

## CHILDREN EXPERIENCE LOVE OF GOD AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS

During 2022-2023, World Vision worked with a group of seven scholars and theologians to reflect on our Child Well-Being Aspiration: ***“Children Experience the Love of God and Neighbours”***. Each was tasked with proposing an answer to the question, *“What can it mean for a child to experience the love of God in the context of development/humanitarian work?”* Members then each developed a paper responding to this question from their unique theological and scholarly standpoint, considering World Vision’s overall approach, and bearing in mind that World Vision works in diverse faith contexts. The papers were presented in a seminar series during 2022-2023, and three responses were given to each from various stakeholders. Recordings of the seminars and copies of the papers are [available on WV Central](#).

This work is foundational to developing an improved narrative and quality measures for child well-being objective (CWBO) 1, *“children report an increased awareness of God’s love”* and CWBO2 *“children have positive and peaceful relationships in their families and communities.”* There is general agreement that these outcome statements are intended to capture children’s spiritual well-being as an integral aspect of their overall well-being, and that they should somehow be tied to World Vision’s Christian identity while also bearing relevance in multi- and different-faith contexts, but there has not been general agreement on how these statements should be interpreted and applied across World Vision programming and reporting.

At the end of their collaboration, the scholars met in person in August 2023 to consider the various positions that had been discussed over the course of the project. To help further the discussion and offer a foundational shared understanding, they developed the following statement:

### Theological Statement of Meaning and Resulting Approach to Measurement: Children Experience the Love of God and Neighbours

#### August 2023

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## 1. Definitions

### A. *Children:*

Any person between the age of 0-18 years is considered a child, acknowledging that there are different stages of childhood.

“Children are fully human and made in the image of God yet also still developing and in need of instruction and guidance.

Children are gifts from God and sources of joy yet also capable of selfish and sinful actions.

Children are vulnerable and in need of protection, yet also strong and insightful.

Children are metaphors for immature faith and childish behaviour and yet models of faith and sources of revelation.”<sup>1</sup>

Children are endowed with capacity to recognise, give and receive love.

### B. *Experience:*

Experience is the way God works in a person’s life.

The visible fruits of God’s working is transformation towards flourishing, a change in thinking, feelings and behaviour.

God works uniquely in the life of each child. Though visible at times, God may be at work in ways that are “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20).

We acknowledge that children’s wider experiences of life are both negative and positive, and sometimes they may perceive these to be attributed to God, either directly or through the actions and attitudes of others.

### C. *God:*

The Christian Triune God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who continue to Create, Redeem and Sustain. God *is* love and is also the ultimate source of all expressions of love (1 John 4:16). God created the world and declared it very good: a place where all could be blessed and flourish. All people, including children, are made in God’s image, which endows us all with inherent dignity and worth, and draws us into partnership with God to work out God’s purposes in the world (Gen 1:26-31).

Though we retain God’s image, we recognise that a person’s relationships with God, with themselves, with people, and with creation have been corrupted by human rebellion (Gen 3), and redeemed by Jesus Christ (Col 1:19-20; Rom 3:21-24).

### D. *Love:*

All children experience different dimensions of God’s love (including the gift of life [Ps 139:13-16] and the Image of God) to different degrees. We also recognise that a child may experience God’s love without perceiving, understanding, or acknowledging God as its source.

### E. *Neighbours:*

Love is mediated through relationships: God, self, people and creation.

We especially recognise that children experience God’s love in their life and encounters with the people in different circles of care. Love is multi-dimensional and can be experienced through life, word, deed and sign (Mark 10:13-16). The mediated nature of love

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<sup>1</sup> Marcia Bunge, cited in Jessy Jason, *Affirming Children’s Dignity as a Theological Vision and Mandate*, 18.

means that we can point to genuine human expressions of love and attribute these, in part, to the God who is the ultimate source of love. In this sense we can say that one aspect of children experiencing God's love can be understood as being manifested through loving relationships of family, friends, and wider community.

Importantly, expressing love to children may sometimes involve simply being present with them (Job 2:13).

## 2. Summary Statement

*God has invited World Vision to participate in the outworking of the Gospel by nurturing children's experience of His love. We acknowledge the dignity and worth of every child as foundational to our mission and recognise with humility our limitations as caregivers and advocates, recognising the centrality of relationship with neighbours in children's ability to experience God's love. We also encourage positive and peaceful relationships with self, Creation, and with God himself.*

## 3. Limitations and Ongoing Debates

- There is a desire to quantify the work towards change but not everything can be quantified or even observed.
- Transformation is the desired goal. At the same time transformation is a fluid idea and an ongoing process. A helpful way of framing / observing transformation is to witness the fruit of the spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-control (Gal 5:22-23).
- We recognise that the statement and its objectives need careful consideration and unpacking as fitting to the context while at the same time retaining core Christian values and practices.
- While we understand that an expression of love has its ultimate source in the Triune God, the one expressing or receiving the love may not share in the same understanding.
- God's love can be experienced without being named but we take it as our great joy and calling to name that love where we can.