SPECIAL EDITION DIGEST

Measuring the Experience of God's Love in Children

A Global Framework for Hope, Faith, and Flourishing

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Special Digest: Measuring the Experience of God's Love in Children: A Global Framework for Hope, Faith, and Flourishing

I.   Overview

How do children experience God's love, and how can something so deeply personal, sacred, subjective and culturally diverse be both honored and meaningfully measured? This question lies at the heart of *Measuring the Experience of God's Love in Children*, a landmark global research initiative that bridges empirical science and theological inquiry to understand how children perceive, receive, and internalize divine love across diverse religious and cultural contexts.

Rooted in the Christian tradition and designed for cultural relevance, the study explores how children encounter God's love through relationships, rituals, and community life. It recognizes the child as a spiritual and moral agent whose experience of divine love is informed by culture, theology, and human connection. It offers an unprecedented view into children's spiritual development and provides faith leaders, educators, and caregivers with practical, evidence-based tools to support their emotional, moral, and spiritual well-being.

The result is the first validated, cross-cultural measure of children's experience of divine love, viewed through the theological lens of hope. The decision to focus on children's hope as an expression of God's love was shaped by key indicators revealed by the research. These indicators demonstrate that hope and God's love are integrally linked, as is reflected in biblical teachings—a child's hope is a transformative experience of God's love that is expressed and nurtured through their relationships. By centering children's voices across varied contexts, the study deepens our understanding of early spiritual formation and affirms that love, trust, and belonging are foundational to resilience and flourishing. Ultimately, the project elevates spiritual well-being as a vital dimension of holistic child development and in efforts to serve children and nurture their needs globally.

Our research integrated theology, developmental psychology, and advanced measurement science to create a spiritually grounded, empirically rigorous instrument. Capturing the intangible nature of hope required a clear, operational definition. In this framework, hope is understood as a positive psychological state that spans emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions, a reflection of a child's ability to trust, to love, and to envision a meaningful future.

In the Christian faith tradition, hope is more than an abstract ideal, it is a dynamic expression of God's enduring love and faithfulness. It is nurtured through human relationships that mirror divine love and sustained by belief in God's promises and presence. In this context, hope is both a gift and a response, emerging from the experience of being loved by God and finding purpose in participating in His Kingdom. It serves as a foundation for relational, emotional, and spiritual flourishing. Though our study was developed within a Christian framework, the resulting

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measure draws on universal themes that resonate across the world's major faith traditions, highlighting both shared foundations and distinctive expressions.

Points of Connection with other Faith Traditions

Hope is expressed through distinct yet spiritually rich frameworks across faith traditions. While the theological frameworks vary, most traditions affirm hope as a vital force that sustains the human spirit, nurtures moral development, and fosters connection with the divine. By examining how hope is **understood, inherent, and cultivated in children** within these spiritual systems, the study is enhanced with a cross-cultural understanding of hope as both a deeply personal and universally resonant experience. This interfaith perspective enriches our measure and ensures its applicability across diverse cultural and religious contexts. In addition, bridging the understanding of children's hope across faith traditions maximizes the potential for use of the new measure by faith-based, government, and secular agencies alike.

As we learn about different traditions, therefore, we expand our unique lens through which hope nurtures the human spirit, whether through covenant, cosmic law, mindful presence, or divine alignment. Together, they offer rich and distinct perspectives on hope, as transcendent longing, moral trust, inner liberation, or sacred submission.

Hope has always proved to be an integral element of spirituality, whether or not through formal theological terms. For example, it is common within many Indigenous traditions to express hope in ways such as stories, rituals, and intergenerational relationships - a perspective which underscores the importance of collective identity, spiritual continuity, and the sacredness of life, all of which contribute to a child's experience of love, trust, and belonging. Across time periods, populations, and faith traditions, hope remains a vital force that connects individuals to something greater than themselves, inspires resilience in the face of adversity, and fosters the possibility of transformation. The cultural relevance of our measure affirms the universality of hope as a force for healing, guidance, and flourishing.

The Power of Loving Relationships for Children

For children, hope is deeply personal. It reflects their developing sense of identity and belonging, the belief that they matter, that they are worthy of love, and that their lives hold meaning. It encompasses trust in the adults who care for them, faith in a brighter future, and resilience in the face of adversity. Even amid difficult circumstances, a child's hope signals the presence of inner strength and the capacity to imagine a life marked by safety, love, and possibility. This measure seeks to honor that sacred inner light and provide a way to understand and nurture it.

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A key element of the study focuses on the relationship between God's love and hope, which was confirmed through an extensive series of child interviews, literary review, and expert collaboration. Additionally, this relationship was tested across a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds using a diverse array of indicators and scales to ensure cross-cultural consistency.

This validation process demonstrates that the Christian definition of hope is a valid indicator of God's love because it is promoted and seen through **human relationships**. Child interviews across cultures demonstrate the importance of human relationships - of love, trust, and support from family, friends, and community. Human relationships demonstrate **true love**, the clearest representation of God's love on earth. This true love fosters hope, promoting self-belief within children regardless of circumstances. **Experiencing this expression of God's love through human relationships also leads to greater child flourishing: it serves as critical buffer in crisis situations, improves social engagement levels, instills beliefs of inherent dignity and worth, allows children to accept and recognize love, and inspires children to become agents of change by outwardly expressing this internal belief**.

This study culminated in a tool that quantifies the hope measure, utilizing the duality of theological and psychometric methods to provide a diversely functional yet biblically grounded scale. Six main themes of hope were identified through interview and analysis: **compassion, joy, purpose, resilience, wisdom, and personal faith (spiritual life)**. These themes are all represented within questions on the measure, resulting in a comprehensive and accurate quantification of hope and a child's experience of God's love.

II.   A New Theory of Change for Spiritual Well-Being

Historically, faith-based organizations like World Vision have sought to nurture not only the physical and emotional well-being of children but also their spiritual well-being. Yet, unlike metrics for nutrition or education, spiritual impact is often seen as too abstract to quantify, especially across diverse cultures and religious traditions. This project addresses that gap by developing a **new theory of change** rooted in the belief that *when children experience love, whether through God or others, they cultivate hope, and that hope becomes a key indicator* of inner transformation.

The innovation lies in treating **hope not just as an emotional state, but as an outward expression of God's love** at work in the child's life. This refined understanding of hope integrates moral, emotional, and spiritual dimensions, providing a universal language that is inclusive of Christian theology yet accessible across faiths and cultures.

This new understanding of child-wellbeing expands our awareness of the factors which lead to global child flourishing, and allows for a greater effectiveness in flourishing programming. The

expansion of the quantification of well-being to include spiritual elements would likely increase the programmatic importance of and bring greater attention to spiritual well-being across contexts throughout the world. Spiritual well-being is a vital and intrinsic part of overall well-being, and this increased prioritization will lead to greater global attention.

This measure will have a great impact on World Vision's ability to execute a core objective of enabling children to **embrace and encounter the love of God**. Quantitative data on the experience of God's love and hope will provide information on the success of programs, point to areas in need of improvement, and allow for changes which lead to a broad and more impactful reach. World Vision will be able to expand, amplify, and more tightly control their work for the maximum impact.

This work is monumental by bridging children's, theologian's, and academic perspectives as well as qualitative and quantitative methodologies to create a measure that is unique and novel. This new tool, shaped by **reflection and dialogue** and focused on change, allows analysis on a more comprehensive and applicable scale than any before. It **addresses many limitations** which previously hindered research in this field. It is not based on a single denominational tradition, allowing for diverse interpretations of God's love through cross-cultural flexible application. It is also sensitive to cultural differences and relies on verified measures of spiritual experiences. This tool has the potential to change our understanding and ability to impact child flourishing by capturing meaningful change in how children experience God's love.

III.   Study Design

To construct a developmentally flexible global measure of children's hope rooted in their experience of God's love, World Vision **blended three perspectives** to ensure accuracy in the faith-based conceptualization of hope from a child's view that simultaneously upholds high scientific standards. This approach brought together spiritual development and psychosocial growth to create a **unique measure that is more globally applicable and spiritually diverse**. As backbones of the new indicator, Christian theology grounded the conceptual framework and children's experiences laid the foundation of the dialogue. The project employed a novel and deeply integrative methodology that fused **three core elements**:

1. **The Voice of the Children**: Through a large-scale qualitative exercise across eight countries, Albania, Bolivia, Iraq, Lesotho, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Uganda, 658 children between the ages of 10 and 18 were invited to share stories about love, faith, hardship, and hope. These interviews were designed to better understand children's narrative about their emotions, awareness of God's love, and hope for the future. Taking a child-centered approach, children were granted the authority as experts in their own lives

as they shared their personal stories using their own words. Their authentic experiences and insights were collected and compiled as the basis for the new measure.

These narrative interviews revealed powerful patterns: children defined love through relationships, drew strength from community, and expressed hope as both a belief in themselves and a sense of being deeply valued.

2. **Theological Wisdom**: A working group of theologians with expertise in child theology from Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Protestant traditions, representing Bosnia and Herzegovina, Honduras, Ghana, the UK, the US, India, and Malaysia, joined the study to reflect on children's spirituality from a faith-based lens. Their task was to articulate a theology of hope that was authentically Christian yet globally relevant when considering how children experience the love of God and their neighbors. They built on the preliminary work involving children's perspectives to craft a measure that reflects theological principles and resonates with children's spiritual experiences.

They agreed that hope, when rooted in God's love and expressed through human connection, is a visible and transformative sign of spiritual well-being. This conclusion highlighted that human relationships, including those in humanitarian and development programs, are a way for children to experience God's love, which can be observed through their changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

3. **Scientific Rigor** : The final component was the development of a robust, psychometrically validated survey instrument. A team of researchers from Harvard University, Duke University, and Claremont Graduate University led the design and validation of the study. They sought to achieve two goals: (1) to ensure the indicator captured subjective experiences of children's spirituality while being culturally sensitive of diverse cultural, denominational, and geographical backgrounds and (2) to validate the scale as an instrument that accurately and consistently measures hope as a multidimensional construct of children's perceptions of God's love.

This team of academics carried out a two-step process in which they created a measure based on previously established frameworks of children's spirituality and then tested the indicator for strong psychometric properties. First, they performed a literature review to collect existing scales with questions relevant to measuring the six signs of hope. Then, they adapted these scales and developed new questions through an iterative process between academic experts and target populations. The research team deliberated on which items to include in the final measure during group discussions. These selected items reflected the empirical rigor of existing hope scales while representing the

theologian working group's assortment of perspectives on hope. Lastly, the proposed measure was put to the test to confirm that it could produce consistent, valid, and meaningful results.

The resulting scale includes six dimensions: **Compassion, Joy, Purpose, Resilience, Wisdom, and Personal Faith**, each with carefully tested questions tailored for children. Over 4,600 youth completed the survey across the eight pilot countries, confirming its reliability, cultural adaptability, and construct validity. The personal faith dimension of the study was tested solely among those of the Christian Faith tradition.

IV.   Six Signs of Hope As Expressions of God's Love

The six dimensions identified by the new measure represent six interrelated signs of hope that serve as indicators of children's inner flourishing. Across the eight countries included in the study, a standout theme emerged from the six signs - **human relationships and connection**. Children's stories illuminated love, trust, and support from family, friends, and community as factors that contribute to their emotional well-being, resilience, and personal growth. When a child experiences God's love, particularly through human connection, it often presents as the various signs of hope. The final list of six indicators was informed by the collective wisdom of both theological and children's perspectives. The list is not intended to be definitive, but it best reflects the evidence from this research.

Though the new measure focused on the spiritual dimension of children's lives, what became clear was that a child's spirituality is integrated into many aspects of their life, not just the spiritual side. These six indicators offer a holistic view of child flourishing and **can be applied to children who have and have not acknowledged faith**. Here we outline the six signs of hope, how they are represented biblically, and science-based evidence for how each sign influences children's flourishing. Much of the previous research on each indicator of hope has been conducted in North American and European contexts. While the populations of interest and scope of the work in this research initiative on children's hope expand beyond those geographical borders, the results from this work align with that from previous research while also providing novel insights.

Compassion – A hopeful child is compassionate and aware of the needs of others, seeks to show kindness, and appreciates when people show compassion to them.

Compassion is a strong and unconditional sense of empathy and care toward others. Compassion is inherent in God's actions as a nurturer and protector of life.

Research on compassion in children suggests that children throughout development increasingly display concern for others' welfare, show compassion (Spinrad & Eisenberg,

2017), and engage in suitable efforts to alleviate the pain and suffering of others (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Benefits of feeling compassionate toward others include reducing negative outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, stress, and negative affect (Perkins et al., 2022)

Adults are foundational to children learning to experience compassion. Observing adults' compassionate behavior, receiving care from adults, or taking on the responsibility to care for others and themselves is a way for children to learn how to help, empathize, and alleviate others' negative feelings (e.g., Lopez et al., 2012) and experience first-hand that compassion is a communal value. For instance, parenting practices and teachers' warmth serve as models for perspective-taking and offer opportunities to participate in adult responsibilities through which children better understand compassion and learn how to show it (Luckner & Pianta, 2011).

Joy – A hopeful child feels joy in simple experiences and has a grateful heart, which allows them to celebrate the kindness of others.

Joy is related to gratitude, both in general and towards others specifically, along with a sense of being loved by others. God expressed joy and satisfaction while creating the world, was delighted in his connection and companionship with humans, and created children to bear the image of him.

Gratitude orients people to what there is to be joyful about when they recognize the good things in life and view life as a gift (Watkins et al., 2003). This perspective and feeling appreciative is related to aspects flourishing; grateful people are more prosocial, more social, and have a less negative outlook (Froh et al., 2014). Appreciation for the good in life is a feeling of connection with humanity and joy from being part of existence.

Feeling joy, from experiencing gratitude, feeling loved, or another source, is positively related to greater well-being and flourishing (Watkins et al., 2017). For children, happiness arises from moments of joy, such as affectionate moments from family members like hugging and kissing the child (Hong et al., 2015). Children often experience joy through collaborative activities and play (Gragg and Collet, 2022; Hong et al., 2015), which increases self-determination, promotes positive socioemotional development, and nurtures relationships (Deci & Ryan, 2012).

Purpose – A hopeful child is expressive and an active agent in community life, constantly learning and pursuing their dreams and aspirations.

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Purpose means holding steadfast in one's belief that their life holds a purpose oriented around making the world a better place in the future and acting in accordance with this purpose even when it is challenging. God instilled purpose in all people because they bear his image, giving humans meaning and direction guided by moral principles and part of a larger plan for all of creation.

Purpose develops over time (Bronk, 2012; Damon, 2008; Malin et al., 2017) and is positively related to children's and adolescents' well-being (Barcaccia et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2016). Adolescents in the United States devote themselves to diverse purposes in life, such as pursuing a vocation, serving God or other faith-based cause, doing charitable work in the community, contributing to society, and preserving environmental resources.

Children's social relationships are integral for finding their purpose. Encouragement from adults, including family, mentors, and institutions like the church, school, and community centers, to find and pursue interests helps develop skills and deepen interests. Modeling and support from adults plays a large role in children finding their purpose. For instance, observations of and participation in families and communities exposes children to where improvement is needed in the world (Malin et al., 2015) and provides opportunities to witness how to pursue purpose (Damon, 2008). Parents model prosocial activity and encourage children's prosocial interests (Moran et al., 2013) while institutions (e.g., school, church) encourage engagement in meaningful activity involving beyond-the-self concerns and interests.

Resilience – A hopeful child has both the inner strength and the capacity to draw strength from relationships, to face life challenges with courage. They learn and grow stronger from experience.

Resilience is the willingness and ability to maintain hope and persevere during challenging times. Jesus was determined and remained committed to his saving work despite his suffering.

Internal and external factors support positive outcomes related to resilience, including child and adolescent well-being (Andreou et al., 2020; Riggs et al., 2024). Internal variables include intelligence, social competence, self-esteem, adaptability, active coping skills, a sense of control in one's life, autonomy, secure attachment style, and a sense of humor (Kumpfer, 1999; Luthar, 2006; Werner, 1993, 1994; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). External contextual influences, rooted in human connection, include high-quality home environments and parenting, other supportive persons in the child's life who take on a parenting or mentoring role, positive extracurricular activities, supportive peer

relationships, safe and caring school environments, and other positive aspects of a child's neighborhood, community, and culture (Kumpfer, 1999; Vanderbilt-Adriance & Shaw, 2008; Wyman et al., 1999; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994).

Children build resilience with the help of a competent and caring adult in the family or community, a motivating environment, and hope for the future (Masten 2001, 2014). Here again, supportive relationships positively impact children's well-being. Trusting relationships with caregivers, stronger social networks, and bonds in the community are indicative of a child's well-being and the ability to deal with adversity (Chai et al., 2018).

Wisdom – A hopeful child understands that they have value as a person, reflects on what they are learning through life experiences, sees the wisdom in demonstrating strong character, and tries to act accordingly.

Wisdom is a form of moral resilience, or willingness and ability to do the right thing in challenging circumstances or when no one is watching. Jesus, the embodiment of wisdom, elected to take on a human form and journey from childhood to adulthood.

The popular saying "do good, feel good" applies to children's wisdom, their decision to help other people and perform kind acts and then reap the benefits for their well-being. Children believe that performing moral acts leads to greater happiness; they perceive people are happier in life when they do good regardless of how the person actually feels (Yang et al., 2021).

Importantly, these beliefs translate to actual behavior. When children themselves carry out a moral act, particularly on a voluntary basis, they experience positive emotions and happiness (Kogut, 2012; Paulus & Moore, 2017; Wu et al., 2017), with the rewarding feeling increasing with age (Weller & Lagattuta, 2013). Other positive outcomes of children's prosocial behavior include stronger peer groups (Layous et al., 2012) and a lower likelihood of exhibiting problematic behaviors, such as aggression and delinquency (Padilla-Walker et al., 2015). Even when there is a personal cost at stake, prosociality is positively related to children's well-being (Sabato & Kogut, 2019). This benefit is more pronounced in older children because they have a better understanding of recipient's characteristics (Kogut et al., 2016, Sabato and Kogut, 2018), motives for helping (Heyman et al., 2014), and the consequences of giving (Kogut, 2012, Weller and Lagattuta, 2013).

Mirroring the other signs of hope, relational contexts are important for promoting positive development of children and adolescents. Within the family unit, caring family relationships and attributing importance to family-related values contributes to positive

youth development to promote thriving and well-being (Blasi, 1983). Particularly in the transition to adolescence, a family environment characterized by parental warmth and clear expectations about obligations to the family, such as caring for and respecting family members, and about children's prosocial behaviors predict the development of prosocial behavior over time in children (Pastorelli et al., 2021).

Personal faith (spiritual life) – A hopeful child trusts in God, has a relationship with Jesus, sees the work of the Holy Spirit, and finds meaning in spiritual practices and rituals. *(For use in Christian contexts)*

Personal faith is a sense that one has a personal relationship with God who loves them and actively improves their life. In the Christian faith, God's spirituality is best represented by the analogy of the sheep and the Great Shepherd, which describes a deep shared connection between God and his believers. Through this bond, God's believers hear and respond to his call.

Children who are more spiritual are happier. Scoring high in the personal and communal domains of spirituality are strong predictors of children's happiness (Holder et al., 2010). These children find more meaning and value in life and possess high-quality relationships. Similarly, adolescents who report spiritual experiences are more likely to experience higher levels of positive emotions that are conceptually linked to transcendent experiences, including vitality, zest, awe, wonder, elevation, and love (Emmons, 1999; Haidt, 2003; Leak et al., 2007; Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2023). Focusing on prayer in particular, types of prayer centered around God and gratitude, adoration, thanksgiving, reception, are positively associated with aspects of well-being, including self-esteem, optimism, meaning in life, and life satisfaction (Whittington & Scher, 2010).

For older youth beginning university, their faith in God and spirituality has far-reaching benefits for their well-being (Mathad et al., 2019; Purnell et al., 2019). Students' spirituality relieves stress, produces a greater sense of meaning in life, and promotes greater happiness and life satisfaction (Deb et al., 2020; Leondari & Gialamas, 2009; Rizvi & Hossain, 2017; Shek & Liang, 2018), better coping skills during adverse circumstances (Maier & Surzykiewicz, 2020), and greater optimism (Adams et al., 2000). Though this list is far from exhaustive, it shows the expanse of benefits of spirituality in youthhood.

World Vision acknowledges that all children possess a spiritual dimension. As a Christian organization, they seek to nurture and deepen the Christian faith among children from

Christian backgrounds, while fully respecting the efforts of other faith traditions to do the same for children within their own faith traditions.

Each sign is observable, developmentally appropriate, and deeply influenced by a child's relationships. Notably, children who reported high levels of hope often pointed to tangible sources of love, such as a parent's sacrifice, a sponsor's encouragement, or a community leader's support as catalysts for their hope.

As essential guiding forces, caregivers, and role models in children's lives, **adults serve as vessels of God's love**. Unlike in relationships with the divine, moments of social connection with adults express love to children by being physically present with children, providing affirmation, wishing them well, and instilling faith-based beliefs in them. Quality interactions with adults can inspire hope and ultimately children's flourishing.

V.   Cultural and Spiritual Sensitivity Across Contexts

A core strength of this tool is its flexibility. While grounded in Christian theology, the survey was designed to be inclusive of non-Christian contexts. To address the experience of God's love through hope in general, this tool was designed as a flexible measure, able to adapt to a variety of demographics' cultural and religious experiences for an inclusive and accurate measurement. Throughout the creation process, a duality of ecumenical theology and psychometric validation processes ensured the universal applicability of the tool based on an empirical basis.

To ensure linguistic and cultural appropriateness, the research team employed the **TRAPD** method (Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pretesting, and Documentation). This checked and verified the accuracy of translations for eight different countries, sub-populations within countries, and children - leading to a widely inclusive and consistent measure.

The local facilitator of the tool was an experienced enumerator trained to integrate this tool into the local community by asking children questions and communicating with them in a **proper and respectful manner** based on the cultural and linguistic context - adapting language, managing emotional responses, and building trust within the community. For example, in majority-Muslim or pluralistic countries like Iraq or Sri Lanka, language was adapted to maintain spiritual resonance without imposing a particular doctrine. Local facilitators were trained to manage emotional responses and build trust. Field offices also helped adapt the tool to younger children (10–12 years), ensuring age-appropriate language and reducing survey fatigue through simplified examples and interactive methods. In some countries, discussions about love, hope, or God evoked strong emotions, yet many children described feeling grateful for the opportunity to speak openly in a safe space. These are just a few examples of the many ways this tool can be

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adapted - crafting an inclusive and flexible measure for an accurate measure of hope across contexts.

VI. A Benchmark for Global Impact

The measure equips World Vision and its partners with a reliable method to assess spiritual well-being across more than 70 countries. Using a benchmarking technique, World Vision determined how many children they serve experience the six signs of hope across countries. The cutoff was based on the distribution of scores for each sign using a normative approach. In early validation, **over 40% of children surveyed met the threshold for "signs of hope"**, with variations across regions reflecting different challenges and strengths. For example, children in Sri Lanka and Senegal scored high in joy and purpose, while those in Iraq and Thailand demonstrated strong resilience in the face of hardship.

The new measure helps answer not only *whether* children feel God's love, but also *how* they experience it, through care, encouragement, and the inner strength that hope provides. Separating this indicator from previous measures, it can be implemented as a robust empirically-supported foundation for programs and practitioners to better understand how children around the world experience God's love and how it impacts their well-being. Insights gleaned from the preliminary work with this measure uncover the **transformational impact of God's love for children across the globe**: instilling hope in children helps them flourish by improving their well-being and social engagement.

The survey's versatility across cultural perspectives maximizes its application within different religious contexts and faith traditions. For programmatic leaders, it provides a rigorous benchmark for tracking change over time and adapting interventions that promote not just survival, but also deep human flourishing. World Vision and its partners are optimally positioned as global entities to track and report children's spiritual well-being and shape future programming based on benchmark findings to foster hope and experiences of God's love in the populations they serve.

Organizations like World Vision who seek to provide hope, strength, and happiness to vulnerable children and their families can further leverage this new measure to demonstrate how work rooted in a Christian identity can play a positive role in altering vulnerable children's lives around the world. This new measure has the potential to revolutionize faith-based programmatic care for *all* children.

VII.   A Transformational Step Forward

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This research is more than an evaluation tool; it's a **theological, scientific, and moral reimagining of how we see children** largely informed by their own voices and perspectives. **It affirms that love and hope are not merely soft ideals, but measurable and powerful forces that drive healing, growth, and transformation. And it places the child, not just as a recipient of care, but as a moral and spiritual agent capable of shaping their world**. Spiritual well-being, fostered by human relationships, is just as important as physical health, education, and protection for programs' priorities.

Not only is the new survey a benefit for programmatic planning and interventions, but it will also provide an even deeper understanding of children's spirituality through future research. Going forward within the academic realm, researchers can use this measure to explore connections among spiritual perceptions, human relationships, and developmental outcomes across global contexts.

In a time of global instability and rising despair, *Measuring the Experience of God's Love in Children* offers a **hopeful counter-narrative**: that even in the most vulnerable places, when a child is seen, heard, and loved, hope blooms, and that is evidence of something sacred at work.

VIII.   Results of Validation Study

To ensure that the *Measuring the Experience of God's Love in Children* instrument is both scientifically sound and meaningful across different cultures, a thorough validation process was carried out. This effort followed best practices in child development and cross-cultural research and took place in several stages:

1. Developing the Questions
    The first step involved creating questions based on input from psychologists, theologians, and child development experts. The questions were designed to reflect how children experience God's love, particularly through the feeling of hope. Great care was taken to ensure that the questions were appropriate for children aged 10 to 18.
2. Making It Culturally Relevant
    Interviews with children and caregivers were held around the world to make sure the language made sense and was respectful of different cultures and faith traditions. The questions were carefully translated into local languages to preserve their meaning and clarity.
3. Testing in Eight Countries
    A pilot version of the measure was tested with children in Albania, Bolivia, Iraq, Lesotho, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Uganda. These countries were selected to represent a wide range of cultures and religions. Feedback from this phase helped improve the clarity and format of the questions.

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4. Understanding What the Questions Measure
   Statistical analyses were used to see how well the questions grouped together into key themes—like emotional, social, and spiritual experiences of divine love and hope. The results showed that the questions worked well together and accurately captured these themes.
5. Reliability and Consistency
   The measure showed excellent reliability, meaning that children answered the questions in consistent ways. When tested again two weeks later, the results remained stable, showing that the measure was dependable over time.
6. Does It Measure What It's Supposed To?
   The measure was compared to other well-established tools that assess child well-being, spirituality, and emotional health. Children who scored high on the new measure also tended to show higher levels of emotional strength, self-worth, and connection with others, confirming its validity.
7. Works Across Different Cultures and Faiths
   The tool was tested to ensure it works equally well regardless of a child's background, whether Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, or indigenous. It was also consistent across countries, age groups, and genders, making it a strong option for global use.

What the Results Show

The results clearly demonstrate that this new measure is reliable, valid, and culturally sensitive. It offers a trustworthy way to understand how children around the world, ages 10 to 18, understand their experience of divine love and hope.

The questions were found to group together in meaningful ways and matched the theory behind the instrument. Children who felt secure in their relationships, had strong spiritual practices, or reported higher levels of emotional well-being were more likely to score higher on the measure. Importantly, children and caregivers reported that the questions were understandable and meaningful. Whether they came from a Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or other spiritual tradition, children were able to reflect on what love, trust, and hope meant in their lives.

Why This Matters

This is one of the first scientifically validated tools to measure how children experience God's love and hope. It provides a new way for researchers, faith leaders, educators, and caregivers to understand and support the spiritual and emotional growth of children around the world. By listening to children's voices and recognizing their spiritual experiences, we can better nurture

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their sense of meaning, connection, and well-being, no matter where they live or what faith tradition they follow.

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Appendix

Call-out: Representation of Hope Across Faith Traditions.

Below are descriptions drawn from the literature outlining how hope is represented in various faith traditions. Comments on these descriptions are welcome and improvements will be implemented over time as future conversations refine these faith-based representations of hope.

In **Judaism**, hope is similarly grounded in a covenantal relationship with God, characterized by trust in divine justice, redemption, and the coming of a messianic age. The Hebrew term *Tikvah* (hope) conveys a sense of longing, endurance, and active waiting. Jewish hope has historically been forged through suffering and exile, but remains rooted in collective memory, communal responsibility, and the unshakable belief that renewal and restoration are possible.

In **Hinduism**, hope is intertwined with *dharma* (moral duty), *karma* (cause and effect), and the soul's progression through cycles of rebirth toward *moksha* (liberation). Hope reflects trust in the cosmic order and in the soul's capacity to grow through righteous living, spiritual discipline, and union with the divine. The future is not viewed as linear but as part of a vast spiritual journey, and hope is expressed through the cultivation of inner virtues like patience, devotion, and detachment.

In **Buddhism**, the concept of hope takes on a more nuanced form. Rather than emphasizing external expectations, Buddhist traditions emphasize mindful presence, compassion, and the alleviation of suffering. While ultimate liberation (*nirvana*) may be seen as a form of transcendental hope, it is achieved not through attachment to future outcomes, but through deep inner transformation, right action, and spiritual insight. Hope, therefore, is embedded in the practice of the Eightfold Path, offering freedom from suffering through wisdom, ethics, and mental discipline.

In contrast, the **Islamic** perspective on hope (*raja*) is more explicitly tied to submission to the will of Allah. Hope is not an open-ended expectation, but a disciplined trust in God's mercy, justice, and divine decree (*Qader*). In Islam, hope is inseparable from *tawa* (God-consciousness) and must be balanced with *chaw* (reverent fear of God). It is cultivated through prayer, repentance, righteous action, and reliance on God's compassion, not on human agency alone. While other traditions emphasize internal or relational origins of hope, Islam stresses alignment with divine authority and obedience to the sacred law as the proper foundation for hope.