Preface to the second edition

This revised edition of *Children Finding Faith*, twelve years after the publication of the original, is written with an even greater sense of urgency than the first. Numerous reports on children, young people and the church in this period tell the same story: the Millennium generation is even more alienated from organised religion than its predecessors. One statistic makes the point: in 1979, some 960,000 ten to nineteen-year-olds attended church regularly. By 1989 this same group had become 490,000 twenty to twenty-nine-year-olds – a 49% drop. In other words, the number of children and young people actively involved in Christian churches is diminishing at an alarming rate.[1] A report published in January 2000 even spoke of the church as 'one generation from extinction'.

The church needs children's evangelism, therefore, like never before. For if it fails to engage with the generation now being born, the future is bleak. And, as the figures show, there is no time to be lost. I hope that this book may play some small part in the urgent task that lies ahead.

In the first edition, I advanced ideas which were new to many in the field of childrens' work, especially those who – like me – identify with an Evangelical theological tradition. To my surprise, these ideas caused something of a stir. What in my innocence I had supposed to be no more than an exposition of thinking I had found exciting and relevant, to others proved revolutionary – even heretical.

Now, more than a decade on, I have rewritten some of the earlier material, kept other parts intact and added several new chapters. Comparison between the two editions will reveal that I have removed discussions on the role of theology, the family, the fatherhood of God and the incarnation. This is not because I have changed my mind or have come to regard these issues as irrelevant: far from it. In an ideal

publishing world, I would retain these chapters. However, other – more pressing – questions have arisen and in the limited space available I have sought to address these rather than repeat earlier material. It remains my hope that the excised material may one day find its way (suitably revised) into a further book on ministry to children.

So what is new to this edition of *Children Finding Faith?* As before, the book divides into two parts. The first looks at how faith is born, develops and grows, using insights from faith development theorists such as John Westerhoff and James Fowler. But before this, I offer a substantial discussion of the kind of world in which children in the West are currently growing up. This is intended to make clear that youngsters, increasingly estranged from the Christian faith, do not come to the gospel as empty vessels or blank slates but as individuals who have already been exposed to a variety of influences and worldviews which have already predisposed them one way or another towards the Christian message. In other words, they are creatures shaped by the culture in which we live, and it is as such creatures that they hear and interpret the good news of Jesus Christ. To use a metaphor, it is crucial that we understand the nature of the baggage they bring with them before we seek to relieve them of it and present Christ as an alternative. This is the central message of chapter 1.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 incorporate much of what was in the 1988 edition with some important additions. In the first edition I adopted (rather more uncritically than I should) views about children and the Bible that were close to those of the educationalist Ronald Goldman. In consequence, I was more cautious about the use of miracle stories and parables than I am now. Having read Roger and Gertrude Gobbel's book *The Bible: A Children's Playground*, I am persuaded that my caution was misplaced. The reader will therefore find several passages rewritten in these chapters which present a much modified view from that of 1988.

In part, this has arisen from an increasing awareness on my part, of the role played by imagination in the genesis and development of faith. Human beings – especially children – are incredibly imaginative and creative; and it is through the exercise of imagination that we find ourselves often led into new understandings and truths. Put another way, God has revealed himself in scripture in all kinds of ways that are enriched by a prayerful use of the imagination. He has not spoken simply in propositions but in metaphors, images, stories and visions. In short, he has

spoken *imaginatively and creatively*. For those like me who were reared on the epistles of Paul and the belief that God has spoken through words rather than images, this is both liberating and revolutionary. It is not without risks – since giving the imagination free reign without theological and biblical boundaries can lead into all sorts of quicksands. But undoubtedly the risk is worth it, as I have sought to show. Chapters 2 – 4 therefore introduce new material on imagination, faith and play which I hope the reader will find useful even if he or she doesn't agree with it.

Part one is completed, as before, by a review of what it means to be a Millennium teenager. Had time and space allowed, I would have wished to allocate more time to the latest research into teenage attitudes to religion and values and although some of this is included, it is less than I would have wished. Again, a further book beckons…

Part two contains the most substantial changes. It presents a theological framework within which faith development insights should be set. Chapter 6 revisits the issues of sin and accountability and is substantially the same chapter as in the first edition.

Chapter 7 deals with the subject of conversion and faith development. Once more, evangelical readers may find this sits uncomfortably with the tradition of understanding conversion as an event rather than a process. I hope my exposition of Westerhoff and Fowler will reassure them that it is possible to see conversion as both. Moreover, by the addition of new material on James Loder's concept of 'the transforming moment', it is my intention that the role of imagination in bringing about change in a person's life may supply further insight into how God works to engender saving faith.

Chapter 8 is completely new and looks at the twin notions of believing and belonging – a distinction that has played a significant part in new thinking about evangelism in the 1990s. It argues that the traditional goals of evangelistic endeavour, bringing people to belief in Jesus, then enabling them to belong to a community of faith, should be considered in reverse: belong then believe.

Part two is then concluded with appendices which address two controversial issues: children and worship (especially Holy Communion) and children and spiritual gifts. The first of these chapters (Children, worship and Communion) is completely fresh and attempts to get behind the 'how to' questions, to theological principles. But because the problem of children in Communion has become increasingly pressing in

recent years, I have focused much of the discussion in this chapter on that issue. The arguments may therefore seem to some readers provocative and uncomfortable. I hope this will not cause them to skip over it but instead will spur them on to engage with the point of view it puts forward. It is my hope that the unusual format of the chapter may encourage this.

Finally, Appendix 2 returns to the thorny issue of children and spiritual gifts. Having read what I wrote in the original edition of *Children Finding Faith*, one theological student commented in her degree dissertation that: 'I wonder whether this is part of the typically evangelical separation of components of faith into suitable/unsuitable for children?' I'm not sure she is right about the separation of components being typically evangelical but I certainly would want to argue that there are some things inappropriate to children and that in an age which is extremely sensitive to child abuse in all its forms, subtle and unsubtle, we must strive to avoid any hint of emotional or spiritual manipulation. The suitable/unsuitable dichotomy, in my view, is not only theologically grounded but pragmatically necessary.

Looking back, I recognise that the position I have taken on a number of topics may not be shared by all readers. For that reason, some may wish to consult books mentioned in the footnotes to discover alternative views. Indeed, in this revised version of *Children Finding Faith*, as with the original, I have found myself travelling something of a journey as I have researched and written it. Whether readers agree or disagree with what I have written, my hope is that it will enlarge our vision for relevance of the gospel to the millions of children who are already members of the Millennium generation. They need the love of Christ every bit as much as the rest of us and the evangelistic task is urgent.

And finally…

There remains one further issue which underlies all that is written in the chapters that follow. It is an issue which does not readily fit into either part one or part two and I have therefore (perhaps somewhat awkwardly) placed it here. But it is of such importance that we cannot ignore it, especially in an age that is highly sensitive to the vulnerability of children. The issue is that of child protection and the use of adult power. By considering it at this point, we shall be in a better position to inform our thinking as the book proceeds.

The nature of adult power

Power is not simply something that 'happens'. It has a structure and can be analysed. To do so enables us to understand and address the issue of adult power as it relates to children. The American pastoral theologian Ray S Anderson draws our attention to five types of power:[2]

- Exploitative power
- Manipulative power
- Competitive power
- Nutritive power
- Integrative power

Child abuse in any form takes place when the first three types are at work. The adult who seeks to exercise power over, or in competition with, children in his care is misusing the relationship he has with them. In an evangelistic context, the temptation to do so (whether conscious or unconscious) is enormous. For who does not want children to come to faith in Christ? The issue is: why do we want this and how?

This is where the fourth and fifth types of power are relevant. Nutritive power is concerned with building a person up: with nourishing them in their walk with Christ and their relationships with others. It is wholly positive. If our aim is to use our power towards children in this fashion, we are not seeking to abuse but to encourage. Similarly, the goal of integrative power is to make whole: to enable someone to bring together the disparate parts of their life. Like nutritive power, it is beneficent.

But how can we safeguard against allowing these positive types of power to degenerate into abusive ones? I would suggest the following guiding principles:[3]

1. *Respect*. This is absolutely fundamental. If we truly care for children we shall accord them respect. We shall see them not as fodder for our own wishes but as individuals in their own right. We shall not regard them as means to our ends but as ends in themselves. Children (or anybody else for that matter) do not exist to satisfy us: rather, we are called to serve *them.*

2. *Autonomy*. Just as much as adults, children are individuals made in the image of God, with the gift of freedom he has bestowed. To be sure, they are still maturing but this does not invalidate the theological as well as developmental truth that adults have a responsibility to encourage children in learning to exercise their God-given freedom. This means we shall hold back from pushing them in the spiritual direction we want them to take simply because we believe we know best. We are back to the issue of respect.
3. *Self-critical discernment.* It takes wisdom to know the way in which God may be leading a child. In addition to being prayerful, the children's worker will want to seek God for the ability to discern what is appropriate at any given moment. Essential to this is the quality of openness. On one hand, we shall need to be open to God in such a way that we genuinely are ready to do whatever he wants (which may conflict with our own inclinations) and on the other to be open to hearing what the child in front of us is saying. Both kinds of openness will in turn require us to know ourselves well and to be willing to recognise when we are thinking and acting out of our own desires, whims or prejudices. In short, we have to be prepared to ask ourselves whether we have a hidden agenda we are seeking to smuggle in, and even more to admit we can be wrong.
4. *Beneficence* implies a very practical judgement: what will achieve the greatest good? How can I act to promote this child's best interests? These are the key questions. Moreover, in its negative form, it asks the question: 'how can I avoid doing harm?'. And, when faced with a situation involving children, this question is always necessary. But stated positively, the principle of beneficence points us towards acting for positive good.

Here Anderson's analysis of power becomes useful once more. For the goal of positive good will require us to ask whether any proposed action will be more likely to fall into the category of exploitative, manipulative or competitive power on one hand, or the category of nutritive or integrative power on the other. There should be no doubt that for those who work with children (as indeed with young people or adults) that nutritive and integrative power remain the only kinds that should be contemplated.

Coming to terms with the realities of power relationships is crucial, then, if we are to grasp what it means to work with children. For children

regard adults as all-powerful – a fact that gives adults enormous power over them. It is essential therefore, that as we consider how faith develops and the issues surrounding evangelism among children, we ask ourselves the hard questions about our use of power. Not to do so would be to fail those whom we seek to serve.

Notes to Preface:

1 Phil Moon, 'Church Demographics' in Leslie J Francis, William K Kay, Alan Kerby and Olaf Fogwill (eds), *Fast-moving Currents in Youth Culture*, Oxford, Lynx, 1995.
2 Ray S Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry*, Louisville, Kentucky, John Knox Press, 1997, pp151–2.
3 These principles are based on standard codes of practice for pastoral counselling, designed to protect those seeking professional help at a time of emotional disturbance. They are also applicable to those who work with children in any kind of ministry. See Association of Christian Counsellors, *Code of Ethics*. Also, Tim Bond, *Standards and Ethics for Counselling in Action*, London, Sage Publications 1995.