Erikson,” Learning Place Online.com, http://www.learningplaceonline.com/stages/organize/Erikson.htm (accessed March 7, 2012).

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