

# **A Contribution to the Discussion on Theologically Motivated Digital Mission among Children**

To what extent can the affordances of digital technology empower digital mission among children and ensure compatibility with theological models of mission and the theology of childhood?

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## Table of Contents

<b>Table of Figures</b> .....	3
<b>Abstract</b> .....	4
<b>Declaration</b> .....	5
<b>Intellectual Property Statement</b> .....	5
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b> .....	6
<b>1.1 Background to the Study</b> .....	6
<b>1.2 Research Objectives and Approach</b> .....	7
<b>Chapter 2: The Basis of Mission</b> .....	9
<b>2.1 Mission Defined</b> .....	9
<b>2.2 The Historical Journey of Mission</b> .....	10
<b>2.3 Post-Modern Paradigm of Mission</b> .....	11
<b>2.4 Missio Dei</b> .....	12
<b>2.5 Mission: Evangelism, Discipleship and Social Action</b> .....	13
<b>Chapter 3: The Theology of Childhood and the place of Mission</b> .....	16
<b>3.1 Theology of Childhood: Historical – Current Views</b> .....	16
<b>3.2 Evangelism: The Role of the Church concerning Christian Parents vs Non-Christian Parents</b> 19	
<b>3.3 Response Expectation</b> .....	21
<b>3.4 Stages of Faith Development</b> .....	22
<b>3.5 Learning and Teaching Style</b> .....	23
<b>3.6 Models of Mission with Children</b> .....	24
<b>3.6.1 Marcia Bunge</b> .....	24
<b>3.6.2 Ron Buckland</b> .....	25
<b>3.6.3 Scripture Union</b> .....	27
<b>3.6.4 Summary of Models</b> .....	28
<b>Chapter 4: Digital Mission with Children</b> .....	29
<b>4.1 Digital Mission – a Paradigm Shift?</b> .....	29
<b>4.2 Digital Technology Critical Concerns</b> .....	30
<b>4.2.1 Christian Culture vs Digital Culture</b> .....	30
<b>4.2.2 Negative Effects on Children</b> .....	31
<b>4.2.3 Embodiment</b> .....	31
<b>4.3 Digital Technology – Positive Advancement?</b> .....	32
<b>4.4 Digital Pioneers</b> .....	32
<b>4.5 Digital Culture and Child Culture</b> .....	33
<b>4.6 The Importance of Digital Design</b> .....	33
<b>4.7 Examples of Digital Mission</b> .....	34

<b>4.7.1 Superbook</b> .....	35
<b>4.7.1.2 Application of Superbook in Mission</b> .....	37
<b>Bunge’s Model and Superbook</b> .....	37
<b>Buckland’s Model and Superbook</b> .....	38
<b>The Revealing Jesus Framework and Superbook</b> .....	39
<b>4.7.2 Guardians of Ancora</b> .....	40
<b>4.7.2.2 Application of Guardians of Ancora in Mission</b> .....	41
<b>Guardians of Ancora and The Revealing Jesus Framework (Scripture Union)</b> .....	41
<b>Bunge’s Model and Guardians of Ancora</b> .....	43
<b>Buckland’s Model and Guardians of Ancora</b> .....	43
<b>4.8 Digital Mission and Bible Literacy</b> .....	44
<b>4.9 Digital Mission, Bible Interpretation and Religious Authority</b> .....	45
<b>4.10 Online Mission and the Local Church</b> .....	46
<b>4.11 Online Mission - The Covid-19 Pandemic</b> .....	46
<b>Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research</b> .....	50
<b>5.1 Conclusion</b> .....	50
<b>5.2 Future Recommendations for Research</b> .....	53
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	54

## Table of Figures

Figure 1 .....	22
Figure 2 .....	23
Figure 3 .....	24
Figure 4 .....	26

## **Abstract**

This dissertation has examined the fields of missiology, theology of childhood and digital theology to understand the current theological perspective on digital mission among children. The advancements in digital technology have been one of the contributing factors in the emergence of a new post-modern paradigm of mission. This has created tension and uncertainty in the Church but offers opportunities for advancement if embraced within theological boundaries. This study has shown that children are not to be excluded from the theological discussion. A study of the theology of childhood identifies that children are an important part of the Kingdom of God and therefore the Church. As such, missional efforts among adults and children are equally important. The study has found that a three-pronged approach is necessary for mission: evangelism, discipleship, and social action and none should be excluded. Existing local church provision for children according to research tends to place more emphasis on discipleship to the exclusion of evangelism among both church-going and non-church-going children. This dissertation asserts that this need not be the case as children can and should be given the tools needed to explore a relationship with Jesus. The models of mission identified emphasised that faith development is a journey rather than a one-time conversion experience and requires a holistic approach. This study has revealed that increasingly, both children and adults regularly inhabit the online space. Since this is the case, the Church must create new strategies concerning how to engage ministerially and missionally online. This dissertation has shown that the affordances of digital technology can be utilised and shaped to meet the needs of the Church. Examples of digital mission have been scrutinised alongside established models of mission to discover that the three-pronged approach is possible online and can also be combined with a hybrid approach.

## **Declaration**

This dissertation is my original work unless referenced clearly to the contrary, and no portion of the work referred to in the dissertation has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Background to the Study**

The recent Covid-19 pandemic placed a spotlight on the readiness of organisations to translate offline activities online. Despite the notion that the internet is embedded in our daily lives, it appears that for many, it is merely a tool and not a place to inhabit. During the pandemic, when governments enforced lockdowns, it became apparent that almost everything would have to move online. Doctor's appointments, education, work, social gatherings, family celebrations and even church services had to all find a new location.

As everyone grappled with understanding and navigating online interactive technology, the Church was no different. The Church, however, was dealing with not only the practicalities of the technology but also the theology of moving sacred rituals and spiritual formation to a place considered by many Church leaders to be disembodied and anything but sacred. As the Church was wrestling with these 'big' theological questions, one has to ask whether the Church should have been asking these questions earlier. Why were local churches not already championing online mission with systems already in place to minister to congregants online and also those who were non-churchgoers but inhabitants online?

Also whilst working hard to minister to their adult congregation during 'unprecedented times', what was happening with the children's congregation and the vast numbers of children inhabiting the digital space who are not from church-going families? Children who were from Christian families reportedly did receive some discipleship-focused materials that were not easy to engage with online, but more complex is that there did not appear to be any strong missional plan, considering children would be online even more than usual due to lockdowns.

The issue at hand appeared to be much bigger than the pandemic response, this was just an expose of what has already been happening. Discipleship-focused children ministry that focused on Sunday attendance would be unlikely to make an impact missionally.

It appears that the world is moving into a post-pandemic phase and those who were uncomfortable with inhabiting the online space can return to offline spaces and breathe a sign of relief. The question though, is whether the Church should simply return to the status quo or should the Church embrace all that digital technology has to offer and develop new strategies concerning those who remain regular inhabitants of online spaces.

Preliminary research in preparation for the research proposal highlighted that whilst many studies had already been undertaken concerning online church and ministry with adults, very few had considered children. It became apparent that any study focusing on children's ministry would have scope to add to the discussion.

## **1.2 Research Objectives and Approach**

The overarching objective of this research is to discover what opportunities digitality can offer to mission among children and to what extent churches have been or are willing to engage with these opportunities. To answer this overarching question, a wide range of literature will be considered in relation to the following points, “What has led to the present situation, what is happening now, what should be happening and what should be the response”?<sup>1</sup>

The researcher assumes that the Church has not engaged with online mission among children on a large scale due to theological issues which have yet to be clarified. This study will therefore offer some clarifying reflections on the historical and current definitions of mission including the relationship between evangelism, discipleship and social action.

Additionally, the theology of childhood will be considered to establish whether theological concepts such as original sin and the age of accountability have impacted the extent to which evangelism takes place with children. Mission among children will be traced historically to establish the extent to which current practice is related to past and present models of mission. This will be followed by an extensive discussion examining theological views on digital culture

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<sup>1</sup> Noel Woodbridge, 'The EDNA Model for Doing Research in Practical Theology : A Biblical Approach', *Conspectus : The Journal of the South African Theological Seminary*, 17.03 (2014), 89–121 (p. 95) <<https://doi.org/10.10520/EJC151847>>. These questions are not considered chronologically in the dissertation but rather, are interweaved through the discussion in order to keep a practical focus.



and digital mission. Some examples of current online mission resources will be examined to discover whether they are supported by the theological models of mission that has been earlier outlined. This discussion will attempt to reassure critics of digital mission that it can take place with children in a theologically responsible way and is compatible with established theological models of mission. The discussion will aim to discuss the affordances of digital technology and how they can be used and shaped to meet the needs of the Church and most importantly to take part in *Missio Dei*, the mission of God.

Lastly, before overall conclusions, the study will reflect on what took place in the local church during the Covid-19 pandemic. Research that took place during the pandemic period will be examined to establish what lessons can be learnt with regards to digital mission with children to create new strategies based on the lesson learnt.

## Chapter 2: The Basis of Mission

### 2.1 Mission Defined

In the most generic sense, the word mission refers to an assignment. The dictionary defines it as “an important job... that someone is sent somewhere to do” or “any work that someone believes it is their duty to do”.<sup>2</sup> This definition highlights the place of being sent and personal conviction, both of which also have a part to play in Christian mission.<sup>3</sup>

David Bosch posits that the works of mission can be seen in the New Testament through the activities of Matthew, Luke and Apostle Paul.<sup>4</sup> However, he reveals that it was the Jesuits who first began to use the word ‘mission’ to refer to their efforts to spread Christianity in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. In the years that followed, mission in Christianity continued to refer to the spread of the Christian faith. Those who travelled to another country (mission field) to spread the gospel were called missionaries. They were usually sent by a sponsoring church or missionary agency.<sup>5</sup>

However, Bosch also describes a newly established church still depending on another congregation as a mission, or a series of meetings which would take place with the purpose of spreading the Christian faith as mission.<sup>6</sup> From this, he deduces that mission could be theologically defined as, “propagation of the faith, expansion of the reign of God, conversion of the heathen and the founding of new churches”.<sup>7</sup> This speaks to the breadth of what mission entails. According to this definition, mission is not simply evangelism - the verbal sharing of the good news of Jesus Christ, it is also about preaching the Kingdom of God and discipleship. Hence, this chapter will be looking at the relationship between evangelism, discipleship and social action in the work of mission.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus’ <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>> [accessed 5 January 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman + Todd, 1999), p.24.

<sup>4</sup> David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16, Twentieth anniversary ed (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2011). Bosch discusses New Testament models of mission in Part 1 of his book.

<sup>5</sup> Bosch, p.1

<sup>6</sup> Bosch, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Bosch, p.1.

## 2.2 The Historical Journey of Mission

Much of the work of mission traced through history by Bosch and others such as Kenneth Latourette, reveals that from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Christianity advanced by the Church in the West sending missionaries to the East and South.<sup>8</sup> Missionaries were not just taking the gospel of Jesus with them but also their cultural and ecclesial way of life through colonialism.<sup>9</sup> Both Bosch and Joerg Rieger argue that mission and colonialism at this time were completely linked. The Church was able to assert its authority through colonial powers to enforce the conversion of those in the nations where missions took place.<sup>10</sup> At the time, this was not seen with the same negative eye as it would be viewed today. Bosch argues that the perspective at the time by the Church was genuine and authentic.<sup>11</sup>

Bosch observed that from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century onwards there has had to be a broadening or transformation of the concept of mission due to various factors such as the end of the colonial era, secularisation and the advancement of other faiths, requiring a redefinition of what mission is.<sup>12</sup> The Western Church is no longer viewed as having the 'last word' on issues, individuals want to make up their own minds about how to engage with the Church. Due to increased migration, Europe itself has become a multi-faith society and also those of no faith. It can no longer be as simple as the 'Christian West', taking the gospel to the 'non-Christian world', Maggie Dawn calls this view "embarrassing and outdated".<sup>13</sup> Since many in the West no longer identify as Christians, does this mean that the West itself has now become a mission field?

According to the Office for National Statistics, the 2021 Census of England and Wales found that more than half the population do not identify as Christians. 46.2% identified as Christians

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew F. Walls, 'Kenneth Scott Latourette', *Christian History*, 20.4 (2001), 44. Bosch, p. 399

<sup>9</sup> Joerg Rieger, 'Theology and Mission Between Neocolonialism and Postcolonialism', *Mission Studies*, 21.2 (2004), 201–27 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/1573383042653677>>.

<sup>10</sup> Rieger, p.201, Bosch, p.233.

<sup>11</sup> Bosch, p. 235.

<sup>12</sup> Bosch, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Maggie Dawn, 'Worship, Community and Missio Dei in a Digital Age', in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, ed. by Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M Phillips, 2020 (para. 1) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2059308/15>> [accessed 29 May 2021].

and 37.2% said they have no religion.<sup>14</sup> These statistics were widely shared in the media with headlines that England is no longer a Christian country.<sup>15</sup> The Bible Society responded that whilst fewer people identified as Christians, this does not necessarily show the decline of Christianity but a change in religious identity.<sup>16</sup> Previously people could have ticked the Christian box because they believe that living in the UK means their identity is Christian or because their parents were Christians or even that they were christened as a baby in church. With an increasing reluctance to accept labels, someone who is open to exploring the Christian faith may not have ticked the box. Grace Davie refers to this as 'Believing without belonging'.<sup>17</sup> When viewed through this lens, it can be seen that these statistics, whilst supporting that the UK is now a place where mission needs to take place may not be as hopeless as this particular census portrays. Bible Society research asserts that "among those who say they have no religion or faith, 11 per cent say there is definitely or probably a God, while a further 17 per cent say they do not know".<sup>18</sup> The argument here then is that even among those who stated that they have no religion, many will still be open to missional activity that is different to what they know as the mainstream church.

### 2.3 Post-Modern Paradigm of Mission

Bosch uses Küng's paradigm theory to suggest that missionary activity has moved into a post-modern paradigm. Küng divides the history of Christianity into six sections or paradigms, the last of which is the emerging ecumenical paradigm.<sup>19</sup> Bosche describes the emergence of this paradigm as post-modern since it is occurring in the present and moving into the future.<sup>20</sup> Steve Hollinghurst suggests that alongside the emergence of these paradigms have been

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<sup>14</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS), 'Religion, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics', 2022 <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>> [accessed 6 January 2023].

<sup>15</sup> BBC, 'Less than Half of England and Wales Population Christian, Census 2021 Shows', *BBC News*, 29 November 2022, section UK <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-63792408>> [accessed 28 February 2023].

<sup>16</sup> Bible Society, 'Census Results: Religion Is Still Mainstream' <<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/latest/news/census-results-religion-is-still-mainstream/>> [accessed 11 January 2023].

<sup>17</sup> Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox*, Second Edition (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015) Chapter 1 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/994472/3>>.

<sup>18</sup> Bible Society. 'Census Results: Religion Is Still Mainstream'. Paragraph 7

<sup>19</sup> Hans Küng, *Christianity: Essence, History and Future*, The Religious Situation of Our Time (New York: Continuum, 1995).

<sup>20</sup> Bosch.

various technological advancements that have contributed to their emergence through modes of communication changing from oral – written – print – radio – television and now digital.<sup>21</sup> Whilst each progression brings opportunities, Bosch describes paradigm shifts as “a time of deep uncertainty”.<sup>22</sup> I would aver that it is this uncertainty that requires researchers and theologians to study what mission needs to look like in this new digital context. Perhaps a new approach to mission is what will drive the advancement of the Christian faith where there is a current decline. Gerald Pillay advises that “The establishment of paradigms takes decades and sometimes centuries, so the contours of this paradigm are still being drawn”.<sup>23</sup> This is, therefore, an exciting time to be reimagining mission.

## 2.4 Missio Dei

Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian began discussions which steered mission in a different direction in the 1930s. He had become dissatisfied with the human focus of mission, and wanted to centre mission once more in trinitarian theology.<sup>24</sup> Before the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, mission (*missio* in Latin) referred to God the Father sending the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup> Barth, therefore, asserted that mission began with God Himself, it is not a human idea. Therefore, God is the sender of the Church.<sup>26</sup> This concept became popularly known as *Missio Dei*, a term first used by Karl Hartenstein, a German missiologist who wrote a report of discussions that took place at the International Missionary Conference in Germany in 1952.<sup>27</sup> *Missio Dei* means, mission of God.<sup>28</sup> Peter White and Cornelius Niemandt define mission as “first and foremost, about God and his historical redemptive initiative on behalf of creation”.<sup>29</sup> Mission is seen as

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<sup>21</sup> Steve Hollinghurst, *Mission-Shaped Evangelism: The Gospel in Contemporary Culture* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1437039/4>>.

<sup>22</sup> Bosch, p. 357.

<sup>23</sup> Gerald J. Pillay, ‘Text Paradigms And Context: An Examination of David Bosch’s Use of Paradigms in the Reading of Christian History’, *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Mission Studies*, 18.1 (1990), 109–23 (p. 113).

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Bosco Bangura, ‘Reverse Mission? Missio Dei and the Spread of African Pentecostalism in the West’, *Ecclesiology*, 16.3 (2020), 379–99 (p. 385) <<https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-bja10004>>.

<sup>25</sup> Bosch, p.1.

<sup>26</sup> Bosch, p.399.

<sup>27</sup> Tormod Engelsen, ‘*Missio Dei* : The Understanding And Misunderstanding Of A Theological Concept In European Churches And Missiology’, *International Review of Mission*, 92.367 (2003), 481–97 (p. 482) <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6631.2003.tb00424.x>>.

<sup>28</sup> Bangura, p. 383.

<sup>29</sup> Peter White and Cornelius J.P. Niemandt, ‘Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches’ Mission Approaches’, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 24.2 (2015), 241–69 (p. 242) <<https://doi.org/10.1163/17455251-02402010>>.

originating from God and it is Him who will complete His work among us, humans merely participate. Joseph Bangura posits that the church is intrinsically missionary. Mission is not just something the Church does but something the Church is.<sup>30</sup> With this definition, everything that the Church does in participating in the furtherance of God's Kingdom and redemptive work on earth can be classified as mission.

It is not everyone who agrees with such a wide definition. Andrew Kirk states that *Missio Dei* "has been used to advance all kinds of missiological agendas".<sup>31</sup> Leslie Biggins cautioned that at times such agendas have even been secular in nature, more focused on justice work which whilst noble and worthwhile, in his view should not replace the evangelistic side of mission work.<sup>32</sup> Keith Ferdinando warns that "mission risks becoming whatever the church in any historical period understood it to be".<sup>33</sup>

## 2.5 Mission: Evangelism, Discipleship and Social Action

Consequently, Ferdinando further narrowed down the definition of mission through a set of four approaches so that the Church can understand what its specific role is. These are proclamation, discipleship and social action but his most narrow definition of mission is to make disciples based on the instruction of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 which has been widely referred to as The Great Commission.<sup>34</sup> Darren Konz argues that adhering to the Great Commission mandate does not have to mean a departure from *Missio Dei*. It is because of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and God's grace, that the Church can partake in the work of mission.<sup>35</sup> The words "Go therefore"<sup>36</sup> are not intended for Christians to go where they are not sent by God.

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<sup>30</sup> Bangura, p.386.

<sup>31</sup> Kirk, p.25.

<sup>32</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), p. 8 <[https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3044636/009\\_Chapter03.xhtml#ch-3](https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3044636/009_Chapter03.xhtml#ch-3)>.

<sup>33</sup> Keith Ferdinando, 'Mission: A Problem of Definition', *Themelios*, 33.1 (2008), 46–59.

<sup>34</sup> Ferdinando, p. 54.

<sup>35</sup> Darren Konz, 'The Even Greater Commission: Relating the Great Commission to the *Missio Dei*, and Human Agency to Divine Activity, in Mission', *Missiology: An International Review*, 46.4 (2018), 333–49 (p. 338) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829618794507>>.

<sup>36</sup> Matt. 28:19, *NKJV Outreach Bible, Study Edition* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017).

Discipleship in the context of Matthew 28 encompasses teaching those who have come to faith as well as planting churches so that new believers can grow to be productive themselves. Ferdinando argues that making disciples must be at the core of what the Church does, and this must be kept central whilst proclamation and social action are taking place. “Verbal communication of the gospel must necessarily be accompanied by a life that corroborates the message, which in certain circumstances means social action”.<sup>37</sup> Bosch agrees that Christians must, “participate in the movement of God’s love towards people”.<sup>38</sup>

Paul Keeble illustrated this well with his concept of ‘mission with’, ‘mission to’ and ‘mission for’. ‘Mission with’ is simply ‘doing’ life with others and in the process, participating in what God is already doing in the world. ‘Mission-for’ involves acts of service which would include the alleviation of poverty and social action and then, ‘Mission to’ is the work of proclamation, or evangelism.<sup>39</sup> This is further buttressed by the five marks of mission identified by the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984. They are: “1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, 2. To teach, baptise, and nurture new believers, 3. To respond to human need by loving service, 4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society and 5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth”.<sup>40</sup>

This discussion has been centred on defining mission and understanding the place of evangelism within it. It has been shown that mission and evangelism as words are not synonymous.<sup>41</sup> This is because mission involves more than evangelism, it also includes discipleship and social action. However, the work of mission is incomplete if evangelism is absent. This must be considered as mission with children (as is the context of this dissertation), cannot exclude evangelism but must also include discipleship and social action. The Church must find creative ways to move outside of the walls of the Church and engage in mission with them.

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<sup>37</sup> Ferdinando, p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> Bosch, p. 399

<sup>39</sup> Paul Keeble, *Mission-with: Something out of the Ordinary*, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Anglican Communion Office, ‘Anglican Communion: Marks of Mission’, *Anglican Communion Website* <<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>> [accessed 12 January 2023].

<sup>41</sup> Bosch, p. 420.

This chapter has undertaken exploratory research to discover what has led to current approaches in mission but has not specifically referred to mission with children. This will be discussed in the next chapter as further exploration will focus on issues that may have shaped current mission and evangelism with children such as the age of accountability, how children are perceived theologically and strategies that should be utilized.



## Chapter 3: The Theology of Childhood and the place of Mission

Returning to Bosche's theological definition of mission, "propagation of the faith, expansion of the reign of God, conversion of the heathen and the founding of new churches",<sup>42</sup> where is the place of the child in this? Have children been included in missional efforts; alongside adults, independently or has it been deemed unnecessary altogether for them to be included or considered? Since the previous chapter illustrated that mission has progressed through various paradigms, one would assume that mission with children has also progressed. It is necessary to trace various views on this so that the context of current mission with children and any future advancements can be fully understood and placed in the correct context of the Church's understanding of the child.

### 3.1 Theology of Childhood: Historical – Current Views

Marcia Bunge explains the Theology of Childhood as a discovery of the nature of children as created by God and what this means for their care.<sup>43</sup> There is a need to ascertain the history of and current view of the child as created by God to understand the form that mission with children should take, for how can one minister to those one does not understand?

Bunge states that "The Christian tradition often describes children as sinful creatures and moral agents".<sup>44</sup> Where has such a view come from? Leslie Francis and Jeff Astley reveal that early Christians believed that whilst humans are prone to sin, children could not be responsible for that sin until they became a certain age.<sup>45</sup> However, they note that Augustine of Hippo, a North African theologian in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries took a great deal of time to reflect on the concept of original sin. This led him to contemplate and contradict the earlier view of the innocence of children. Augustine believed that it is clear from scriptures such as Psalm 51:3 and Romans 5:12 that since the fall of Adam, humans are born with inherent sin and are already guilty and in need of saving grace, having started life in a state of non-

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<sup>42</sup> Bosch, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> *Toddling to the Kingdom*, ed. by John Collier (London: Child Theology Movement, 2009), p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Collier, p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> Leslie J. Francis and Jeff Astley, *Children, Churches and Christian Learning* (London: SPCK, 2002), pp. 15–16.

innocence.<sup>46</sup> This implies then, that children have an automatic propensity to sin and will do so once they can walk and talk.<sup>47</sup> Some still hold this belief today and it is important to consider this view as it will guide perspectives on evangelism with children. If a child is seen as guilty of sin from birth and needing salvation, then evangelism would be urgent, whereas if a child remains innocent until a later age, then evangelism could potentially wait until that later age.

Bunge argues for a balanced approach, noting that there are scriptures which support the view that children are sinful from birth and although this in some cases could wrongly lead to maltreatment, a correct approach is to acknowledge that at the heart of sin is selfishness and children should accept some responsibility for their actions. Bunge posits that failing to acknowledge children's sinfulness would negate the need for parents and teachers to teach them morals but conversely to see them as only capable of sin and not faith would mean that adults would not be open to learning from children in the way that God intended.<sup>48</sup>

Nick Gruber notes the question of the salvation of children is often only considered if the longevity of the child's life is in question, which he reasons is not the correct motivation for evangelism. He posits, "An invitation to receive abundant life in Jesus is a much worthier motivation than providing an eternal fire escape".<sup>49</sup> Indeed the focus of Augustine himself was not evangelism itself but infant and adult baptism.<sup>50</sup>

Chapter two of this dissertation noted that during the 16th-19th Centuries, Western missionaries were heavily engaged in global missions, however, during this time, Gruber notes that baptism, not evangelism tended to be central among children.<sup>51</sup> The baptism of children ensured their acceptance into the church and any further spiritual guidance was mostly left

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<sup>46</sup> Francis and Astley, pp. 15–16.

<sup>47</sup> Nick Gruber, *Foundations of Childrens Evangelism: How to Lead Kids to Christ* (Springfield, Missouri: Logion Press, 2017) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2050463/0>>. Chapter 1, Section 2

<sup>48</sup> Collier, pp. 103–9. Here Bunge is contrasting scriptures such as Gen. 8:21, Prov. 22:15, Psa. 51:5, 58:3, Rom. 3:9-10, 5:12 where the sinfulness of children is highlighted with Matt. 18:1-4 where Jesus brought a little child into the midst of the adults to illustrate a point thus implying that the adults could learn from the child in their midst.

<sup>49</sup> Gruber. Chapter 1, Section 2, Paragraph 9

<sup>50</sup> Gruber. Chapter 3

<sup>51</sup> Gruber. Chapter 3

up to parents. Gruber notes that Martin Luther, the German theologian who is credited with leading the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s taught that a parent's primary responsibility is to teach their children the ways of God.<sup>52</sup>

This view remained prevalent, however by the 1700s, Charles Wesley did report that children were responding during revival altar calls and had conversion experiences. He was driven by a conviction that children would grow into sin and need salvation. At the same time, Jonathan Edwards was preaching specifically to children and seeing them respond. He also believed that children were born into sin and needed salvation even from a young age. Charles Spurgeon similarly advocated that children could yield to salvation appeals.<sup>53</sup> Attitudes towards the conversion of children, the idea that young children were capable of receiving Christ as their saviour was changing sporadically but not universally.

In this period at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the UK, Sunday schools were founded by the Church. It is necessary to note though that the primary objective of these schools was not spiritual education or evangelism. Rather the objective was to educate children who could not afford to go to school.<sup>54</sup> Since many children worked during the week in factories, the free classes would hold on a Sunday afternoon. Children were taught to read and write and the Bible was used as a textbook which in turn did help the children to learn Christian morals and values. Parents who didn't go to church still sent their children to Sunday School because they wanted their children to have free education.<sup>55</sup> This demonstrates how social action by the church can be a vital part of mission work. Even though the outright objective was not evangelism, children were given an opportunity to become acquainted with the Bible through the work of the Church.

At the same time though, other evangelistic efforts were ongoing. Christoffer Grundmann notes that in 1868, Josiah Spiers, a Sunday school teacher and Tom Bishop, founded the Children's Special Service Mission. Its purpose was to be deliberate in the evangelisation of

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<sup>52</sup> Gruber. Chapter 3

<sup>53</sup> Gruber. Chapter 3 This reference applies to the statement on Wesley, Edwards and Spurgeon.

<sup>54</sup> Francis and Astley. Ch. 3 pp. 35-36

<sup>55</sup> Francis and Astley. Ch. 3 pp. 35-36

children aged eight and above by inviting them to summer camps and Bible studies.<sup>56</sup> The name was later changed to Scripture Union which is still currently operating, now in 120 countries.<sup>57</sup>

The late 19th Century saw restrictions enforced concerning child labour and the establishment of free government schools. This led to Sunday school changing focus to primarily Christian education. Parents largely continued to send their children to Sunday School, by now used to the routine but by the 20th Century, attendance began to decline as families would increasingly take part in recreational activities at the weekend.<sup>58</sup>

Sunday school classes eventually moved to the morning alongside adult services. This would lead to Sunday school being attended mostly by children whose parents were in church. Debates continued as to whether there was any point in separating children from parents who were already in the church, perhaps the whole family should attend service together and abandon the Sunday School idea altogether. While many others believed that children could learn better if they would be taught at their level of understanding and be able to ask questions. Some others though cautioned against this as they felt that it somehow devalued the child as a full member of the Church.<sup>59</sup>

### **3.2 Evangelism: The Role of the Church concerning Christian Parents vs Non-Christian Parents**

This discussion brings us to the present in a sense where the debate still goes on concerning the role that the Church should play in the life of the child and Sunday School has now been given many new names such as children's ministry, children's church or another individual church specific name and still predominately takes place on a Sunday morning alongside the adult service.

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<sup>56</sup> Christoffer Grundmann, 'Children and Christian Missions: Historical Aspects and Missiological Challenges', *Mission Studies*, 33.2 (2016), 163–86 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341446>>.

<sup>57</sup> Scripture Union, 'Who We Are - Scripture Union Global', <https://Scriptureunion.Global/> <<https://scriptureunion.global/who-we-are/>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

<sup>58</sup> Francis and Astley. Ch. 3 pp. 37-39

<sup>59</sup> Francis and Astley. Ch. 3 pp. 37-39

Since many who attend children's church are the children of Christian parents, do they need to be evangelised? Is there an assumption that if their parents are Christians, then they are too because their parents would have made sure of that? This assumption is merely that, an assumption. How can it be assumed that every child in the church is already a Christian?

Charles Spurgeon noted that some seemed to believe that “children do not need conversion, that children born of Christian parents are somewhat superior to others, and have good within them which only needs development”.<sup>60</sup> He acknowledged that many churches did not expect or advocate for the conversion of children. He further cautioned that the children of Christian parents were just as much in need of conversion as those of non-believing parents, stating that it was only the presence of the Holy Spirit that would enable children to overcome sin and stay on the right path. For this reason, he advocated that the purpose of teaching children should be for the salvation of their souls. He also argued that children have a role to play in the Kingdom of God and do not need to wait until they are older.<sup>61</sup> Lois Lebar, a professor of Christian Education also argued that children are often eager to come to Jesus and do not need to be compelled like adults, therefore Christian educators should be making the most of this opportunity. She reflected on the scriptures when Jesus said “Let the little children come to me...”, insinuating that the children were already willing to come to Jesus but were obstructed by the adults around them.<sup>62</sup> Doug McConnel argues that “Christ made it clear that children can receive the kingdom of God in Mark 10:14”.<sup>63</sup>

Spurgeon was also very concerned about children who didn't attend church if there were no missional efforts to reach them. He recommended that Sunday School teachers should see it as their duty to go into the neighbourhoods where children were playing and encourage them to come to Sunday school so that they might be persuaded to follow Jesus.<sup>64</sup> By the early 20th Century, Gruber cites Frank Coleman as being influential in the area of child evangelism.

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<sup>60</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Come, Ye Children: A Book for Parents and Teachers on the Christian Training of Children* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1897), p. 21.

<sup>61</sup> Spurgeon. p. 21-22.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16, Lois Lebar, *Children in the Bible School* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1952), p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley, *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework* (Colorado Springs, London: Authentic : Published in partnership with World Vision, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Spurgeon, p. 83.

Gruber describes him as an evangelical who advocated that evangelism was essential among children since many who were involved in missions at the time, had a salvation experience themselves as children.<sup>65</sup> Dan Brewster avered that “without a relationship with God, children have no hope of becoming fully who God wants them to be”.<sup>66</sup> However, his approach is holistic, meaning that whilst a relationship with God is central and key, children must also have their physical and emotional needs met. He also advocated that evangelism outside of the family unit is permissible since the salvation of children is important but should not be without the knowledge and permission of their parents.<sup>67</sup> In this way, it is possible to carry out mission with children whose families do not attend church by helping to provide for the needs of the family and by seeking the consent of the parents before sharing the gospel of evangelism materials with their children.

### 3.3 Response Expectation

Frank Coleman answered critics of child evangelism by stating that all children are capable of believing and therefore if they are not taught to believe in Christ, then they will believe in other things that are in one way or the other against Christ.<sup>68</sup> He reflects on children as being believing, sensitive, affectionate and teachable, meaning they are receptive to the gospel.<sup>69</sup> He argues that some doubt the conversion of children because they expect them to react in the same way as adults. Children will need to go through a process of discipleship which Coleman calls “thorough evangelisation” which is teaching children to rely on God as “Lord and helper”, leading to dependence and obedience.<sup>70</sup> Whilst theological debates may still go on as to whether a child is born sinful or whether they are innocent until the age of accountability, there is consensus among the writers mentioned that children can come to faith in Jesus. Brewster advocates that it is more appropriate to ascertain a child’s maturity to establish their accountability than their biological age.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Gruber. Chapter 3

<sup>66</sup> Dan Brewster, *Child, Church, Mission Revised* (Compassion International, 2011), p. 150  
<<https://www.scribd.com/document/62120073/Dan-Brewster-Child-Church-Mission-Revised-En>> [accessed 27 May 2022].

<sup>67</sup> Brewster, pp. 165–68. Paul Butler, *Reaching Children* (London: Scripture Union, 1992), p. 39.

<sup>68</sup> Frank Coleman, *The Romance of Winning Children* (Cleveland, Ohio: Union Gospel Press), p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Coleman, pp. 14–18.

<sup>70</sup> Coleman, p. 20.

<sup>71</sup> Brewster, p. 109.

Keith White and Haddon Wilmer agree that the faith development of children cannot be identical to that of adults. If comparisons are drawn then children would appear less knowledgeable, more emotional and less mature and adults may become impatient that the child is not growing in spiritual development fast enough according to their expectations. Therefore, it is necessary to understand children as unique and discover what they need at their stage in life.<sup>72</sup> Francis and Astley also concur that a child coming to faith in Christ would not respond the same way as an adult. At that moment, the child might not be making a life-long commitment because they are very much living in the present moment. At the moment they decided to follow Jesus, they have decided to adopt the faith of the adult who led them in the decision and seeds have been sown for the future.<sup>73</sup> Francis Bridger refers to this as “triggering a child’s movement from one stage of faith to another.”<sup>74</sup>

### 3.4 Stages of Faith Development

John Westerhoff described various stages of faith development. He avered that it is not as simple as someone coming to faith in Christ through a one-time decision but rather more like a journey of faith. The stages he described are “experienced faith, affiliative faith, searching faith and owned faith”.<sup>75</sup> These stages are also not separate but rather connected where one stage expands into the next. According to Westerhoff, children “observe, copy, experience and react” and their faith will also be expressed in this way.<sup>76</sup> The British Council of Churches' 1976 report on the Child in the Church agreed with this, recommending that Christian educators understand how to nurture children’s curiosity and desire to explore rather than expecting them to believe and do what they cannot understand.<sup>77</sup> This requires building relationships with children so that it is possible to understand their stages of development.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Collier, pp. 18–19.

<sup>73</sup> Francis and Astley, p. 204.

<sup>74</sup> Francis Bridger, *Children Finding Faith* (Scripture Union, 1988), p. 122.

<sup>75</sup> John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, 3rd rev. ed (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Pub., 2012), p. 89.

<sup>76</sup> Westerhoff, p. 91.

<sup>77</sup> British Council of Churches, *Report of the Working Party on the Child in the Church* (London: British Council of Churches, 1976), p. 13.

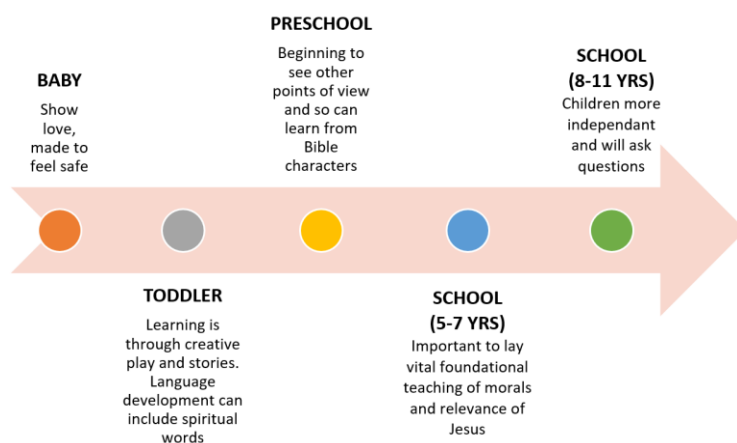
<sup>78</sup> William Andersen and others, ‘Theology of Childhood: A Theological Resource Framed to Guide the Practice of Evangelising and Nurturing Children’, *Journal of Christian Education*, os-46.3 (2003), 5–31 (p. 11) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/002196570304600302>>.

This accentuates the need for a holistic missionary strategy that includes more than evangelism. There is also a need for discipleship which allows for relationships to form. This is especially necessary for a situation where a child has decided to become a Christian and their family has a different set of beliefs or no belief at all. Every child needs to have nurture and support, in this case, the church could equip parents with knowledge about their child’s newfound faith or at least seek permission to be part of the child’s support network if the parents do not want to do this.<sup>79</sup>

### 3.5 Learning and Teaching Style

Children go through a process of growth and development which is physical, emotional and also spiritual. It is important to consider that the way a child understands also develops. For example, younger children think in less abstract ways about concepts and more according to concrete facts.<sup>80</sup> Therefore speaking to a child about the concept of sin may be difficult for them to understand but mentioning practical concrete wrong choices would be easier for them to grasp. Evangelism then needs to take this into account.<sup>81</sup> Butler emphasises various ways that children should be taught during each stage of childhood based on their stage of development and this is shown in Figure 1.<sup>82</sup>

Figure 1



<sup>79</sup> Andersen and others, p. 18, 27-28. Butler. p. 44.

<sup>80</sup> Feifei Liu, 'Designing for Kids: Cognitive Considerations', *Nielsen Norman Group*, 2018 <<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/kids-cognition/>> [accessed 19 May 2021].

<sup>81</sup> Butler, pp. 51–53.

<sup>82</sup> Butler, pp. 66–68.



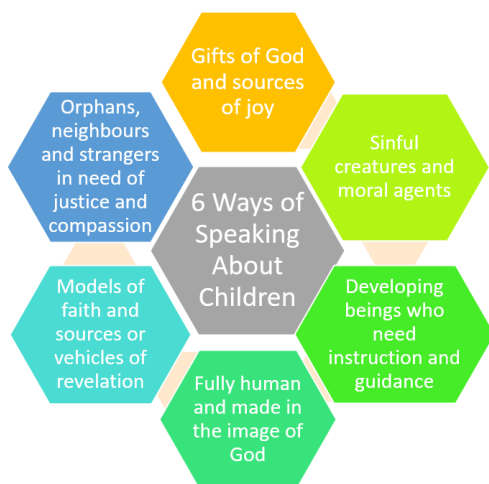
These stages could be likened to Westerhoff’s experiential stage mentioned earlier. Teachers or mission workers can help children to experience Jesus through the way they interact with them. They can also invite children to experience Jesus by being allowed to interact with the Bible in creative ways as well as ask questions.

### 3.6 Models of Mission with Children

#### 3.6.1 Marcia Bunge

Marcia Bunge identified ‘6 ways of speaking about children’ which she gleaned from her study of the Bible and their implications for the Church’s work with children. These are listed in Figure 2.<sup>83</sup> In the context of this discussion, they could be used in developing a model of mission with children.

Figure 2



Bunge advocates that none of these elements should be in isolation from the other. Therefore, for example, knowing that children have a propensity for sin does not negate the fact that they are treasured by God and have the right to be included in the life of the Church. Therefore mission strategy needs to ensure that children are included in Church life, but with necessary discipleship that would educate them, using materials that they can understand

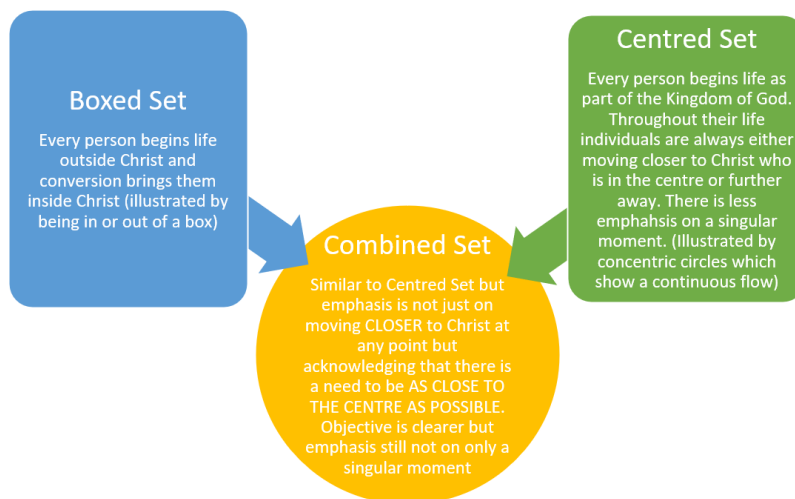
<sup>83</sup> Marcia Bunge, ‘Biblical Understandings of Children and Childhood: Resources for the Church and Mission Today’, in *Now & Next: A Compendium of Papers Presented at the Now & Next Theological Conference on Children Nairobi, Kenya, March 9-12 2011*, ed. by Siga Arles and Keith J. White (Colorado Springs, Col.: Compassion International, 2011), pp. 15–33 (pp. 21–28).

that would teach them the morals and strategies they need to overcome sin.<sup>84</sup> This should not be at the expense of the family unit, meaning that mission with children should endeavour to also be a holistic family mission, or at least include parents so that guidance would continue at home.<sup>85</sup> Bunge emphasised that since children should not be viewed as ‘humans in waiting’, then they have gifts that can be utilised right now that should be encouraged and adults should take time to validate questions they may have and even take time to learn from them as Jesus suggested in Matthew 18:1-6.<sup>86</sup> Finally, the need for advocacy and compassion in the form of social action should also form part of any mission strategy.<sup>87</sup> Bunge’s work emphasises the relationship between evangelism, discipleship and social action.

### 3.6.2 Ron Buckland

Ron Buckland having studied missionary activities in various countries observed two main perspectives and developed these into a third perspective which he recommends. These are summarised in Figure 3.<sup>88</sup>

Figure 3



<sup>84</sup> Marcia Bunge, p. 30.

<sup>85</sup> Marcia Bunge, p. 31.

<sup>86</sup> Marcia Bunge, p. 32.

<sup>87</sup> Marcia Bunge, p. 33.

<sup>88</sup> Ron Buckland, *Children and the Gospel: Excellence in Ministry with Children and Their Families* (Sydney: Scripture Union Australia, 2001), p. 72.

Buckland recommended the combined set as he chooses not to see children as being outside of the Kingdom of God because of sin and needing to 'opt-in' via conversion. Rather he sees each child, and later adult on a journey either towards or away from Christ. This approach does not deny the conversion experience. Buckland notes that "belongingness can become rebellion".<sup>89</sup> In other words, even though a child's starting point is with God; because there is a propensity to sin, humans can choose to move away from this position and instead choose sin, either through choice or ignorance. In their journey towards Christ, children may have a conversion experience where they choose to change direction but it cannot end there, they must continue on their journey closer and closer to Christ. This also emphasises the importance of discipleship because after deciding to follow Jesus, they could change direction once more moving away from Him.

This approach also has relevance concerning evangelism with children. Rather than waiting for an age of accountability, work can begin at an early age to nurture and teach belongingness and discourage rebellion. Buckland also notes that rebellion can be passive, meaning that a child is not consciously choosing to move away from God. It cannot be a choice if the child has never been told about the existence of God or shown how to journey with God.<sup>90</sup> This becomes the work of mission, teaching children from a perspective of love and inclusion in God's Kingdom rather than exclusion because of sin. In this sense, Buckland encourages that "Christian education and evangelism are locked together".<sup>91</sup> This is similar to the experiential stage of Westerhoff's four stages of faith. The balance, of course, needs to be that a child is not led to think that they don't need salvation because they started from a point of belongingness which could be a danger with this model. This is why Buckland suggests a combination of the Boxed set and Centred set so that there is an awareness of the need for salvation but an acceptance that faith is a journey and does not end with a one-time conversion experience, repeating a prayer for salvation that may not be fully understood. This is likewise emphasised by Bunge's model that was previously discussed.

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<sup>89</sup> Buckland, p. 63.

<sup>90</sup> Buckland, p. 64.

<sup>91</sup> Buckland, p. 68.

### 3.6.3 Scripture Union

Scripture Union was founded 156 years ago in the UK with a focus on evangelism and mission with children. Scripture Union International is a UK charity that now oversees the operations of Scripture Union branches in 120 countries and all work operates within the specifications of the cultures where they are based.<sup>92</sup> In addition to equipping churches and schools, Scripture Union England and Wales launched a specific strategy for mission (Revealing Jesus Framework) in 2020 working with children and young people. This strategy has been created to intentionally work with children and young people who are not church-goers. Their research has identified that 95% of children and young people are not church-goers.<sup>93</sup> Their research also identified that children and young people who decide to follow Jesus, journey through four stages of faith development. The four stages and an explanation are shown in Figure 4.<sup>94</sup>

Figure 4



Volunteer 'Faith Guides' partner with Scripture Union and churches to guide children and young people through these stages using the resources that Scripture Union provides. The final stage of becoming part of a Christian community could involve becoming part of a locally established church. However, the goal of Scripture Union at the end of this four-stage process is to create unique Christian communities that are unique to the culture and context of the children involved, in other words, based on their interests. These groups would be steered by

<sup>92</sup> Scripture Union, 'Who We Are - Scripture Union Global

<sup>93</sup> Scripture Union England and Wales, 'The 95 Campaign', *Scripture Union* <<https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/95-campaign>> [accessed 28 February 2023].

<sup>94</sup> Scripture Union, 'The Revealing Jesus Mission Framework', *Scripture Union* <<https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/revealingjesus>> [accessed 16 December 2022].

the children and young people themselves while guided by their Faith Guides. Scripture Union is keen to emphasise that these groups are not a replacement for church but an addition.<sup>95</sup>

### **3.6.4 Summary of Models**

These three models bring something important to the mission table. Bunge's six ways of speaking about children can be used as the foundation of any mission strategy because it involves all three sides of mission – evangelism, discipleship and social action. The emphasis for Buckland is helping those working with children to see that a child's journey of faith is about more than a one-time decision or salvation prayer. It is not only evangelism then, that will move a child closer to Christ. Again, both discipleship and social action are important. The Revealing Jesus Framework of Scripture Union appears to put more emphasis on evangelism but a closer look reveals that discipleship is also important in their model as is social action or advocacy. The connection that forms the first stage can actually take place through a youth club or other facility that is meeting the needs of the child or their family. Their model also does not end with the child's response but continues to the final stage where the child is encouraged to be part of a Christian community that will continue to nurture their faith development. Summarily all three models are useful templates for taking the discussion of mission work with children forward.

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<sup>95</sup> *Revealing Jesus Celebration & Launch Event*, dir. by SUEnglandandWales, 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3tJzBWolKSA>> [accessed 16 February 2023].

## Chapter 4: Digital Mission with Children

### 4.1 Digital Mission – a Paradigm Shift?

Christian historian Latourette classified the development of Christianity from the early church through World War II into historical eras. He described a thousand years of uncertainty between 500 and 1500 and then great progress between 1500 and 1800. He was highly confident that each era would advance Christianity.<sup>96</sup> Thomas Kuhn, a scientist and philosopher credited for pioneering the phrase ‘paradigm shift’, echoes this idea. He maintained that a paradigm shift always results in progress.<sup>97</sup> Hans Küng, a Swiss theologian, believed that each change made a distinctive contribution to the development of Christianity.<sup>98</sup>

Bosch also stated that a transition from the contemporary enlightenment worldview to the postmodern paradigm is occurring. He ascribes this to a struggle between people who are becoming disillusioned with enlightenment philosophy but are still hesitant to fully abandon it.<sup>99</sup> In Christianity, this translates as a struggle between individuals wanting to embrace the Church but at the same time wanting to express their faith in non-traditional ways. Bosche admits that the Church appears to have lost its authority in many societies. Despite this, though, he is positive that there is potential for progress if there is courage among members and leaders of the Church to embrace change.<sup>100</sup>

The implication here is that if each paradigm change advances Christianity and generates progress, then the present transition into a post-modern paradigm which includes digital culture will be no different. The dilemma is whether the Church will welcome the opportunities presented by digital technology or dismiss them.

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<sup>96</sup> Walls. p.44

<sup>97</sup> Maxine Hairston, ‘The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing’, *College Composition and Communication*, 33.1 (1982), 76 (p. 76) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/357846>>.

<sup>98</sup> Küng.

<sup>99</sup> Bosch, p. 373.

<sup>100</sup> Bosch.

## 4.2 Digital Technology Critical Concerns

### 4.2.1 Christian Culture vs Digital Culture

Albert Borgmann attributes the expansion of digital culture to the downward trend of Christianity. He contends that technological advancement has rendered the Church redundant for many and therefore, Christians must establish a counterculture rather than assimilate with digital culture.<sup>101</sup> Jay Kim also agrees that the Church should counter digital culture, which he claims impedes in-person gatherings as a result of online distraction. He argues that Christians would have a greater effect on culture if we opposed it. Whilst he acknowledges that digital technology can be used as a resource, he suggests that the focus should always be to draw people to Church buildings.<sup>102</sup>

Conversely, Ardi Sastrohartoyo and others remind that the gospel travelled far at the start of the early church because of the Roman-built roads.<sup>103</sup> The roads built and used by non-Christians were a vehicle for the gospel just as digital technology can also be a vehicle for the gospel in this era. Jeff Brawner posits, "if the Church is to effectively reach this sight-and-sound generation for Christ, we must utilize the same media roads much of society is using every day".<sup>104</sup> This would seem to be especially relevant when discussing children's ministry since so much of their lives utilizes digital technology. It would seem a strange choice if their spiritual life is the only aspect where technology does not feature. Tim Hutchings illustrates this point when he says that the internet isn't a realm of evil that must be redeemed since many Christians are already authentically practising their Christianity online daily.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Albert Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2003).p.6

<sup>102</sup> Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020)  
<<https://www.scribd.com/read/447093532/Analog-Church-Why-We-Need-Real-People-Places-and-Things-in-the-Digital-Age>>.

<sup>103</sup> Ardi Raharjo Sastrohartoyo and others, 'The Priority of the Church's Ministry during a Pandemic', *Evangelikal: Jurnal Teologi Injili Dan Pembinaan Warga Jemaat*, 5.2 (2021), p.164  
<<https://doi.org/10.46445/ejti.v5i2.336>>.

<sup>104</sup> Jeff Brawner, 'Meeting and Using the Media', in *The Pentecostal Pastor*, ed. by Thomas E. Trask, Wayne I. Goodall, and Zenas J. Bicket (Springfield, Mo: Gospel Pub. House, 1997)  
<<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2050234/2>>.

<sup>105</sup> Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*, Routledge Research in Religion, Media, and Culture, 8 (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017)  
<<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1485837/4>>.

#### 4.2.2 Negative Effects on Children

Yolanda Reid Chassiakos, MD and others emphasise the importance of a family approach to negate some of the negative effects associated with digital technology that children experience. This includes having regulated use of digital technology allowing for adequate sleep, exercise and nutrition.<sup>106</sup> They note many positive aspects of digital use by children in terms of their development but do acknowledge that unregulated use could lead to total immersion in online activity, leading to a reduction in time spent with family members. A suggested solution is to have a family media plan where time limits and boundaries are set, apps that the whole family can use together are favoured and interaction rather than passive viewing is encouraged.<sup>107</sup> In terms of mission with children, this once again emphasises the importance of parents being involved, especially when activities are taking place online.

#### 4.2.3 Embodiment

Pam Smith notes that one of the fiercest objections to online ministry concerns embodiment.<sup>108</sup> Since the incarnation necessitated the embodiment of Jesus, shouldn't all ministry likewise demand embodiment? This argument relies on the perception that people are not embodied when they are engaged in activities or ministry online. Could children actually receive the gospel or be discipled online? Teresa Berger argues that "without a body, no digital world can be entered, no website visited, and no app installed."<sup>109</sup>

In other words, an individual is completely present when they are online, both the missionary and the receiver, just as they would be in person. Peter Phillips and Bex Lewis insist that the digital age is incarnational, drawing comparisons between how digital technology is

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<sup>106</sup> Yolanda (Linda) Reid Chassiakos and others, 'Children and Adolescents and Digital Media', *Pediatrics*, 138.5 (2016), e20162593 <<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-2593>>.

<sup>107</sup> Reid Chassiakos and others.

<sup>108</sup> Pam Smith, *Online Mission and Ministry - a Theological and Practical Guide.*, 2015 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1469864/3>>.

<sup>109</sup> Teresa Berger, @ *Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, Liturgy, Worship and Society Series (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018) Chapter 2, section 4, paragraph 1 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1496547/4>>.



intertwined with every aspect of our lives and is all about communication and God is communicative in every aspect of life through His Word.<sup>110</sup>

### **4.3 Digital Technology – Positive Advancement?**

Although some in the Church continue to be unsure about whether digital tools can be used for missions, others have come to see the digital space as a place where mission activity can occur. Online mission offers presence and accessibility in novel and exciting ways. There is also a place for hybridity, that is where online mission occurs in conjunction with offline mission. Philip Meadows notes that when many saw the possibilities offered by digital technology, they thought that there would be a digital takeover. Whilst digital technology has become radically intertwined with life, he argues there has been more of a convergence of old and new than a takeover.<sup>111</sup> Keeble's mission to, with and for are all possible online with this understanding.

### **4.4 Digital Pioneers**

Digital pioneers are those who have decided to enter the digital space and mediate Christian learning, practice and formation that others would believe can only take place offline. These pioneers have utilized the interactive aspects of digital technology and the tools created to be able to work with children whose 'normal' as digital natives are to use a digital device and intertwine their everyday offline life with their online life.<sup>112</sup> These pioneers have done this by creating apps and games using concepts that will be familiar to children since they use other recreational and educational apps and games.

Digital pioneers are not just making use of available digital tools but are aware that for digital natives, technology is their context, their culture. To engage digital natives missionally, it is

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<sup>110</sup> Peter Phillips, Bex Lewis, and Kate Bruce, 'Digital Communication, the Church and Mission', *Church Growth Resourcing Mission Bulletin*, June 2013

<[https://www.academia.edu/11523511/Digital\\_Communication\\_The\\_Church\\_and\\_Mission](https://www.academia.edu/11523511/Digital_Communication_The_Church_and_Mission)>.

<sup>111</sup> Philip R. Meadows, 'Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture', *Mission Studies*, 29.2 (2012), 163–82

<<https://doi.org/10.1163/15733831-12341235>>.

<sup>112</sup> Meadows.

necessary to engage them where they are, in their context.<sup>113</sup> For example, just as a missionary in the past would have given a child, paper resources to go home and read, now they can give them a link to download, a QR code to scan or recommend an app to use. Even more than this, a child can be engaged with the gospel whilst they are on their device perhaps through an app that has been recommended by a friend. The app would be their first contact with the gospel, even before meeting a missionary or children's worker offline or online.

#### 4.5 Digital Culture and Child Culture

Those who create Christian apps or games for children to use must understand the culture of the children they are attempting to engage. This is what would distinguish between digital technology being used as a tool by a children's worker and the missional cultural engagement advocated by Katherine Schmidt.<sup>114</sup>

Digital technology for a child is not a distraction from their 'real' life, rather it is embedded into their lives<sup>115</sup>. Just as children could lose track of time playing outside and forget to do their chores, children using their devices can be distracted by them. The problem here is not the device itself but the moderation of it, just as with any aspect of a child's life.

#### 4.6 The Importance of Digital Design

A child who is presented with a digital resource that is not understood by the adult who recommended it or has not been designed with them in mind, will not be able to engage with it. This also relates to the interactive nature of technology. Children are used to being able to scroll, touch, move around, control what happens and interact with others on apps and games.<sup>116</sup> If Christian content is static and created only to be consumed rather than interacted with, this may also reduce engagement. Interactivity in apps and games is very important

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<sup>113</sup> Katherine Schmidt, 'Digital Inculturation', in *Missio Dei in a Digital Age*, ed. by Jonas Kurlberg and Peter M Phillips, 2020 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2059308/7>>.

<sup>114</sup> Schmidt.

<sup>115</sup> Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1518245/3>>.

<sup>116</sup> Feifei Liu, 'Design for Kids Based on Their Stage of Physical Development', *Nielsen Norman Group*, 2018 <<https://www.nngroup.com/articles/children-ux-physical-development/>> [accessed 19 May 2021].

because it helps children to interact with the Bible and be able to see themselves within the story.

Additionally, Hollinghurst describes how those who have no church background find it difficult to receive the message of the gospel without a process. The gospel contains a new narrative that the receiver may never have heard and it is not just as simple as changing the language. Firstly the missionary needs to immerse themselves in the culture of the receiver as has already been discussed but additionally, the receiver needs time and space to be able to reflect and interact with the gospel.<sup>117</sup>

This aligns with earlier discussions in this dissertation concerning responses to the gospel not necessarily involving a one-time decision but rather there is a time of exploration or a journey of progressing closer to Christ. Chapter three also noted that children learn through exploration, discovery, play and interaction with information. Mary Hess notes that in digital culture there has been a change in learning styles from teacher-led to student-led, meaning that learners prefer to seek out what they are curious about and interact with it. They want to participate in learning rather than being lectured.<sup>118</sup>

#### **4.7 Examples of Digital Mission**

This section will discuss examples of missional efforts that demonstrate how digital technology can be used in mission with children. There are many examples of Christian games such as those produced by TruPlay and Scarlet City Studios.<sup>119</sup> This discussion, however, will consider Superbook created by The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and The Guardians of Ancorra created by Scripture Union England and Wales. It will be discussed how the affordances of digital technology in these examples are of benefit or detriment when considering the models of mission outlined in the previous chapter.

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<sup>117</sup> Hollinghurst.

<sup>118</sup> Mary E. Hess, 'A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation: A New Culture of Learning: Digital Storytelling and Faith Formation', *Dialog*, 53.1 (2014), 12–22 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12084>>.

<sup>119</sup> TruPlay, 'About -- TruPlay | Play in the Light' <<https://www.truplaygames.com/about>> [accessed 28 February 2023]; Scarlet City Studios, 'Scarlet City Studios – Tell an Alternative Story' <<https://scarletcitystudios.com/>> [accessed 28 February 2023].

### 4.7.1 Superbook

The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) produced an animated Bible series for children in 1981. Following its distribution and success in various countries, in 2011 CBN began remaking the show using 3D CGI technology and there are currently 68 of these new episodes.<sup>120</sup> The episodes begin by portraying a real-life dilemma, next, the children are whisked away by time travel inside an animated Bible story where they interact with Bible characters. In the end, they will come back to face whatever dilemma was going on and will now have found a solution through the Bible story.<sup>121</sup> Superbook is shown on TV, available as DVDs, on YouTube and now integrated into the Superbook Website and App.

The Superbook Website was created in 2009 and the App launched in 2013 has 10 Million + downloads.<sup>122</sup> The website and app work in conjunction with each other as they have all the same features. Both can be used without creating an account, however, when children register, there are benefits such as a unique username and Superbook Character. They can play games and take part in competitions where they will receive points and be able to see where they rank on the scoreboard displayed on the website.<sup>123</sup> This helps children to realise that there are a whole community of Superbook users besides themselves or their immediate environment. They can also use their points to get new outfits for their Superbook character.

The colours, design, animation and rewards are all aiming to ensure that children engage and stay engaged with the content. The homepage shows how many days the Bible has been engaged with and streaks are awarded when this is consecutive without breaks. Daily quests encourage users to visit the app each day and a reminder can be set which then allows notifications to be sent to the user.<sup>124</sup> This is an illustration of persuasive technology, as

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<sup>120</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Superbook - Animation Series - History' <<https://www.cbn.com/superbook/series-history.aspx>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>121</sup> Episodes of Superbook can be watched on their Youtube channel. 'Superbook - YouTube' <<https://www.youtube.com/>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>122</sup> This information was found via the Google Play App Store.

<sup>123</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Superbook Kids Site - Free Online Games - Bible-Based Internet Games for Kids', *Superbook* <<http://uk-en.superbook.cbn.com/>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>124</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Superbook Kids Site - Free Online Games -Bible-Based Internet Games for Kids'.

described by Hutchings.<sup>125</sup> Numerous applications designed for both children and adults employ this persuasive technology. Thus, this is an example of a technological innovation being utilised for religious purposes.

Some may view persuasive technology as unethical but there are parental controls within Superbook that can be used to disable reminders. The app and website also contain the full text of the Bible. On the app, the user goes through the Bible text, they will see icons that will direct them to other content on the app that is relevant to that verse. The app also encourages users to share Bible verses with friends although when parental controls are on, the app will ask for parental permission before allowing the share via email or other platforms.<sup>126</sup>

There is also a section for those who want to know God and become a Christian. When a child decides to commit to following Jesus, they fill in a form to tell Superbook then there is an opportunity to download a new believer's 90-day devotional. This is also followed up by sending an email to the parent who has registered for the App or the child is encouraged to put their parent's email if they do not have an account. The received email also contains the phone number of a children's worker who can call to follow up.<sup>127</sup>

Superbook also produces content for families. Every episode of Superbook has a downloadable family discussion guide so that the whole family can be involved.<sup>128</sup> In the UK and other countries, they also equip churches with a curriculum that goes alongside the resources available for the child and their family (Superbook Academy).<sup>129</sup> Lessons have also been produced for RE lessons in schools.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Tim Hutchings, 'Design and the Digital Bible: Persuasive Technology and Religious Reading', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 32.2 (2017), 205–19 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2017.1298903>>.

<sup>126</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Superbook Kids Site - Free Online Games - Bible-Based Internet Games for Kids'.

<sup>127</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Superbook Kids Site - Free Online Games - Bible-Based Internet Games for Kids'.

<sup>128</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'At Home with Superbook', *CBN Animation*, 2020 <<https://www.superbookproject.com/at-home-with-superbook/>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>129</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Superbook Academy', *CBN Animation*, 2019 <<https://www.superbookproject.com/our-work/superbook-academy/>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>130</sup> 'Bringing the Bible to UK Schools', *CBN Animation*, 2019 <<https://www.superbookproject.com/stories/bringing-the-bible-to-uk-schools/>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

CBN has been clear that its goal for Superbook is evangelism and discipleship.<sup>131</sup> Every episode of Superbook ends with the Salvation Poem song.<sup>132</sup> Much attention has also been given to discipleship, both online and offline.

#### 4.7.1.2 Application of Superbook in Mission

##### Bunge's Model and Superbook

Bunge advocated that children should be included in church life but using resources that they can understand that would teach them the moral lessons they would need to live a Christian life. Superbook aims to do this. Their mission statement states that Superbook teaches moral truths and they have been able to achieve this using the affordances of digital technology.<sup>133</sup> The curriculum provided for churches also includes digital resources.<sup>134</sup> Bunge also encouraged that family should be included in any mission that takes place with children. Again this has been achieved by firstly requiring a parent to register the account for the child if extra benefits are to be enjoyed, incorporating parental controls, producing a downloadable family discussion guide for use alongside every episode and emailing parents if their child has filled in the online form indicating a decision to follow Christ.

Bunge also emphasised the need for questions that children have to be validated. The question section in the Superbook app has many preset questions that the creators believe many children would want to ask with answers provided. Aside from this, there is a contact form on the website that allows children to contact someone at CBN with their questions. Bunge also advocated that children have gifts right now that can be utilized. The Superbook app has functionality that allows children to share scriptures with their friends. Whilst Superbook does not appear to be involved in Social action with children in the UK or America, they do carry out such projects in other countries. For example, they hold Superbook Clubs in

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<sup>131</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Digital Evangelism & Discipleship', *CBN Animation*, 2019 <<https://www.superbookproject.com/our-work/digital-evangelism-and-discipleship/>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>132</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Salvation Poem', *CBN Animation*, 2019 <<https://www.superbookproject.com/our-work/salvation-poem/>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

<sup>133</sup> 'Our Mission – Superbook' <<https://superbook.org.uk/our-mission/>> [accessed 27 May 2022].

<sup>134</sup> 'Superbook Academy - Great Commission', *Evangelical Alliance* <<https://www.eauk.org/great-commission/resources/superbook-academy>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

Cuba where they provide food for children in need. In India, children from slums were taught to read and write using Superbook materials and in Ukraine, children have received counselling and mentorship.<sup>135</sup>

### Buckland's Model and Superbook

Buckland's approach as discussed, emphasises early spiritual involvement from the Church. Unlike those who advocate that evangelism can wait until after the age of accountability, Buckland sees passivity as a mistake resulting in a child drifting away from their starting point in God. Superbook has features that would make it appealing to those who have some knowledge of the Bible and those that don't. Superbook uses digital technology to engage children from an early age in ways that they are used to. Children are used to watching animated stories in CGI, they are used to gaining points by playing games and are used with being rewarded for engaging with apps daily.

An integral part of Buckland's model is the emphasis on the journey of faith, either moving closer to Christ or away from Christ rather than a focus on a one-time decision. Superbook does offer the opportunity to follow Jesus but there is more emphasis on the journey of faith. There are many opportunities for exploration and discovery. This is one of the great positives of the gospel being presented in this way. Children can spend time on this app that they just wouldn't be able to do with an in-person meeting which would have to come to an end when the time is up. They can have the space to explore on their own, yet have all the resources they need at their fingertips at any time of the day or night. Printed resources would also not have the level of interactivity or personalisation that the app has.

Since Buckland suggests that even after a decision to follow Christ is taken, a child could change direction once more, moving away from Him, he emphasises discipleship. The Superbook app provides discipleship resources in a way that is continually relevant to whatever stage the child is at in their journey. Whether they are discovering the Bible for the first time or are attempting to commit to daily reading habits, the app has relevant technology

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<sup>135</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'International Outreach', *CBN Animation*, 2019  
<<https://www.superbookproject.com/our-work/international-outreach/>> [accessed 24 February 2023].

that can help. Since there are family resources and children's church curriculum integrated, this makes the process a smooth one.

### The Revealing Jesus Framework and Superbook

Scripture Union's model requires an initial connect stage as their focus is on the unchurched. Although not immediately obvious, there are ways that digital technology can be helpful in making the first contact. Firstly, a child could unexpectedly encounter the app on the App Store or the videos on YouTube without anyone letting them know about it. The videos on YouTube also advertise the app. Secondly, part of the initial contact is about finding common ground. Since the Superbook app is presented in a way that children are used to, a suggestion by a friend or a children's worker to take a look at the app may be less likely to be rejected. Once a child is connected to the app, there are lots of opportunities for exploration and also to respond either by asking questions, reading further, exploring character profiles or watching videos that provide context for the Bible stories. The final stage of The Revealing Jesus Framework is ensuring that children become part of a Christian community where they can grow. This could be fostered by their family or the church curriculum but more than this, Scripture Union emphasises that children could create their own community not as a replacement for church but as an addition under the guidance of faith guides.

Superbook provides this sense of community by incorporating interactive features. Firstly children can share Bible verses with their friends from within the app but also they are connected to children all over the world who are also part of the Superbook Club through the website. Additionally, children's workers could organise online (via Zoom or similar) or offline in-person Superbook Clubs where children could form a community around a love for Superbook.

Many of the affordances that can be seen in excellent secular children's apps are included in this app. It is not just an excellent system but it is producing results. According to Brown and Fraser's research carried out on behalf of CBN in 2017, since 2009 over 1.2 million children all



over the world have committed to following Jesus and in the UK, there are more than 400 decisions every month.<sup>136</sup>

#### 4.7.2 Guardians of Ancora

Guardians of Ancora is a digital game for children created and launched by Scripture Union in 2015. The game is set in the fictional city of Ancora where light is needed for society to function in peace. The light has been stolen and the job of the players of the game is to bring back the light. They do this by taking on the role of Guardians who in “discovering the truth of the saga stories, bring that truth back to Ancora and are rewarded with firebugs which are used to light the central light in Ancora”.<sup>137</sup> Guardians see themselves inside the Bible stories (saga stories) as they search for these truths. They interact with Bible characters and listen to conversations to understand the story, even becoming characters within the story, for example being one of those who gave out the bread and fish in the feeding of the five thousand. In the process, there are various puzzles and challenges to do.<sup>138</sup>

The game can be played without an account but if a parent sets up an account, they will get emails informing them of the progress their child has been making and other resources. This would also help siblings who share a device to be able to keep their progress in their own account.<sup>139</sup>

Children can create posts about their progress in the game. These can be stored in the Creative Hub and shown to friends later. Sticker posts can be made public on the Community newsfeed which means other players can see them. Players can also friend and follow other players, however, this is just so that their friend’s name will appear in Ancora.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> ‘Our Mission – Superbook’.

<sup>137</sup> Scripture Union England and Wales, ‘Discovering the Bible in a Digital World’, *Scripture Union* <<https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/story/discovering-bible-digital-world>> [accessed 26 February 2023].

<sup>138</sup> Scripture Union England and Wales, ‘Discovering the Bible in a Digital World’, *Scripture Union*

<sup>139</sup> Scripture Union England and Wales, ‘Frequently Asked Questions’, *Guardians of Ancora*, 2017 <<https://guardiansofancora.com/frequently-asked-questions/>> [accessed 26 February 2023].

<sup>140</sup> Scripture Union England and Wales, ‘Frequently Asked Questions’.

Scripture Union England and Wales also provide Guardians of Ancora resources for parents, churches, schools RE provision and also for Clubs.<sup>141</sup>

#### 4.7.2.2 Application of Guardians of Ancora in Mission

##### Guardians of Ancora and The Revealing Jesus Framework (Scripture Union)

The Guardians of Ancora game was created by Scripture Union in response to a large-scale research project, undertaken by Christian Research on behalf of Scripture Union. The research explored faith and faith formation among children aged 8-11 and their parents. The research showed that 95% of children do not attend church and they did not enjoy school religious provision, leaving any spiritual formation up to parents.<sup>142</sup> Many children within this age group reported not being aware of what the Bible contains and believed that only older people or those who teach in the church would be able to understand it. This means they don't see it as being accessible to them. It was also found that parents were not sure of how to talk to their children about spiritual matters.<sup>143</sup> These findings were echoed by the Bible Society Pass it On Report in 2014 which found that many children did not know many common Bible stories and could not distinguish between which stories were in the Bible and which were from children's TV programs.<sup>144</sup> However, both reports found that children did not find Bible stories uninteresting. In response to this Scripture Union began to discuss what they could do to make the Bible and therefore the gospel accessible to children who do not go to church.

As expected, this game fits well with Scripture Union's Revealing Jesus Framework. The first stage of the framework is 'connect' and the Guardians of Ancorra game/app works as a connection point where common ground can be found. Maggie Barfield, the product developer identified that connection was easier between children and mission workers or

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<sup>141</sup> Scripture Union England and Wales, 'About the Game', *Guardians of Ancora*, 2017 <<https://guardiansofancora.com/about-the-game/>> [accessed 26 February 2023].

<sup>142</sup> Scripture Union England and Wales, 'The 95 Campaign'.

<sup>143</sup> Maggie Barfield, 'Helping Children Discover the Bible in the Digital Realm', 2016 <[https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible\\_in\\_transmission/files/2016\\_spring/BiT\\_Spring\\_2016\\_Barfield.pdf](https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible_in_transmission/files/2016_spring/BiT_Spring_2016_Barfield.pdf)> [accessed 29 May 2021].

<sup>144</sup> Bible Society, *Pass It On* <[https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/projects/Bible-Society-Report\\_030214\\_final\\_.pdf](https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/projects/Bible-Society-Report_030214_final_.pdf)> [accessed 28 May 2021].

church teachers because the perceived hierarchy was broken down through playing the game. When the game was used as part of a Bible club for example where children and adults played the game together, children would be more knowledgeable about gameplay and show the adults what to do. This helped them to connect on the same level engaging in collaborative learning instead of the adult presenting as the 'expert'.<sup>145</sup>

The creators have worked hard to overturn the view presented in the research findings that the Bible is only for religious people. By encouraging gamification of the Bible, they are allowing children to see themselves in the stories of the Bible. They are able to reflect on what they see and hear and are encouraged to post their reactions. All of this is wrapped up in a game that has the look and features of other secular games. Scripture Union enlisted the help of professional game designers that have worked with Disney and Pixar to make the game competitive.<sup>146</sup> They intended that those who do not know about the Bible will be attracted to the game itself and therefore discover Jesus through the stories as part of the gameplay. To this end, they encourage those who play the game to introduce it to their friends and they also advertised the game on the networks where children who play similar games socialise.

Of course, there is plenty of scope to explore the Bible through this game but there are no direct invitations to respond to the gospel or follow-up discipleship within the game. Instead, they encourage churches to use the game as a way of connecting with children and giving them room to explore but then to also use the resources produced by Scripture Union alongside to give more explanation to children, a forum to respond and then to provide an "intentional Christian community".<sup>147</sup> Hutchings suggests therefore that Guardians of Ancora "shapes and is reshaped by the practices, aspirations, material culture and social networks of congregations".<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Digital Humanities and Christianity: An Introduction*, ed. by Tim Hutchings and Claire Clivaz, Introductions to Digital Humanities Religion, volume 4, part 4, section 4, para. 4 (Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter, 2021) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2967665/4>>.

<sup>146</sup> Scripture Union England and Wales, 'About the Game'.

<sup>147</sup> Hutchings and Clivaz. part 4, section 4, para. 2

<sup>148</sup> Tim Hutchings, "The Light of a Thousand Stories", *Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, Vol 14 (2019), 159-178 Pages (p. 19) <<https://doi.org/10.17885/HEIUP.REL.2019.0.23952>>.

## Bunge's Model and Guardians of Ancora

Bunge advocates that children should be involved in Church life. An admirable aspect of Guardians of Ancora is that it was created specifically as a result of research where children had expressed that they thought the Bible could only be understood by older religious people. Portraying the Bible in a game that children can easily relate to, could change their perception and help them to see that the Bible and therefore God is for them too. This would give them a sense that they can experience God right now and don't need to wait until they are an adult. An effort is made to include the family of children who play the game by producing resources that the family can use together alongside the app. A parent can also create an account and receive updates about what their child is doing on the app.

Bunge does insist that evangelism, discipleship and social action must be part of mission. The question is, can this be achieved online? Superbook was able to include evangelism and discipleship within the app itself and then this would lead to groups forming offline that would then lead to social action opportunities. In the case of Guardians of Ancora, there is a hybrid approach as it has been designed to be used as part of a strategy that includes the Church. The app itself sensitises children to the Bible but doesn't have enough explanation and life application to be described as discipleship. This is expected to take place offline using other resources from Scripture Union. There is also potential for communities to form around gaming as an interest.

## Buckland's Model and Guardians of Ancora

The Scripture Union research that provided the background for the game identified that "children have an instinctive and expectant attitude to prayer".<sup>149</sup> This supports the view of Buckland that children start with God and are on a journey moving closer to or further from God in their life. Buckland also advocates teaching children from a position of 'belongingness' and the game supports this by allowing children to engage with the Bible. The game also allows children to engage with the Bible no matter which stage in their spiritual journey they

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<sup>149</sup> Barfield, p. 26.

are at. This important aspect of mission is possible because of the interactive nature of this technology.

The discussion thus far has illustrated that it has been possible to utilize digital technology to achieve the aims of mission with children in line with the three models of mission identified. Whilst both examples encourage a combination of online and offline participation, children have been readily engaging online.

#### **4.8 Digital Mission and Bible Literacy**

What is clear from both Superbook and the Guardians of Ancorra is that Bible literacy is seen as a key part of their mission strategy. Hutchings highlights that Guardians of Ancora has an interesting undercurrent, in that users are sent “on a quest to change the world by learning the Bible”.<sup>150</sup> The intent is that the game world is a parallel to the everyday lived experience where the Bible brings light and solutions to the world. This is a very Bible-centric view which reflects the view of Scripture Union which avers that encountering the Bible will lead to an encounter with God.<sup>151</sup> Both apps seek to help children to not just read the Bible but to engage with it. Bobby Gruenwald opines that “content isn’t king anymore, it has been dethroned by engagement”.<sup>152</sup> This is not to say that the Bible is not enough by itself, but that in light of the interactivity made possible by digital technology, it is what children are used to. Hutchings also agrees that “Bible publishers have to move beyond the static page and allow readers to become part of the story”.<sup>153</sup> It is necessary to understand that digital technology will not simply replicate what is already available, rather creators look for new problems that can be solved using digital technology. How can the work of mission be made easier in the digital age? This is the question that the Christian Broadcasting Network and Scripture Union have asked and answered with the technology they use.

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<sup>150</sup> Hutchings, “The Light of a Thousand Stories”, p. 20.

<sup>151</sup> Hutchings, “The Light of a Thousand Stories”.

<sup>152</sup> Bobby Gruenewald, ‘The Engagment Economy’, in *Book: A Futurist’s Manifesto: Essays from the Bleeding Edge of Publishing*, ed. by Hugh McGuire and Brian O’Leary, 1st ed (Boston, MA: O’Reilly Media, 2012) Para. 1 <<https://book.pressbooks.com/chapter/youversion-bobby-gruenewald>> [accessed 29 May 2021].

<sup>153</sup> Tim Hutchings, ‘Now the Bible Is an App: Digital Media and the Changing Patterns of Religious Authority’, in *Religion, Media, and Social Change*, ed. by Kennet Granholm, Marcus Moberg, and Sofia Sjö, Routledge Research in Religion, Media, and Culture, 5 (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Frances Group, 2015) Section 2, para. 2 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1665891/18>>. [accessed 29 May 2021]

#### 4.9 Digital Mission, Bible Interpretation and Religious Authority

Superbook makes attempts at helping children to interpret what they are reading by providing context through character and place profiles, question and answers and their animated videos and links to these are embedded in the text itself. The Guardians of Ancora game on the other hand allows readers to be a part of the story but doesn't give help within the app to interpret the stories whilst encouraging users to reflect and post prayers, reactions and stickers.

Since the Guardians of Ancora game is part of a wider mission strategy for Scripture Union, they have made provision for this through offline resources and community, however, Barfield insists that the app can stand alone in spiritual formation as well. She suggests that the app, even without any hybridity can move children forward in their journey with God whether they are hearing about the Bible for the first time or whether they are already followers of Jesus.<sup>154</sup> This approach appears to give the individual agency in their own spiritual formation journey. Rachel Wagner suggests that putting the responsibility for interpretation on the individual challenges the authority of traditional Church hierarchy.<sup>155</sup>

In this missional context, since these are children, what will the future of the Church look like when the children are using apps that allow them to interact with the text themselves digitally? Ruth Tsuria and others suggest that apps can guide users' religious engagement with digital artefacts and inform how they understand what religion looks like as presented through such practices".<sup>156</sup>

It would seem that the Church will need to be open to collaborative learning and strategies. This dissertation has shown that mission must include evangelism, discipleship and social action therefore efforts must be made then to ensure that mission does not become over

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<sup>154</sup> Hutchings and Clivaz.

<sup>155</sup> Rachel Wagner, 'You Are What You Install: Religious Authenticity and Identity in Mobile Apps', in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. by Heidi Campbell (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2012) <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1624028/24>>.

<sup>156</sup> Ruth Tsuria and others, 'Transferred, Mediated or Transformed: Considering the Design, Features, and Presentation of Sacred Text Mobile Applications', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 36.1 (2021), 57–78 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1878633>>.

individualistic in that materials are created and uploaded online for interaction but no follow-up takes place. Heidi Campbell's theory of Religious Social Shaping of Technology, however, would suggest that the Church could still shape technology to enforce religious authority and ideas.<sup>157</sup> For example, Superbook uses some of the episodes of Superbook to recommend church attendance and involvement.<sup>158</sup> The Guardians of Ancora game when opened for the first time each day asks a question, one of which is "do you think it is important to go to Church"?<sup>159</sup> These could be considered as subtle ways that have been incorporated into the apps to encourage submission to traditional spiritual authority.

#### **4.10 Online Mission and the Local Church**

The discussion so far has considered two resources that facilitate mission online and also provide context for offline mission. It should not be forgotten that these are both large charitable organisations and do not speak for what local churches or denominations are doing missionally online. It is fair to say that local churches may not have the resources to create apps on the scale of the ones that have been examined here. Illustratively, Barfield has revealed that her vision for the Guardians of Ancora has not been completely realised because of the costs to produce something that can compete with other apps in the app store.<sup>160</sup> However, both creators do provide substantial resources for churches to use online as well as offline which would help them to engage with children outside of church and also those who attend. More research is needed to establish statistically how many churches in the UK do engage with these particular or similar resources. It is outside of the scope of this dissertation to analyse this and establish reasons for the engagement or non-engagement with the digital resources provided by such organisations at the local church level.

#### **4.11 Online Mission - The Covid-19 Pandemic**

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<sup>157</sup> Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, Religion, Media and Culture, 1. ed (London New York: Routledge, 2010) Chapter 2 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/1615807/10>>.

<sup>158</sup> Christian Broadcasting Network, 'Superbook Episode Guide', *Superbook* <<http://sg-en.superbook.cbn.com/content/isaiah-2>> [accessed 27 February 2023].

<sup>159</sup> Hutchings, "The Light of a Thousand Stories", p. 169.

<sup>160</sup> Hutchings and Clivaz.

The Covid-19 Pandemic that began in March 2020 led to churches having to close their doors and therefore in-person, offline mission could not take place. This posed several challenges for churches, including how to navigate children's ministry. Scripture Union Canada commissioned research and produced a report titled, 'Do we need a new plan for children's ministry'?<sup>161</sup> The research was conducted by a group of researchers and ministry leaders with a focus on Brazil, Canada, the UK and the US in 2021 on behalf of Scripture Union Canada.

The report suggests that the pandemic exposed what has already been an issue for some time. Since children could not come to church as usual, parents became responsible for their children's spiritual formation and there was a realisation that they felt underequipped and underresourced to do this. It became apparent that there had been no partnership or relationship in many cases between parents and the church regarding their children. This led to a lack of engagement with whatever materials churches provided, perhaps due to teachers not being able to directly facilitate lessons and so the pressure would be on parents to ensure any materials given were used or to ensure their children attended online provision. There was also a feeling that there was no direct strategy for children's ministry for many churches as they were preoccupied with navigating how to provide ministry for adults.

Specifically, an identified problem was the lack of understanding about how to engage children online. Children's workers reported finding it difficult to connect with children without in-person contact. Many churches attempted to use Zoom and other live platforms but found that the resources they had been using did not translate well online. The report also suggested that of those who used Zoom, some did not explore the interactivity that it offers but instead offered passive content which was not well received. Where denominational or para-church resources were used by churches, parents criticised that these were not adjusted or tailored to be relevant for the local church context.

Sarah Holmes also conducted a study of online content that 100 churches from various denominations in the UK uploaded online for children to engage with during the lockdown

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<sup>161</sup> Sarah Holmes, Lawson Murray, and others, *Multi-National Children's Ministry Report 2021*, October 2021 <<https://scriptureunion.ca/wp-content/uploads/Multi-national-Childrens-Ministry-Report-2021.pdf>>.



period. She found that the majority of churches produced recorded content that consisted of majorly teaching content although 40% of the churches did encourage some sort of interactive content either by asking children to complete a craft activity or worksheet that had been sent for use alongside or by mentioning a Zoom session that would be upcoming. Holmes reported that the churches that used the recorded videos alongside a Zoom call were seen to have a better approach.<sup>162</sup> Here, a hybrid approach is seen as favourable and effective. This correlates with the view that forming community is important as reflected in Scripture Union's Revealing Jesus Framework discussed in Chapter 3. Holmes noted that much of the online content was of a discipleship nature which it was felt reflected the nature of offline content that had been in use pre-pandemic. However, it was highlighted that many of the videos did not require prior knowledge of the Bible and so could be accessible by those who are not Christians but there were no opportunities for a salvation response given in the majority of settings.<sup>163</sup>

In another similar study of Norway, South Africa, The Netherlands and the UK, Holmes and others highlighted that of those churches who provided children's ministry during the pandemic, their main focus was those who usually attend the church Sunday provision with identical issues identified as the Scripture Union report.<sup>164</sup> Meanwhile, there have been positive reports about large numbers of adults who viewed church online provision during the pandemic but hadn't previously attended church. Since churches have reopened, churches have changed the way they provide services and many of those who attended church for the first time during the pandemic online have started attending church in person and made commitments to follow Jesus.<sup>165</sup> Post-pandemic, many churches have continued to provide online services for those who cannot attend in person. It would have been wonderful if this had also been reported in children's ministry.

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<sup>162</sup> Sarah E Holmes, 'An Exploration of Online Christian Faith Nurture for Children, Using UK Churches as a Case Study', *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, 25.2 (2021), 169–83 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056997120965989>>.

<sup>163</sup> Holmes.

<sup>164</sup> Sarah Holmes, Astrid Sandsmark, and others, 'Reflections on Ministry amongst Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 20.1 (2021), 82–106 <<https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-bja10019>>.

<sup>165</sup> Evangelical Alliance, 'Changing Church Report: Responding to the Coronavirus Crisis', *Evangelical Alliance* <<https://www.eauk.org/resources/what-we-offer/reports/changing-church>> [accessed 27 February 2023].

The problems experienced do not appear to concern the technology itself, but rather, the lack of knowledge on how to engage with it. As has been discussed, children use digital technology every day, therefore connecting with them through these means during the pandemic should have been an engaging experience that could have made an impact among those who do not go to church as well as those who are regular attendees. However, now that it has become apparent the opportunities available through digital technology; the benefits and challenges, churches have the opportunity to make a change.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research**

### **5.1 Conclusion**

The purpose of this dissertation has been to contribute to the discussion of digital mission with children. Keeble's practical concepts of 'mission with' (relationship, discipleship), 'mission to' (evangelism) and 'mission for' (social action), discussed in chapter two provided a useful summary of mission in what is referred to as a postmodern age. A key discussion partner has been David Bosche who defined mission theologically emphasising the need for mission to include evangelism, discipleship and social action which has been echoed by several authors and researchers in this dissertation.

Bosche has also championed the discussion of paradigm shifts that he insists have advanced Christianity globally through periods of uncertainty and struggle resulting in progress. It is the assertion of this study that digital technology and culture are part of the post-modern paradigm and despite initial struggles and objections if embraced could cause the Church to advance. Media and technology have long been utilized by the Church but the sticking point of fully embracing digital culture appears to be centred around online ministry.

These objections summarily relate to the need for incarnational and embodied ministry. However, scholars such as Smith, Berger, Phillips and Lewis allay these concerns by advocating that online presence is also embodied and relational. Moreover, it is argued that relationships can be formed online when the technological affordances that allow this to happen are used to the fullest.

The Covid-19 Pandemic highlighted the need for the Church to have constructive dialogue around the ways that digital technology has become central to everyday life. The enforced government lockdowns that took place did not just necessitate that digital tools were used but that the digital space was inhabited. Families, work colleagues, church and social gatherings all had to move online. This became a conundrum for many settings that were not prepared and the Church was not spared. The Church had to hurriedly make provisions for services online and engage in overnight theological discussion on how sacred space could be

replicated online, if sacraments could take place and how it would be possible to engage in Mission online. That conversation is still ongoing as the Church creates a post-pandemic response. This dissertation has highlighted that an important part of the Church has been mostly excluded from this post-pandemic response and that is the Children's Ministry. Research that has taken place has tended to focus on what adults experienced during the pandemic.

This dissertation then intends to bring balance to the discussion by discussing missional online work with children. To understand the expectations of mission among children, it has been necessary to examine the progression of mission and theological views of the child. It has been observed that the concept of original sin, the age of accountability, the history of the Sunday School movement and the responsibility of parents in the spiritual development of their children have all been contributing factors in the Church's current view on mission among children and particularly children of primary school age who are the focus of this study. Arguably evangelism which this study has established is a key part of mission has been neglected among children, particularly those whose parents attend church already. Studies post-pandemic has discovered that the existing provision for children had a strong discipleship focus and was concentrated on those who attended Sunday Church. There was little existing engagement with digital technology or online ministry. This left many churches overwhelmed in the face of having to engage with families online.

Notable efforts were made to record videos that children could view online however these were criticised as being instructional rather than interactive. Few churches did attempt to use other interactive platforms alongside the static videos such as YouTube Live and Zoom with mixed results. For some churches, this was applauded, but for others, there was little engagement. Church leaders and parents who participated in studies identified that a primary cause of this was that the lesson content being used offline could not simply be translated online. There had been no strategy in place concerning how to engage with children online. Parents felt that pressure was put on them to engage with the content provided by the Church and discovered that they were underequipped in how to partner with the Church in the spiritual formation of their children. Queries concerning just who is responsible for the spiritual formation of children from Christian homes have been debated for many years. This

study highlighted that Spurgeon advocated that the children of Christian parents needed the three-pronged approach of evangelism, discipleship and care from the church just as much as those outside of the Church.

Various post-pandemic research has suggested that churches use the experience of the pandemic to formulate a new strategy for children's ministry that is more collaborative, relational, and evangelistic and takes a hybrid approach of both online and offline resources.

Churches did express regret that they were unable to engage in mission to those outside of their church congregation during the pandemic. They were unable again, to reconfigure their in-person missional programs to an online setting. It was noted that para-church organisations were creating content that could be used by the local church but churches did not have the structures in place to customise these for their settings. Unfortunately, many churches were not already engaging with these resources or creating their own since it has been highlighted by Scripture Union (England and Wales) and others that as many as 95 percent of children are outside the Church. Since children do inhabit online spaces, it would seem improvident to not also inhabit the same spaces and also provide resources that can be accessed online by these children.

Examples of online mission resources from Scripture Union (Guardians of Ancora) and The Christian Broadcasting Network (Superbook) when examined in this study proved to be in line with the three models of mission studied. This supports the assertion that theologically supported mission can take place fully online and also be supplemented by offline resources, thus offering hybridity.

The apps studied made the best use of the available technology but also shaped it to their own needs as identified as possible by Heidi Campbell in her theory of Religious Social Shaping of Technology. Most interesting is how the Guardians of Ancora game was able to incorporate a direct response to the research that led to its production. Scripture Union research highlighted that children who don't go to church and had no knowledge of the Bible believed that the Bible could only be accessed or understood by 'religious' people who attend church.

By giving them permission through the game to become part of the story and interact with the text, this was demonstrating to them that the Bible is for them too.

Both resources studied have yielded results in documented decisions to follow Christ. However, as all three models of mission advocated, the faith journey is more than a one-time conversion event. Faith development occurs in stages and whatever the starting point of an individual, mission aims to help them on their journey by providing opportunities for connection, exploration, response and community. Whilst this study has been vocal about the relationship between evangelism and discipleship, the third component of social action is also essential. Of course, social action is a practical step that would often require signposting or giving other offline support. This is why many advocates of online ministry such as Meadows are additionally advocates of a hybrid approach to mission.

As highlighted, there is limited research in the area of digital mission, especially among children. This study has added to the discussion by bringing together knowledge from missiology, the theology of childhood and digital theology.

## **5.2 Future Recommendations for Research**

It would be conducive to further evaluate existing online mission resources to gain a larger understanding of varying approaches and the extent to which each resource uses or modifies the affordances of the technology. It would also be beneficial to discover how the pandemic has motivated churches' online mission to create new strategies for children's ministry and specifically online mission. Lastly, research that would seek to discover the view of children themselves concerning online mission and their expectations of children's ministry would be helpful.

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