

***The Church and Children:
Vision and Goals for the
Twenty-First Century***

Study Guide

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Study Guide

Welcome to this study on the National Council of Churches, USA statement, **The Church and Children: Vision and Goals for the 21st Century** (adopted November 11, 2004). The NCCC Committee on Justice for Children and their Families thanks you for your willingness to engage members of your congregation in this study. We thank the participants for their willingness to walk this journey with us in responding to our theological imperative (“Created in the image of God, children are a gift of the whole humanity.”) and biblical mandate (“The witness and authority of the Bible provide a mandate for our work with and for children.”). It is our hope and prayer that you will be moved to action on behalf of children and their families. We encourage you to commit to being an advocate in your community, in the nation and throughout the world, because children are suffering everywhere. We can make a difference!

May God bless you in your future endeavors on behalf of children.

Josselyn Bennett
Chair, Committee on Justice For Children and Their Families

Preparation

- In advance of the study, visit the website of the National Council of Churches, U.S.A. at www.ncccusa.org/pdfs/churchandchildren.pdf and download the policy statement. Make copies for all participants.
- If you know the participants are not familiar with the work of the National Council of Churches, also read over the information about the organization's work and be prepared to share a little about its member communions, commissions, and initiatives.
- Involving children in this study session is a natural opportunity to incorporate their perspective. Note the suggestions for alternative questions and activities for children in the study.
- Visit the website of the Children's Defense Fund at www.childrensdefense.org. Click on the menu bar "data" then scroll down and click on "Each Day in America". Print the statistics and information listed. You can also click on "State Data" to get specific information about the status of children in your state. Make posters with some of the facts to display in your meeting space.
- Set up a worship table with a white pillar candle, the Bible, and some objects that represent how your communion expresses its covenant responsibility for children. For example, if your congregation practices infant baptism, you might include a glass bowl of water. Also include objects that represent the Lord's Supper or eucharist.
- The study session suggests dividing into small groups for some activities. If your group is small, assign pairs of participants to group tasks, or consolidate some groups.
- On separate sheets of newsprint, print the goal category heads from the policy statement (faith communities; family education; safety; arts, recreation, and culture; economic security; health). Post these sheets of newsprint around the meeting space. Gather seven each of red, green and blue markers.
- On newsprint, a chalk or dry erase board, print the following open-ended statement:
 - What I hope for most for children is
 - What I fear most concerning children is. . .Collect index cards and pencils for the opening activity and for the Act of Commitment.
- Make copies of "A Litany of Commitment" (p. 9) for each participant. Ask for volunteers to read the seven readers' parts.
- Set aside some time to pray for the participants in the group and for yourself as their leader. Ask God to help you to discern how to open the hearts and minds of those in the group to the needs and gifts of children.

Study Session

(This suggested study plan is for a ninety-minute session.)

This one-session study is designed to help congregations:

- **Become familiar with the policy statement on the well-being of children adopted by the National Council of Churches, USA;**
- **Explore the implications for ministry suggested by the policy statement's vision and goal statements;**
- **Formulate action plans to implement the goals on behalf of children.**

Opening (15 minutes)

As participants arrive, have available information about mission, education, worship and service opportunities your church offers to minister with and for children. Invite those who arrive first to browse through the information. Also ask each person to reflect on the posted open-ended statements and jot down responses on an index card. When most participants have arrived, invite them to gather together around the worship table.

1. Pray together.

Loving God, we know there are big problems facing children and families—too little food and too much hunger. Not enough love and too much violence. Too little family time and too much despair. Too little money and too many bills. Too many illnesses and not enough health care.

We confess that there are times we want to turn away from the problems or pretend they don't exist. We say they are someone's else's concern or someone else's fault. We fear that we can't make a difference. We fear that making a difference will change our lives in ways we won't like. We want to give up—to give up on others, give up on ourselves.

Forgive us for our faintheartedness—for failing to love others as you would have us, for failing to believe in ourselves as you do. Remind us that you never give up on others and you never give up on us. Amen.

-Shannon Daley Harris. As published in *Congregations Stand for Healthy Children: Bringing Hope and Healing*. National Observance of Children's Sabbaths Manual 2006, vol. 15. Children's Defense Fund.

Point out the objects you placed on the worship table and say that these things are meant to remind us that we have a covenant responsibility for children.

2. Examine Hopes and Fears.

Ask each participant to take turns sharing his or her name and the responses made to the open-ended statements. Record their responses on separate sheets of newsprint. Say that the policy statement adopted by the National Council of Churches in November 2004 represents one opportunity to make real the hopes we have for all children and to address those factors in our culture that we fear are damaging to their potential development.

Allow time for participants to read the introduction to the policy statement (lines 5-34).

Read aloud the excerpt from the Preamble to the NCC Constitution (lines 8-14). Point out that while many denominations have statements on children and the NCC itself has policies and programs that address many of the specific issues that relate to children, this policy is the first comprehensive statement on children to be made by the National Council. It represents the collective voice of the member denominations and presents a call to minister holistically with and to children.

Exploring (30 minutes)

3. Engage in Bible Study.

A. Study Old Testament Scriptures.

Divide the group into small groups and assign one of the following scripture passages to each group:

- Genesis 17: 1-8; 21: 1-7 (God's promise to Abraham and Sarah)
- Exodus 2: 1-10 (God saves the infant Moses)
- 1 Samuel 3: 1-4: 1 (The call of Samuel)
- 1 Samuel 17 (David and Goliath)
- Esther 4 (Esther answers the call to help the Jews)
- Jeremiah 1: 4-10 (The call of Jeremiah)

Ask each group to read the assigned scripture and be prepared to respond to the following:

-What role does the child or young person play in this scripture?

**If children are a part of the group, ask the following:*

-What does each young person or child do in these stories? Do you think children can do more things than adults think they can?

When groups have had time to read and discuss, ask each group to report to the total group. Point out for the group that many scholars and practitioners are presently urging a new perspective on childhood and children. This new interdisciplinary approach, presented in the book *Rethinking Childhood* (edited by Peter Pufall and Richard P. Unsworth. New

Brunswick, New Jersey Rutgers University Press, 2004), puts emphasis on two central ideas:

- *Voice*, a cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own; and
- *Agency*, the fact that children are much more self-determining actors than is generally thought.

Voice is the vehicle children use to express agency in their own lives.

Ask participants to respond to the following:

- **Where do you see voice and agency coming through in these stories from scripture?**
- **How have you experienced or noted children expressing the desire to act on their own behalf? In what ways does your congregation encourage children to participate in the life of the church and in the life of faith?**

**If children are a part of your group, ask the following:*

- ***What do you do at your church? What would you like to do? Are there jobs or responsibilities in the church that adults do that you think children could do too?***

B. Explore the Story of Jesus and the Children.

Ask for volunteers to read aloud the following:

- Mark 9:33-37; 43
- Mark 10: 13-16

Invite participants to silently read lines 68-80 (Biblical Mandate).

ASK:

- **What does it mean that children point the way to God's realm?**
- **What would it mean to make children fully welcome in our families? Our communities? Our churches? What would governmental policies and structures that fully welcome children look like?**

**If children are a part of your group, ask the following:*

- ***How do you think children can help adults understand how God wants us to live and treat each other?***
- ***What would you like to tell adults about how you'd like children to be included at home, at school, in church, in your community, in the world?***

4. Focus on Context.

A. Every Day in . . .

Allow participants a few minutes to read over the information under “Contemporary Context” (lines 82-144). Call their attention to the posters you displayed giving updated statistics about children (either nationally or in your own state). **ASK:**

- **What particularly strikes you about the status of children? What seems most urgent?**

**If children are a part of your group, ask the following:*

- ***When you read these facts about children’s lives, which problems do you think are the most important to take care of/ Why?***

B. Discuss Connected Communities.

Share some of the following information with participants:

While we have traditionally referred to the children behind such statistics as “children at risk”, a landmark report by the Commission on Children at Risk makes the case that overall, the mental and behavioral health of all children in the United States is deteriorating. In the face of rising affluence, growing numbers of children and youth are falling victim to mental illness and emotional and behavioral problems. Suicide rates, attention deficit, depression, and conduct disorders afflict a growing number of the young.

Children from relatively affluent families are not immune. Even those whose families benefit from the products and services globalization has brought suffer dehumanizing effects. Children and youth are now at the center of a consumer economy, with even the youngest children targeted as a marketing niche.

The Commission’s report, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2003) presents scientific evidence that the human child’s brain is actually “hardwired” for both a deep connectedness to other people and to moral and spiritual meaning. What our children need are communities that put the needs of children and youth first: warm, nurturing, intergenerational communities with clear limits and a strong spiritual base. The Commission’s report calls these authoritative communities, but The Mothers’ Council Task Force on the Needs of Children suggests the term “connected communities” better describes these communities.

Invite the group to discuss the effects of contemporary culture. **ASK:**

- **What issues and situations seem to most adversely affect our children?**

- **In your view, how is our church functioning well as a connected community—one that puts the needs of children and youth first? Where does our ministry with and to children and families need strengthening?**

**If children are a part of your group, ask the following:*

- ***What are some things in your life—at home, in church, or at school—that you think are bad for children your age?***
- ***Do you think your church is helpful to you in dealing with difficult or scary things in your life? How could it be more helpful?***
- ***What do you think you and other children could do to help make the lives of other children better?***

Responding (30 minutes)

5. Examine Goals.

A. Work in Small Groups.

Divide into seven small groups or pairs of participants and assign each group/pair to one of the goal categories. Give each group or pair a red, blue and green marker. Ask that participants read over the goals in the assigned goal category together. Then invite them to respond to the goals in that category by doing the following:

- In red, list goals they believe your congregation is already addressing in positive ways.
- In green, list any specific activities or objectives they can think of to meet a particular goal.
- In blue, list goals not being addressed, or questions that need clarifying.

Allow about fifteen minutes for groups to work, then allow five minutes for group members to circulate reading the responses each group made to the goals. If children are part of your group, note particularly the questions or comments they have written down.

B. Share Group Work.

Call participants back to the total group. Ask each small group or pair to share their work. Ask for any additions, suggestions, or observations from the total group. Then **ASK:**

- **For which goals not being addressed by our congregation might we formulate specific objectives? What further information would we need? What resources (for example, if your congregation does not have a child protection policy in place, you might form a committee and check to see what denominational resources are available to help you address this goal)?**
- **In your view, which goal in each area is the highest priority?**
- **Which goals need not only a direct service approach, but also a sustained and ongoing public witness? What form could that public witness take (for**

example, writing letters to public officials about issues related to children, advocating with legislators for legislation that addresses the needs of children, working for public policy to meet specific unmet needs, such as health insurance)?

- **To what actions might we commit as a congregation in order to better minister with and for all children?**
- **In what ways can we actively involve children in meeting these goals, thereby affirming the authenticity of their voice and agency?**
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**If children are a part of your group, consider the following:*

- *Ask children to tell you what things they believe are most important for your congregation to commit to doing for children.*
- *Then ask them what they think they can do to help meet the goals.*

Suggest that one possible action might be to form task groups for each of the goal categories, including children and youth in the task groups. With the permission of your church's governing body, the groups might commit to further work around specific goals. Record the group's responses to this discussion and use them to inform next steps in implementing goals.

Closing (15 minutes)

6. Commit to Action.

Invite the group to join in a time of closing worship and commitment. Ask that participants read over the hopes and fears they listed at the beginning of the session. On another index card, ask them to print something they will commit to doing individually.

Encourage participants to sit in silence for a few moments. Then light the pillar candle and lead "A Litany of Commitment" (p. 9)

Invite participants to place the index cards with their individual commitments for children on the worship table or in the offering plate

A Litany of Commitment

- Leader:** As Christians, we are called to make a commitment to work together, as families, as congregations, as denominations, and as an ecumenical community of member communions.
- Group:** **We are called to ensure that all children have the opportunity to develop and flourish:**
- Reader 1:** All children need to be a part of nurturing communities where they are included as full members and participants in the common life of worship, prayer, witness, and service.
- Reader 2:** All children have the right to be a part of loving and safe families. All segments of society share responsibility for supporting families in raising their children and future generations.
- Reader 3:** All children have the right to quality public education that fosters their intellectual, social, emotional, physical, cultural and creative development.
- Reader 4:** Every child has the right to live in a physically and emotionally safe environment that cultivates acceptance and peace and in which they are protected from the myriad of dangers confronting them.
- Reader 5:** All children have the right to express and celebrate their souls and spirits through arts, culture and recreation. Children need to have open time to dream, play and create.
- Reader 6:** All children have the right to economic security and economic justice: meaning all families have access to food, clothing, transportation and safe, affordable housing, and that all families have equal opportunities to provide these basic economic needs.
- Reader 7:** Every child and family has a right to guaranteed quality, comprehensive health care. All children deserve to live in a healthy environment that allows them to thrive.
- Leader:** Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."
- Group:** **Therefore we commit to love, shelter, protect, and defend children committed to our care and in our communities.**
- We commit to nurture and support families in caring for their children, acting in their best interest and recognizing and fostering their children's spirituality and unique gifts.**
- We commit to advocate for the integrity of childhood and the dignity of all children at every level of our religious, civic and political structures.**
- We commit to intentional and vigorous action with and on behalf of all children.**
AMEN.

Suggestions for Follow-Up Actions

- Check with your denomination offices to see what statements or policies concerning children have been adopted, or what initiatives are underway (see website addresses for many communions listed below). Find out how your congregation might be involved.
- Choose one goal category where your congregation already has education, mission, service, or advocacy underway. Develop some specific action plans that address one or more of the goals in that category.
- Hold a Children’s Sabbath to lift up the need and celebrate the gifts of children. Contact your denomination’s representative to the Committee on Justice for Children and Their Families (see below) or Children’s Defense Fund at www.childrensdefense.org. to find out how to get a National Observance of Children’s Sabbaths Manual.
- Encourage every committee or council within your congregation to keep this question in mind as they plan; “What about the children?” One good way to keep this question at the forefront is to involve children in the work of the committee.
- Find out more about current legislation that affects children and their families. The National Council of Churches, USA has a Washington office, as do many of the member communions. These offices are a good source of information on pending legislation. Also check the website of Children’s Defense Fund at www.childrensdefense.org.
- In every season and every aspect of your congregation’s life encourage members to pray for children and their needs.

Committee on Justice for Children and Their Families

For more information about the work of this committee, visit www.nccusa.org. Under the drop-down menu for Commissions, click on Education and Leadership Ministries Commission. Scroll down to the committee name.

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