

Children and the Kingdom of God

*A Listening Exercise initiated by
World Vision International and Viva Network*





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Introduction

The Children need to appreciate the deep mysteries of their faith to have a continuing relationship with God. Their awareness and understanding of God's rule and his Kingdom can ignite their desire to actively advocate for improved living for themselves, their families and their communities. For this purpose, World Vision International and Viva Network conducted a Listening Exercise on children's understanding of the Kingdom of God. Six countries (Armenia, Burundi, Mongolia, Philippines, Tanzania, and Thailand) with 36 facilitators and assistants conducted this exercise. The participants comprised 82 boys and 111 girls (193) ages eight to 18 years in faith-based humanitarian aid. Project mapping described these children as "most vulnerable." They experienced war, forced migration, extreme poverty, and displacement. Data gleaning was through art-based research, photovoice, picture card activity, and focus group discussion on three Kingdom parables.¹ The central question was: "What is the Kingdom of God to children?" Four sub-questions directed the data analysis:

- a) What are the children's perceptions of the Kingdom of God?
- b) How does a "Kingdom of God" function in a community?
- c) What can children do to build the Kingdom of God?
- d) How can adults help children to be Kingdom builders?

The transcribed and collated data, which are the children's narratives, are not just a collection of stories. They are a powerful tool for the children to 'make sense of life and experience' (Sensing 2011, 163). These narratives, rich with multilayers of meaning, connect the children with God, his kingship, faith, human relationships, the church, and good and evil and help position their suffering and challenges in a bigger picture of life. The children's lived experiences are the frames for childhood hermeneutics – their interpretation of God at work in the world. By delving into the children's imagination, language, culture, and context and respecting the uniqueness of childhood, we can identify emerging themes and motifs to construct a valid and reliable interpretation of the God they believe in and the world He seeks to recreate.

² See the Facilitator Guide for further explanation of the methodology.

A Working Definition of the Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God (Baseleia tou Theou) theme is essential to understanding the Christian faith. The exact term is not found in the Old Testament. An equivalent would be Yahweh's reign over the nation of Israel. The Sinai Covenant sealed Yahweh's sovereignty over the people, calling them to a particular way of living and worship. God protected and provided for them and promised to restore the nation. The people anticipated a Messiah who would "realise the ideals of Israel's kingship" (Beasley-Murray 1988, 17). The momentum builds up in the New Testament with John the Baptist announcing that "the Kingdom of God is near" (Matt. 3:2). Jesus demonstrated signs and wonders and proclaimed that "the Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21)². While we are careful not to transpose the New Testament meaning of the Kingdom of God to the Old, we can safely say, "the Kingdom of God may be regarded as a comprehensive Old Testament scheme, and the teaching of Jesus as a genuine and natural development of it" (Patrick 1987,67).

Theologian NT Wright defines the Kingdom of God as God's sovereign rule over the earth as creator and king (Wright, 2015, 2022). Wright posits that God does not take us to heaven but takes control of the earth, reclaiming and restoring His creation -- spiritual and earthly (theo-political), affecting social, religious, and political powers and the economy. Jurgen Motlmann (2003,3) maintained a view based on Trinitarian theology that God is actively working to restore his creation. The restoration is a journey from the Fall to the renewal of God's creation. Tim Keller, theologian and pastor, said, "God's Kingdom is "present in its beginnings, but still future in its fullness. This guards us from an under-realized eschatology (expecting no change now) and an over-realized eschatology (expecting all change now). In this stage, we embrace the reality that while we are not yet what we will be, we are also no longer what we used to be."³

The "Kingdom of God" concept is difficult for children to understand. Therefore, it was clarified using two key terms: "God as king or leader" and "kingdom." The facilitators affirmed that eight of the nine groups of children⁴ could understand the explanation below.

Good kings and queens love their people and work hard for their well-being. They know their people's needs, take time to listen, and keep them safe from danger. In olden times, kings and queens went to war and fought against enemies to protect their country. The

² The Gospel writers used the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven interchangeably.

³ Quote by Tim Keller: "[God's Kingdom is "present in its beginnings, bu..."](https://www.goodreads.com/quote/tim-keller/Gods-Kingdom-is-present-in-its-beginnings-but-still-future-in-its-fullness) ([goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/quote/tim-keller/Gods-Kingdom-is-present-in-its-beginnings-but-still-future-in-its-fullness))

⁴ The groups are from Vardeni & Kapan (Armenia), Ntunda & Itaba (Burundi), Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia), Pangasinan (Philippines), Myubuni & Dumbachand (Tanzania), Kanchanaburi (Thailand). The facilitators from Thailand shared that the child participants had difficulties understanding the concept of "God's Kingdom" and "God as king." Most likely, the reason could be cultural.

kings and queens celebrated with the people at festivals and special occasions. The place where the king rules is called his kingdom. The Bible tells us that Christians also have a kingdom. It is called the “Kingdom of God.” This kingdom is not a country on the map. It is anywhere that God is made the king or the leader. It could be in the home, school, or community. The Kingdom of God can be in you and me if we let God be our leader. (Facilitator’s Guide, 2024)

Perceptions of the Kingdom of God

In the art-based activity, the facilitator asked the children: “What would it look like when God is the king or leader of your village?” In the photovoice, the children were instructed to capture a representation of the Kingdom of God. Similarly, the picture card activity required the children to choose a picture that depicts the Kingdom of God. The children worked on their activities, and like serious theologians, their perceptions are diverse, with differing opinions. Three views are evident from the data coding: a) the Kingdom of God is here, b) the Kingdom of God is not yet, and c) the Kingdom of God is between times.

a) The Kingdom of God is “here.”

The first perception is that the Kingdom of God is here. Drawings from children of Burundi and Tanzania vividly depicted God’s presence in their communities. “God as king” is not a passive idea. He is visible and establishes His kingship through providence, protection, and promises for the present and future. In the Kingdom of God, there is hope and assurance of His faithfulness. The abundance of food (whether shared or harvested), peace, safety, and right relationships are signs that divine presence is in control. When God is the king of a community, his sovereignty impacts the actions and attitudes of all its citizens. “Righteous people” (meaning not found in the data, but presumably, these people are believers) reach out to those in need, sinners repent, and people go to church as a norm. Nature performs at its best. Trees bear fruits, flowers bloom, skies are blue, and rain comes at the right time to water the earth. The children’s answers show no dichotomy between the sacred and the ordinary; life on earth is Kingdom life. The children’s simple faith in taking God at face value could be the reason for this perspective. Daily chores, human relationships, schooling, appreciation of nature (mountains, flowers, fruit trees), tending to cattle and chickens, gardening, feasting, and child-play integrate with church life, faith values, prayer, preaching, bible reading and teaching, and worship of God. Children from Burundi and Tanzania provided 72% of the ABR submissions that showed their communities flourishing because the Kingdom of God is here (Luke 17:21). Several Burundi children added African drums to their pictures and mentioned people dancing, indicating that the Kingdom of God is culturally appropriate.

b) The Kingdom is “not yet.”

A second perception is that the Kingdom of God is not yet (eschatological). The Thai children in this research generally hold this view. They are Karen migrants from the border villages between Thailand and Myanmar. The children are from Christian families but encouraging them to think of God's kingship in their village is challenging. Their environment is predominantly Buddhist, and socio-political practices and cultural folklore strongly impacted their worldviews. Glimpses of the children's understanding of the Kingdom of God mostly came from the picture card activity. The facilitator laid out 100 picture cards for viewing, and the children had to choose one card that best represented their idea of the Kingdom of God. All 16 children opined that the Kingdom of God is a spiritual place (heaven) where believers go in the afterlife. It is a pure and beautiful place without sin and shines like gold. People can follow a walking path to the Kingdom or get there by boat.⁵ The children maintained that only people who believe in God and live morally good lives can enter the Kingdom, and that is when they die. Until such time, the Kingdom of God is a spiritual construct beyond their reach. Another possible reason for an eschatological kingdom could be the imposed Thai law of *lèse-majesté*, which states that disrespect for the reigning local king is punishable. For this reason, discretion is needed when discussing this topic. Therefore, an earthly concept of the Kingdom of God is absent and not a priority for this group of children. The concern is to live morally good lives for the present.

c) The Kingdom is “between times.”

A third perception is that the Kingdom of God is between times. Children from Armenia, the Philippines, and Mongolia mostly hold this view. Living between times means that Jesus' death and resurrection have accomplished salvation, but the fullness has yet to be experienced (Duguid 2016). It was apparent that the Armenian children longed for home, as presented by their drawings of Artsakh, Mount Ararat, the gravestones of their grandparents, and the scenic mountains. Three children added military tanks to their drawings to show they had not forgotten their traumatic experiences. However, there is also an element of hope. The drawings and photographs of flowers blooming in spring, peaceful skies, doves carrying envelopes with hearts, and peaceful scenery represent a better tomorrow. The children seemed aware of this paradox of God's promises of well-being and the reality of a harsh life. There will be suffering and pain between times, and they must live faithfully and depend on God to see them through until Christ comes back in all His glory. This perspective is not new to the Armenian children. War, politics, social instability, and poverty forced them out of their homeland. These children are displaced and living in

⁵ This description is similar to the Grand Palace in Bangkok. Transportation by boat is common in Thailand.

transition; they would know what it means to be living between times. Filipino children look to God for coping mechanisms to manoeuvre life challenges as they live between times.

Their photovoice shows they focused more on God's character to see them through. God is love, light, peace, strength, justice, freedom, the Way, and the provider. Relying on God's qualities, the children could see themselves empowered to rise above their circumstances because God is the reference point. Finally, drawings and photovoice data from the Mongolian children imply that normalcy of life continues between times. The children seem content and happy with their lives, and the benefits of the Kingdom of God are incentives.



Functioning in the Kingdom of God

Understanding functioning in the Kingdom involves identifying what God is doing in the community, what the children expect God to do as the king of their community, and whether living in a God-led community would make a difference to them. A strong theme that emerged from the data coding is that the landscape of the Kingdom of God vividly describes a community enjoying the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs).⁶ As the children talked about their villages, they unknowingly crafted a community with 11 of the 17 SDGs present. This finding confirms that when God is the king of a community, there is community transformation for the benefit of its inhabitants. For example, poverty (G1) and hunger (G2) are the Burundi and Tanzania children's concerns, but there is hope when God is king. The children cited several examples -- "One has been hungry, and another fed him." "A hungry person whom his friend is feeding..." "A child was eating because he was hungry, and ... people were sharing food." "Someone fed the hungry man." "The child is feeding another hungry child." "Siblings were sharing food." "There are the rich and poor, but the rich reach out to help the poor." "The princess has rice and beans to eat." "Those with food gave to those without." and "Children have the heart to feed people experiencing poverty." An interesting finding is that no child listed supernatural acts of God as the solution to solving hunger and poverty in the community. Instead, human sharing and caring brought restoration. The people who love God reached out to bring well-being to those in need. This finding concretely affirms the role of faith-based humanitarian aid as a missional response to usher in God's Kingdom.

Further, the communities where God is king are orderly and sustainable. There are houses, buildings, schools, and cars, and people have homes (G11). Order and harmony are evident in social relationships. People are happy, and they laugh (G3). They uphold peace and justice in their behaviour (G16). One child told the story of a thief who was caught and forgiven. Another story was of someone getting beaten, and the peacemakers (God's people) came to stop the fight. Within the households, children are respectful of their elders. The climate is favourable to the people (G13). Tanzania and Burundi children mentioned they have good harvests, rain in season, and abundant fruit trees. The Kingdom of God has beautiful mountains and nature, and blooming flowers, trees, birds, and insects are indicators of creation care (G15). Decent work and economic growth (G8) were not evident, but children were described as playing with friends, at home, walking, or attending church. There was no description of children working. Two mentions from Burundi were of children carrying water to the house, indicating that the homes do not have pipe-in water. Presumably, the children were drawing water from a common well or water pump (G6). Approximately 80% of the ABR participants drew a church as part of community life, indicating that the church is a significant partner (G17) in implementing, mobilising, and sustaining wellness in a God-led community.

6 The United Nations SDGs outline a pathway to eradicating poverty, safeguarding the environment, and ensuring universal peace and prosperity among nations.

The children's feedback implied that their communities are better than those who do not embrace God as king. They believe God will intervene with His plans for their welfare and give them a brighter future (Jer. 29:11). When God is the king of a community, He restores people and the environment to their original status (God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good; c/f Gen.1:31). While their actual experiences may not fully match their imagination of a community where God is king, an understanding of the children's "selective construct" can better help faith-based humanitarian aid develop and implement strategies that build hope in the children.

Children as Kingdom Builders

In the context of this research, the term "kingdom builders" refers to children ages 8 to 18 years who are conscious of a relationship with the Christian God and desire to make Him king or leader of their community and in their lives. Despite living in difficult or fragile circumstances, these children demonstrate remarkable resilience. They face physiological and psychological challenges. The focus group discussion on the Kingdom parables allows us to peek into their inner world and understand how they cope with life situations. Of the three parables told, the children mostly connected with the Mustard Seed. The younger children (8-12 years) had a more dependent attitude and saw themselves as small and powerless, with no self-initiated capacity for growth. They need adults to help them.

A child added that perhaps the tiny seed feels insecure because it was abandoned. Some children described the tiny seed as insignificant compared to a bigger seed. The older children (13-18 years) were more self-assured. They viewed being small as unique because God planned to make children small so they could have growth potential. This group likened the mustard seed to their faith. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed because it starts small in the children but will grow significantly. They opined that people with weak or new faith would have more challenges in life. Patience and persistence are needed to grow their faith in God. A child mentioned that the mustard seed must die before developing into a big tree (no further comment was given). The children could not explain the growth of the mustard seed; it remains a mystery. Likewise, their faith is a mystery and something to hope in God.

In the drawings, the children depicted themselves playing, dancing, eating, chatting with friends, acting kindly, feeding the poor, sharing food, obeying their parents, aligning with the "king" to help people in poverty, preaching the Gospel, reading the Bible, counselling people in distress, and reconciling with those who had wronged them. The children did not show themselves performing extraordinary actions outside the norm of childhood. They were doing what they would typically do as children. The above finding implies that children's significance and role in the Kingdom of God are rooted in their self-understanding. They did not see themselves as superheroes trying to save their

communities. Their feedback reminds us that Kingdom life is about being before doing. They are the children in our midst (Matt. 18:2-4) whom Jesus placed as models of faith and life. Jesus taught that it is not what children can do that will earn them a passage to God's Kingdom. Children are citizens of God's Kingdom by His invitation. They actively participate in kingdom-building by functioning as children.

However, the children listed several needs to facilitate their growth as Kingdom builders. The needs include care, nurture, education, good advice, guidance, discipleship, and Bible teaching. While these answers may seem normative, they are the children's professed needs and crucial to understanding valid intervention. To grow as Kingdom builders, children need:

... a safe and stable spaces for development. The data show that the home, church, and school are the preferred institutions.

... food, clean water, and health care for their physiological well-being. This finding is gleaned from interpreting the children's description of the Kingdom of God.

... to be literate. The data indicated that the children desire to read the Bible (literacy) and attend schooling (knowledge).

... coping skills to manoeuvre life challenges and to decide and act wisely, especially when living between times.

... to know God's Word and be directed by godly values since the children are building God's Kingdom

The above five essentials are the children's "hierarchy of needs" for successful development as Kingdom builders.



Facilitating Children to be Kingdom Builders

Among the data submitted to the researcher were photos of a priest guiding the children through the Listening Exercise. The children happily engaged in the activity as the priest explained the concept of the Kingdom of God to the children. He cited several examples to help them understand the idea and blessed the children before they started. The priest in his cassock made a difference to the ambience. His presence mediated a religious tone and is a visible comfort to this group of children recovering from forced displacement. Another photo shows leaders from a local faith partner church training to be facilitators of the Listening Exercise. This team attended the orientation and took the time to role-play before implementation. The other teams were also committed in various ways to listen to the children meaningfully. These examples affirmed that adult involvement is crucial to helping children understand their faith in God. If children are to be Kingdom builders, adults must invest in them.

Facilitating children to be Kingdom builders is a long-term commitment to Christian care and nurture involving the five essentials. An emerging thought from the five essentials for growing Kingdom builders is that while Kingdom building is a spiritual calling, four of the five needs (essentials) are physiological. This finding could imply that spiritual ministry to children living under challenging circumstances must begin with physiological provisions. A recommendation of this report is to develop further these initiatives for Christian discipleship of children in faith-based humanitarian aid:

Initiative 1: Provide for the physiological needs of children

Children need shelter, safety, nutrition, medical care, and education for their development. These are the basics for nurturing children towards physical health and mental wellbeing.

Initiative 2: Help children acquire a vision for Kingdom building

Children are like Mustard Seeds: small but power-packed. All children have the potential to grow and be a blessing to their families and communities. The church has a role in teaching and raising their consciousness.

Initiative 3: Build hope in a loving and faithful God

Children's dependence and hope in a loving and faithful God build resilience, which enables them to thrive. Resilience is primarily nurtured through relational bonds. It does take a village to raise a Kingdom builder!

Initiative 4: Invite the children to be co-partners in God's mission

Children are the emerging force to usher in God's sovereign rule and to share in His work of transforming people and communities. As Jesus invited the children into the Kingdom, the faith communities must likewise include them as mission partners.

Summary

Among the data submitted to the researcher were photos of a priest guiding the children through the Listening Exercise. The children happily engaged in the activity as the priest explained the concept of the Kingdom of God to the children. He cited several examples to help them understand the idea and blessed the children before they started. The priest in his cassock made a difference to the ambience. His presence mediated a religious tone and is a visible comfort to this group of children recovering from forced displacement. Another photo shows leaders from a local faith partner church training to be facilitators of the Listening Exercise. This team attended the orientation and took the time to role-play before implementation. The other teams were also committed in various ways to listen to the children meaningfully. These examples affirmed that adult involvement is crucial to helping children understand their faith in God. If children are to be Kingdom builders, adults must invest in them.

This Listening Exercise focuses on understanding the children's perceptions of the Kingdom of God and how they advocate for themselves, their families, and their communities. The activities were conducted in the children's mother tongue, and the children's feedback was translated into English. The highlight for the children was telling their stories through different activities. The most challenging part of the exercise was the focus group discussion on the parables. Findings from the data analysis answered the four sub-questions:

a) What are the children's perceptions of the Kingdom of God?

The children held three views of the Kingdom of God: here (present), not yet (eschatological), and between times. These views influenced their worldviews and participation in community life. Drawings of drums and people in traditional clothing show that faith values and cultural norms direct expressions of Kingdom life.

b) How does a "Kingdom of God" function in a community?

The children's description of the Kingdom of God reflects a community functioning with 11 of the 17 SDGs to support human flourishing. When God is sovereign, there is order in nature and the environment. People experience positive relationships, and the climate blesses the people with good harvests.

c) What can children do to build the Kingdom of God?

While not explicitly describing themselves as "Kingdom builders," the children demonstrated attributes and behaviours aligned with this role. They are conscious of their self-worth and shortcomings. With God as king of their community, they hope He will help them overcome their limitations.

d) How can adults help children to be Kingdom builders?

Facilitating children to be Kingdom builders is a long-term commitment to Christian care and nurture involving the five essentials. These five essentials can be further developed into initiatives for Christian discipleship of children in faith-based humanitarian aid.

Understanding how children think of God and his kingship in the community and how they see themselves as significant players can help faith-based humanitarian aid develop advocacy strategies to help children realise their calling as Kingdom builders.



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"Voices of the Children" (2024)

Readers can access the children's drawings, photos, and picture cards on YouTube by clicking on <https://youtu.be/bLuO4H3lpxo>



