
From Voices to Vision: Integrating Children's Experiences into Christian Development Theology

Kathryn Kraft, Ariola Kallciu, Zoe Silver, Jennifer Wortham

World Vision, a child-focused Christian organisation, seeks every child to experience God's love, and that their perspectives contribute to theological reflection and practice. We adopted a child-participation approach, centring their voices to enrich theological reflection and programmatic development. In-depth interviews with 658 children across Bolivia, Senegal, Lesotho, Uganda, Albania, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, reflected lived experiences of love, God's love, and hope. The importance of human connectivity, helping children feel loved and grow in hope emerged as the overarching theme. Seven Christian theologians constructed a theological understanding of how the transformative power of God's love leads to hope, expressed through six measurable "signs of hope" rooted in Christian theological reflection and informed by the children's voices. The child-informed, child-centred, child-relevant approach offers theological depth, strategic programmatic direction, and a practical measurement tool. This article outlines methodology, theological insights, and implications for integrating child-voice into Christian development work, furthering practical theology and child-focused practice.

Introduction

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14 NIV). Despite such a strong statement about the spiritual abilities and agency of children, the Christian development industry boasts few examples of children speaking meaningfully into shaping the programming we design for them (Duramy and Gal 2010).

World Vision, as a Christian, child-centred organisation, has as its primary aspirational statement that "Children experience the love of God and neighbours." This aspirational statement is fundamental to the organisation's vision that children live "life in all its fulness," and is rooted in a strong commitment to live out its mission as a partnership of Christians seeking "to follow our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in working with the poor and oppressed..." (World Vision International, n.d.). One of the challenges to effectively program for, and measure, this aspirational statement is that World Vision works in seventy countries globally, including many where other religions or secularism dominate and even some where speaking openly about religion is highly sensitive. Furthermore, while World Vision is openly Christian,

it does not undertake efforts to convert or proselytise children.

To address these challenges, World Vision has created a new framework that offers an understanding of how children experience the love of God and neighbours, to support both programming and measurement. The new framework was developed through a rigorous theological reflection process that was fully rooted in the experiences, priorities and voices of children. It is grounded in the authority of Scripture, but with the interpretations and applications shaped by children's voices.

Drawing from extensive qualitative data that reviewed the voices of children, along with ecumenical theological reflection, the framework highlights the importance of human relationships as a vehicle of God's love and how, as a result of that experience of love, children are transformed in hope that is manifest through six measurable signs, all to be explored more in depth below. These signs are the following: *compassion, purpose, resilience, joy, wisdom and personal faith*.

Intentional engagement of children's voices and theological reflection were essential for achieving this new approach, offering a case study for how

development agencies can promote robust development programming while ensuring that the children we serve and the God who calls us to this service are paramount in our approach. This article outlines the methodology, the insights offered by children through a “Voice of the Customer” method, and the theological insights that led to the creation of this framework. Through this account, we share what we heard from children about their own spiritual well-being and how a theological reflection could be built around children’s voices to offer new insight into how Christian development organisations can describe and report on the spiritual impact of their work.

Background to the Project

World Vision’s emphasis on holistic child well-being has long included spiritual nurture as a key component. In its global strategy, World Vision defines Child Well-Being Aspiration 1 (CWBA1) as ensuring that girls and boys “experience the love of God and their neighbors” (Spiritual Care Partners 2025, 5), an aspiration rooted in the organisation’s Christian identity. Translating this spiritual aim into measurable indicators, however, posed significant challenges. Capturing a child’s awareness of God’s love means grappling with intangible personal experiences and cross-cultural differences, while also avoiding the assumption that any growth in a child’s faith or hope could be directly attributed to World Vision’s programs. Furthermore, World Vision works with children of all religious backgrounds and none and, in many contexts, does not implement specifically religious programming.

A previous attempt to measure this aspiration statement was made in 2017. Starting with a comprehensive literature review on children’s spirituality, and following the Transformational Development approach of Myers and others, several core dimensions of how children experience faith and meaning were identified. These included their relationship to self, their relationships with others, their connection to the natural environment, their sense of the transcendent (relationship with God), and their sense of purpose in life (Kraft 2017, unpublished; Best 2016, 278-280; Myers 2011, 82). Drawing from this review, the organisation undertook an effort to measure children’s self-reported personal connection with God, supportive relationships with people around them, and sense of hope for the future. A package of six indicators was developed, drawing from established scales such as the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Einolf 2013), the Religiosity and Spirituality Scale for Youth (Hernandez 2011), and the Religious Well-Being Scale (Fisher 2010).

The set of six indicators developed in 2017 was validated for use with adolescents aged 12–18. Many of

the scales reviewed were validated for adolescents only; furthermore, even though World Vision is a child-focused organisation, the organisational decision was taken that it would be too challenging and sensitive within existing systems and capacities to measure abstract and spiritual concepts with younger children.

One indicator measures “hope for the future,” which was identified as the preferred tool for capturing spiritual well-being, especially where most project participants were not Christian. This decision reflected the view of many staff and leadership that “hope” as a construct seems relevant to the spiritual needs of children for an organisation committed to working with the most vulnerable children. Even so, few World Vision offices opted to measure spiritual well-being at all, focusing instead on quality of relationships with peers or parents as their spiritual metric of choice.

A 2023 internal World Vision review of current measurement practices concluded that the original indicators lacked alignment with a meaningful, child-focused theology of change and they were not informing decision-making. Of particular concern, the “hope for the future” indicator was often interpreted narrowly, focusing only on optimism and positive life perspectives while overlooking the deeper spiritual dimensions that World Vision sought to nurture.

As a result, World Vision leadership commissioned a process that would build on the lessons learned from deployment of the 2017 indicators, yet expand the scope to a broader conceptual reflection that would prioritise global and ecumenical Christian theology as its starting point.

Theological Reflection

Recognising that a statement about God’s love is both deeply theological and open to many different interpretations, depending on a person’s own personal theological and specific faith tradition, an ecumenical theologian working group was convened to lead the process of building conceptual clarity on the aspirational statement about children’s experience of God’s love. This team was carefully curated to ensure a diversity of perspectives, with an emphasis on denominational diversity but also ensuring geographical and gender diversity. The seven theologians represented five continents and seven different denominations of Christianity. In addition to their qualification as scholars, five of the seven also served as clergy. The group included five men and two women. Their names, locations and denominational affiliations are as follows:

- **Rev. Dr. Rohan P. Gideon** (India),
Church of South India

- **Dr. Tim J. Davy** (United Kingdom),
Evangelical Church and Interdenominational Seminary
- **Dr. Rosalind Lim-Tan** (Malaysia),
Malaysian Baptist Church
- **Rev. Dr. Šimo Maršić** (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Catholic Church
- **Rev. Dr. Jason Foster** (USA), Orthodox Church in America
- **Rev. Dr. Seyram B. Amenyedzi** (Ghana and Germany), Global Evangelical Church, Ghana
- **Fr. Lenin Cruz** (Honduras), Catholic Arquidiócesis de Tegucigalpa Honduras (initially in an advisory role, joining the group officially in 2024)

This approach aimed at reflecting the broad geographical and denominational tapestry of global Christianity, an important consideration for a Christian NGO with a global presence. Indeed, while all members of the group had higher degrees in theology, the geographical and denominational diversity they represented inevitably meant that they came from different perspectives on the nature of, and role of, theological reflection; nonetheless, for World Vision they each brought an expertise that was invaluable to a humanitarian NGO trying to understand its Christian ministry. Therefore, we allowed the group to develop its own approach to “doing theology,” finding the areas of commonality and agreement that allowed them to bring a nuanced yet doctrinally sound perspective to the organisation. While a larger number of theologians would have been more broadly representative, we wanted the group to be cohesive and small enough to productively work through complex issues, and thus concluded that seven would be a manageable but still diverse number. Furthermore, we wanted to ensure that every member of the group was fully committed to the project, so we preferred to pay an honorarium to people who could commit to several hours a week and a week-long retreat rather than rely on a larger group of volunteers.

All members of the group came with extensive experience and study in the field of child spirituality. To begin the process, each was invited to write a position paper offering a possible answer to the question, “How do children experience the love of God in humanitarian and development settings (where children may be of all different faith backgrounds)?” To help them ensure their papers were relevant to World Vision’s context, they were given access to key policies and organisational planning documents and met twice with a select group of staff from different countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and Latin America. In 2023, they presented their papers in a series of

seminars with World Vision staff globally: approximately 1000 staff were invited and each seminar had between 50 and 150 participants in attendance. In each seminar, papers were presented one by one, followed by three responses: one from another member of the core theological group, one from an external advisor familiar with World Vision but not directly involved in the organisation, and one from a leader from World Vision’s staff. After all the papers were presented and feedback received, the group of theologians gathered in August 2023 to develop a statement on how children experience the love of God and neighbours.

The group was committed to full consensus, meaning all seven theologians had to agree on any given tenet. Full consensus decision-making often results in stronger group dynamics, and reveals deepened investment in understanding and reaching a decision (Rumison 1998). Due to the complexities of hierarchy within the church, it is easy for power to influence decision-making. For that reason, the full consensus method of decision-making is often used when reaching decisions that impact the majority (Johnson 2011). Through consensus decision-making, a process with deep roots in Christianity through the model set by the early church councils, and in other religious traditions such as early Islamic *ijma’* (Kamali 1996, 23) and the Quaker understanding of divine guidance (Kauffman 2015, 7), we were able to build confidence in the reliability and relevance of the agreed theoretical framework, ensuring it was both deeply Christian and broadly applicable in diverse contexts.

A few strategic decisions about the process made the achievement of full consensus possible. First, the members of the group understood before joining that they would need to bring their unique perspective, but also find ways to reach agreement in order to help World Vision take action based on their recommendations. Second, the face-to-face meeting took place in a retreat style, allowing extensive time for relationship and trust building that promoted space for both trust and openness. Third, and most important, the group was instructed to stay within the bounds of World Vision’s policies and processes; this meant that, while some members of the group admitted they would not necessarily implement the agreed approach themselves, they could all agree that the proposal was relevant and useful for World Vision programming specifically. In other words, they did not need to reach universal consensus about deep theological questions, but could instead reach consensus that their proposal was both theologically sound and relevant to World Vision.

Among the most significant results from the preparatory work were the following key theological insights that shaped the project moving forward:

- Recognizing the Triune God as central to World Vision’s Christian identity while acknowledging that non-Christians may not share this perspective, affirming that God is love and the ultimate source of all genuine expressions of love.
- Understanding that children may experience God’s love through varied dimensions, sometimes without conscious recognition of its source.
- Emphasizing that, within humanitarian and development programs, human relationships are the primary conduits through which children experience God’s love, evidenced by transformational change in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.
- Providing World Vision with a comprehensive list of tangible and observable behaviors and characteristics evident in children’s lives that are a result of this transformational experience of God’s love.

As already noted, World Vision leaders had agreed that an indicator focused on “hope” was of organisational interest. Furthermore, previous research suggested that nurturing hope, even in the most challenging circumstances, could lead to observable improvements in children’s well-being and social engagement (cf. Montgomery 2017; Sparks 2021; Scioli 2023). The theological team agreed that in the biblical narrative, hope represents an important aspect of the transformational impact of God’s love, pointing out that the narratives of Creation and Redemption provide a compelling rationale for a child-centered theology on “hope and love.” They posited that

Hope is a key indicator of children’s transformational experience of God’s love because hope blossoms in the life of a child as they experience the love of God through relationships. So many of the children with whom World Vision works live in complex and challenging circumstances that could lead to despair. It is the hope that is fuelled by a genuine experience of true love that enables children to live life in all its fullness, regardless of their circumstances (Spiritual Care Partners 2025, 3).

In their statement, the theologians highlighted the relevance of a narrative of “hope” for children in crisis and situations that could lead to despair, which resonated with World Vision’s strategic commitment to most vulnerable children. Still, unlike most developmental work with children, and unlike the indicators World Vision was already employing, which

tend to focus on a future optimism (Snyder 1996; Bowers and Bowers 2023; Herth 2024), we wanted to conceptualise child hope in a uniquely Christian way and, even more particularly, the ways in which it is an outward manifestation of God’s love both in the here and now and in the yet to come.

After their first retreat, the theologians encouraged World Vision to take a “child-attentive” or “child-centered” approach, and asked to incorporate children’s voices directly into their work. They suggested that all theology is shaped by human perspectives and, as a child-centred organisation, World Vision had to ensure that our theology of children’s experience of God’s love would be oriented to children’s perspectives. As a result, World Vision engaged in a “Voice of the Customer” exercise, whereby we positioned children as catalysts in the dialogue, ensuring that their experiences and perspectives shaped the discourse rather than being treated as an afterthought.

Voice of the Customer Methodology: Children’s Voices

Child participation is a key value to World Vision, yet effective modalities for child participation and agency in development programming often prove elusive. For example, a systematic review of research on approaches to children’s participation in decision-making found some success with the use of advocates, but little evidence that other attempts were effective in promoting child agency (Keenan et al. 2018). Even World Vision, in its 2023 “Global Report on Child Participation in Decision-Making” highlighted various initiatives to engage children in active community participation and decision-making including advisory groups, “Impact Plus” clubs, and youth forums, but acknowledged that field teams often found this work to be extremely challenging. Progress in levels of child participation were still much less than desired, and had only limited impact on shaping World Vision programming.

Yet, as mentioned above, the theological team emphasized the importance of incorporating children’s voices into a theological reflection that would speak to a particularly intimate aspect of a child’s well-being. To this end, we conducted a “Voice of the Customer” (VoC) exercise using narrative inquiry, a qualitative listening method that enables children to share their stories in their own words. VoC is the process of capturing and analyzing the needs, preferences, and feedback of those directly affected by a service or product.

When exploring topics that impact children, researchers have often overlooked the child and instead studied the voices of their parents (Bejou 2012; Leyser 1988, 363). Even so, there are some examples in which

the VoC methodology has been used effectively with children (Chitakunye et al. 2012, 209; Cody 2015, 296). Centring the child participants throughout the research process should help them feel valued and more trusted, thus encouraging them to provide authentic and trustworthy information (Grover 2004, 90; Thomas and O’Kane 2000, 822). We sought through this approach to position children as experts on their personal experiences of hope and love, honouring the inherent dignity of their voices. By engaging them directly in the conversation, rather than simply presenting pre-packaged theology, we ensured that the new measure was deeply informed by their real-life experiences and needs.

The “Voice of the Customer” is a diverse and somewhat malleable methodology that can be carried out in various different ways (Denove & Power 2007). Often conducted through an initial qualitative approach such as interviews that can follow both direct or indirect styles, analysis of customer feedback and online reviews, focus groups, and journals (Aghlmand et al. 2010, 156; Aguwa et al. 2012, 10112; Cody 2015, 288; Sezgen et al. 2019, 67), the “Voice of the Customer” aims to uncover the authentic opinions of their target audience. Once qualitative data has been collected, the next stage is usually to quantify it so as to make it become measurable (Shillito 2000, chap. 4). To begin to start quantifying the data, a cluster or thematic analysis is often applied where codes are organised into representative themes, and ordered into levels of importance (Coppenhaver 2018, chap. 7). These findings can then be translated to numerical scoring for use in questionnaires for example, turning the subjective perspectives into a measurable action.

VoC was selected as the approach because it allowed the project team to engage deeply with children’s narratives and experiences. It was a feasible way to overcome the organizational challenges that tend to limit the participation of children, as alluded to above, within the tight timeline of the project; we acknowledge, however, that a child-led research design may have more thoroughly ensured that children’s perspectives shaped the work to develop a new framework.

Our VoC exercise was primarily qualitative. We drew from narrative inquiry approaches to develop a semi-structured interview guide which was open-ended enough to allow children to speak freely. While solely quantitative methods have been privileged in “Voice of the Customer” with children, Koscak et al. (2023, 177) note that a lack of qualitative engagement can limit the usefulness of findings and it is in qualitative insights that depth and nuance merge. When we began this exercise working in collaboration with World Vision field offices, we found staff had limited experience using narrative inquiry with children, feeling more

comfortable with quantitative tools and fearing that the only qualitative data collection that they might do effectively would be play-based. For our part, we challenged them to engage with children using child-friendly language and approaches to encourage children to speak at length.

Bearing in mind the potential sensitivity of collecting data with children, the project was conducted with full ethical oversight. The study received approval from the University of East London (Application ID: ETH2324-0242), and secondary approval from Harvard University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians, and assent was secured from child participants, using a consent form provided by World Vision. Consistent with Koenig et al.’s (2001) recommendations, the study design was critically reviewed to ensure cultural sensitivity and respect for diverse religious beliefs. Confidentiality and the right to withdraw were maintained throughout the study. Data collectors received comprehensive training via MS Teams, covering qualitative interviewing techniques, narrative inquiry, data saturation, child-friendly language adaptation, and child safeguarding and data protection protocols.

Interviews typically lasted 15–25 minutes. The semi-structured guide began by inviting children to recount an emotionally significant experience from the past year. Follow-up questions explored the role of relationships, their understanding of hope, and their interpretations of love. Notably, Christian children were asked specifically about God’s love, while non-Christian children were invited to speak more generally about “love” to ensure cultural and religious sensitivity. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for global analysis.

Eight countries with active World Vision programming were selected. National offices oversaw sampling under these criteria:

- Interviews with between 40 and 100 children per country, continuing until data saturation was achieved,
- At least two contrasting locations per country (ideally one urban and one rural),
- Participants or their parents must be directly involved in World Vision programs,
- And an even distribution by gender, age (10 to 18 years), and religious diversity reflective of each country’s context must be maintained.

A total of 658 children in eight countries (Bolivia, Senegal, Lesotho, Uganda, Albania, Iraq, Thailand and Sri Lanka) were interviewed during July 2024. While individual countries conducted their own local analysis,

the global analysis used to develop the framework was conducted centrally. This analysis began at the individual country level. While this exercise was not pure narrative inquiry, since an interview guide was in place, the initial coding was based on themes emerging from the data. This was done initially using the AtlasTI AI-assisted coding utility. Each country's set of transcripts was uploaded to AtlasTI and the software was prompted to produce a list of proposed codes. Codes irrelevant to the analysis (for example, interview notes such as "timestamp" or "child age") were removed and remaining codes were grouped thematically. In this way, a list of 15-20 codes was developed for each country. Coding was manual but AI-assisted (the software proposed possible codes for text that the researcher could accept or reject), and codes were added and modified as needed throughout the process.

For each country, then, a country-specific report was developed. Across all eight datasets, human relationships and connectivity emerged as a key theme, so the reports were divided into two sections: "types of changes in children" and "the role of different people in children's lives." For the first section, after grouping common themes which contained similar data and deleting themes which had insufficient data, each country had a final list of between 8 and 11 themes. In the second section, relationships were grouped by types of people (friends and peers, parents and family members, teachers or other influential community members, and World Vision staff and sponsors). Each thematic section included a brief AI-generated summary (using ChatGPT for Business) of all the coded content and some sample quotes to illustrate the theme.

Human Connectivity—the Unifying Theme

A single overarching theme that emerged across all data from all eight countries was the importance of human connectivity. "Human connectivity" was conceptualized as love, trust, and support from family, friends, and community, which play a crucial role in a child's emotional well-being, resilience, and personal growth. Despite facing challenges, children find strength and comfort in these relationships, highlighting their universal value and affirming the theologians' statement about the significance of loving human relationships for an experience of God's love.

While the theme emerged strongly across all contexts, there were contextual nuances. In Iraq, children emphasized the importance of family support, forgiveness, and collaboration, drawing strength from religious faith and family unity. They spoke of the role of their parents in fostering resilience and hope, particularly in challenging times. In Thailand, children cherished the warmth of family and community bonds,

associating love with understanding, affection, and mutual support, although some faced challenges like loneliness and familial discord. In Uganda and Senegal, children spoke about social connectivity, seeing love as rooted in mutual respect and the support from friends, family, and community. These connections helped them overcome hardships and grow personally. Children in Bolivia and Lesotho reflected on trust and sociability, with children describing how building relationships and valuing loved ones positively impacted their lives. Data from Albania highlighted the significance of maintaining healthy, reciprocal relationships, where children found comfort and growth through genuine connections and support from family and friends.

"Many times, we do not value the people we have around us and, honestly, just the idea crossing my mind that I might lose my mother or that something might happen to my mother, was something that made me reflect. Knowing that I have to take advantage of the time I spend with her, more, every day, is something that has had a big impact on my life. It is something that I have started to value more about my beloved ones." Bolivia

The thematic analysis revealed ten other areas in which children find hope and seek nurture through loving relationships. These thematic groupings are described below along with data on their prevalence.

1. Empathy, Caring for Others, Compassion

Children in all eight countries emphasized the importance of love, empathy, and compassion, highlighting the significance of family support, kindness, and a strong desire to help others in fostering personal growth and community well-being. They expressed aspirations to give back through caring professions and actions, deeply valuing the support they receive from their loved ones. Themes highlighted included appreciation for the kindness of others and a commitment to doing good for others, an understanding of the importance of family support and solidarity in the wider community, and an ambition to succeed in life in order to be able to care for others.

"Love is the understanding of the care and compassion we have for another, the affection we have for them, and how to help them through this affection. I expect more love from human beings. In other words, we can help someone else when they are in trouble, or we can say two words of comfort when they are in a sad situation. I have realized that I am loved by others. I mean when my mother

loves me. If I were worried about something, she would spend time with me and talk to me for an hour to make me feel her love. When those whom I love do not love me, I don't want love that I don't receive." Sri Lanka

The importance of such love emerged as a key theme in all eight countries.

2. *Persisting, Becoming Stronger, Learning from Adversity, Resilience*

Children for the most part exhibited remarkable resilience in overcoming adversity, drawing strength from family, community, and faith. They faced challenges like displacement, poverty, trauma, and loss, but were able to find hope and support through perseverance, self-belief, and the love and protection of those around them. Many children highlighted, in difficult times, how important they found loving and supportive families, faith in God, and a desire to improve their lives.

"I didn't have school shoes for a long period of time and that made me feel uncomfortable at school. My principal promised to buy me school shoes but till today she hasn't bought them... This affected me negatively because I don't have happiness at school. This taught me that life is not easy." Lesotho

"Hope is for example you have nothing and a person tells you that he is going to give you something and it comes to you. Hope is what you hope for." Senegal

Resilience of this sort emerged as a key theme in seven countries: Iraq, Senegal, Lesotho, Albania, Sri Lanka, Uganda, and Bolivia.

3. *Motivation, Ambition, Drive, Participation*

Many children expressed strong hope and determination to achieve their dreams, emphasizing the importance of education, perseverance, and family support. Despite challenges, they remained motivated by their aspirations and believed in their ability to succeed and contribute positively to their communities. Their belief in themselves and their own potential was often underpinned by family support or an empowering message from a significant adult in their life. Participation in community activities and opportunities to develop leadership were also significant motivators.

"I had a hope in life to be the top student in my school, and I achieved that goal. I am now looking forward to becoming a doctor in the future, and I hope that this goal will be

realized. There are obstacles that can make one lose hope, but God brings me back to hope once again." Iraq

Such hope emerged as a key theme in six countries: Sri Lanka, Iraq, Senegal, Thailand, Albania, and Uganda

4. *Gratitude, Appreciation, Simple Joy*

Children often expressed deep gratitude for the love, support, and faith they received from God, family, their wider communities, and organisations like World Vision, which provided them with hope, strength, and happiness. They valued acts of kindness and care as well as simple gift-giving, which they felt brought joy and reinforced the importance of love and community in their lives.

"When I was reporting to school at the beginning of this year, I never had a mattress, yet it was a key requirement at school. Mr. Jeremiah (grandfather) surprisingly bought it for me... I realized that God loves his people that he cares for us even in times of need he appoints people to help. Also stealing is bad, God will bring that thing you need at a right time." Uganda

Gratitude for the support of family and community emerged as a key theme in six countries: Bolivia, Uganda, Sri Lanka, Lesotho, Albania, and Senegal.

5. *Right and Wrong—Being Good and Looking for Good*

Children reflected on morals and ethics for their personal growth. Across these regions, children prioritised love, respect, and moral integrity as guiding principles in their lives. While this understanding of doing right varied across contexts, children spoke of such things as the importance of choosing relationships carefully, learning from mistakes, standing up against injustice, discipline, seeking self-improvement and value for education, having a good attitude, and forgiveness.

"I hope to become someone, more or less like my parent, who loves people, understands what is good and what is bad in life. Stays away from the bad and sticks with the good, I mean. But what I think is, I would like to start a business in life and get involved in business." Albania

Becoming a good person emerged as a key theme in six countries: Albania, Bolivia, Lesotho, Uganda, Thailand, and Sri Lanka.

6. *Self-confidence, Self-esteem, Feeling of Being Proud*

Children across most countries highlighted the growth of their self-confidence and self-esteem through the support of family, personal achievements, and overcoming challenges. They emphasized the importance of perseverance, support, and faith in achieving their goals and building a strong sense of self. Participation in sports or artistic events, and academic excellence or overcoming academic challenges, also helped bolster children's self-esteem. Many children highlighted the significance of family support or messages of affirmation from peers and adults.

"Yes, eh, before I didn't speak with this security that I speak now and I was more shy. Going out on the street is a big step forward for me, being able to express myself or speak in public and develop myself, right?, emotionally with God... Well, when I started to connect a little more with my father. He helped me a little more with my self-esteem and, and there I was able to change and talk a little more." Bolivia

A sense of security and self-confidence emerged as a key theme in five countries: Albania, Thailand, Bolivia, Uganda, and Iraq.

7. *Emotional Well-being and Self-regulation*

Children were generally very reflective and aware of their emotional growth and the process of learning to understand and regulate their emotions. They emphasized the importance of family support, community programmes, and their faith in helping them be more self-aware and reflexive, which in turn helped them improve their relationships. They highlighted the role of trust, self-reflection, and community in overcoming challenges and fostering personal development. Some children also spoke about the importance of emotional expression and how they coped with difficult emotions like anxiety, sadness, or pressure.

"I think they need to give you that closeness, to allow you to trust them. They allow you to feel good around them because some people don't allow you to enjoy yourself in their presence, and you can't love those people. That's why." Albania

"If one is alone, one should not let oneself be carried away by the bad moments. One should always remember the good moments, the moments in which one has felt inner warmth

with someone and focus on that, not on the bad." Bolivia

Emotional well-being emerged as a key theme in five countries: Bolivia, Iraq, Albania, Senegal, and Sri Lanka.

8. *"Growing Up" or Maturing*

Children commented on their growing maturity, responsibility, and self-understanding, often spurred by both family support and personal challenges. They expressed a strong sense of purpose and motivation and some spoke of how they learned to be leaders, driven by hope and the desire to succeed and contribute positively to their families and communities. As they developed in this way, they came to understand themselves and their responsibilities in life, which led to greater maturity and an awareness of the need to manage their dreams and their relationships carefully.

"I am trying to change, and the ones who support me are my mother and sister, who encourage me to read. The changes I plan to make to achieve good results include leaving my mobile phone aside during exams and only going out when necessary to avoid wasting time." Iraq

Growing up as a responsible and engaged family and community member emerged as a key theme in four countries: Iraq, Thailand, Bolivia, and Sri Lanka.

9. *Knowledge, Learning, Awareness*

Children shared about how knowledge and awareness gained through education, extracurricular activities, and life experiences shaped their behaviors and ambitions. These insights helped them navigate challenges and guide future aspirations. Some specifically highlighted areas of knowledge like environmental awareness, understanding of their rights and religious knowledge. Many reflected on the role of parents, teachers and other significant relationships in nurturing their knowledge and encouraging them to use their knowledge to shape life decisions.

"The monitor called us to a meeting and made us aware of children's rights. I was present at the meeting. Yes! And he made us aware of ourselves and several children. Yes, the monitors taught us how to behave with our parents. They told to us about our rights." Senegal

Learning about themselves and how to engage their world emerged as a key theme in four countries: Bolivia, Senegal, Uganda, and Thailand.

10. Faith and Spirituality

Many children expressed deep faith and hope in God, viewing prayer, religious practices, and trust in divine guidance as central to overcoming challenges and finding strength. Children emphasized the importance of maintaining a close relationship with God through prayer, religious teachings, and community activities, believing that faith helps them navigate life's difficulties and achieve their goals.

“Hope is, for example, if I say I trust God because when I pray, He answers my prayers. Yes, it’s something I feel because in most cases I pray God. When I pray if I were to make an example and say I am sent where there are dogs and there is no one who can hear me there. I normally pray first and then enter the yard and the dogs won’t buck at me.” Lesotho

It is worth noting that although in children’s narratives this thematic area emerged as particularly strong in only four of the eight countries (Iraq, Lesotho, Bolivia, and Senegal), it was mentioned across all eight countries and the theologians posited that in order to have a holistic Christian understanding of hope, this element was essential. The theologians also observed that, much like human connectivity, faith and spirituality could be nurtured and expressed through all the other areas of a child’s life.

Key Findings from Voice of the Customer Analysis

The analysis confirmed that, whether they acknowledged it or not, a fundamental aspect of children’s lives is their spirituality, even though a child’s “spiritual life” cannot typically be isolated and separated out from other aspects of their personhood. Therefore, each of the themes explored in the VoC exercise spoke in some ways to the spiritual dimensions of a child’s life.

Because human connectivity emerged as the most dominant theme across all countries, findings about the various types of relationships were integrated into this theme and “human connectivity” was understood to be the means by which all other themes are supported rather than a theme in its own right. This affirms the theologians’ statement in the preliminary work that it is largely through human relationships that children experience the love of God.

The themes that emerged from children’s own accounts of their own experiences became the basis for a theoretical framework defining hope from a Christian perspective in the context of World Vision’s programming reach, which in turn could be used to develop the new indicator. The theologians supported this approach within the principles of a child-centered theology. While other organisations and individuals

working with children may find this framework relevant to their own work, it was specifically designed for World Vision’s programming and its desire to integrate a narrative of hope into its commitment to helping children experience God’s love.

Once the framework was agreed upon (as described in the next section), the VoC data were re-analyzed for sense-making and testing the theoretical framework against the original dataset. In the second analysis, the codes were the agreed signs of hope: for each sign there were two codes (children demonstrate this sign, and children express that this is important). Considering possible moral concerns about judging a child’s expression of a sign of hope through their own narrative only, the analysis coded both for children who demonstrated the sign and for children who said the sign was important. This re-analysis affirmed that at least half of children spoke about each the components of the proposed framework as significant in their lives.

Bringing Theology and Children’s Voices Together: Creating the Framework

The theological working group reconvened in August 2024 to reflect on what children had said and create a statement about how hope is an outpouring of God’s love and its visible manifestation in the lives of children. Based on their preliminary work, the group built on the premise that any child—whether they have an acknowledged faith or not, whether that faith is Christian or not—can experience and display signs of hope rooted in an experience of God’s love. Whether acknowledged and understood or not, World Vision can make the bold claim that the Christian triune God is the ultimate source of all love that leads to hope, because a Christian understanding of God is that he is the loving God of hope and we are made in his image. It is the hope that is fueled by a genuine experience of love that enables children to live life in all its fullness, regardless of their circumstances.

The theological team concluded that, while the concept of “hope” as rooted in God’s love resonated as relevant to World Vision’s approach, a single definition for the term would be problematic. Instead, they wrote a description of how hope is reflective of God’s love. They stated that children are a hopeful gift from God and therefore may be seen as both a sign and source of hope (Psalms 127:3-5), demonstrating signs of hope and participating significantly in the unfolding of God’s loving work, which we believe will one day be fully realized. Children’s hope is an expression of their belief in a better, more promising future that starts here and now, even in the face of a seemingly hopeless present.

The team described hope as the vital resource that keeps children moving forward in times of despair and as a conviction that they have value and inherent dignity, are deeply loved even if they don’t consciously realize

it, and are worthy of human love. This hope empowers them to overcome present challenges, fostering both their inner and outer lives as they grow into agents of change who help recreate environments of love and justice. Hope ultimately comes from God, but is also mediated and modelled through relationships. It must be inclusive so efforts at accessibility on behalf of vulnerable children are also a source of hope.

This conception of hope was not intended to replace definitions of hope developed in academic disciplines. The team reviewed other conceptions of hope, and reflected on measures used in other disciplines such as those developed by Snyder (1996) and the Positive Youth Development perspective (Bowers and Bowers 2023). In order to have a perspective on the wider discourse on child hope, but to stay true to World Vision's Christian identity, the team chose ecumenical Christian theological reflection as its starting point rather than these mainstream definitions and measures of hope. By being uniquely Christian it cannot take the place of other definitions of hope, but rather it can offer depth and nuance to the wider literature on hope.

This process allowed World Vision to develop its own conception of hope as specifically linked to the love of God. Therefore, while there may be significant overlap between this work and definitions of "hope" found outside of a Christian theological dialogue, these descriptors constitute a specifically Christian understanding of hope that is nonetheless accessible to all children, not only children who follow the Christian religion. As such, it is particularly relevant to children in World Vision's sphere of care.

The working group concluded that as children experience the love of God, in particular when mediated through loving human relationships, the resulting transformation is witnessed through various signs of hope. "Signs" of hope are visible, measurable manifestations that demonstrate a child is growing in hope rooted in God's love. The language in these signs resonates deeply with the language that emerged from the analysis of children's narratives in the Voice of the Customer. The six signs are:

- **Compassion** affirms and nurtures life. It also sees people's dire needs. Compassion flows from God, the nurturer and protector of life (Isaiah 31:5; Matthew 14:14, 15:23). Children who exercise compassion can build a better humanity and reciprocate on both sides—giving and receiving in shared hope. Therefore, a hopeful child is empathetic towards and aware of the needs of others, exercising kindness, care, and compassion, even when that might be difficult. (Note that compassion is linked to joy in that a compassionate child also demonstrates gratitude

and appreciation when compassion is shown to them.)

- **Resilience** enables a person to withstand shock, return to form, maintain strength, and engender a sense of resolve. This virtue is reflected in Christ's journey towards his Passion where he was not detoured by other influences from his saving work (Matthew 4:1-11, 16:21-23). Resilience in children reflects a driving hope that is not static but progressing towards a desired end. Therefore, a hopeful child has both the capacity and willingness to face life challenges with courage, growing from adversity while maintaining a positive outlook on life. Spiritual resilience also emphasizes the ways in which children gain this capacity through nurturing relationships.
- **Purpose** is the ongoing process of discovery and learning that gives children a sense of meaning and direction. Jesus infused his disciples with a sense of purpose for the here and now (Luke 2:52; Matthew 4:19) and the promise of the possibility of transformation (2 Peter 1:4). Moreover, purpose is a sign of hope in children as they see themselves as an active part of a greater and meaningful plan for all creation. Therefore, hopeful children pursue their dreams and aspirations, working to make the world a better place and constantly improving their capacity to do so.
- **Joy** brings out the innate exuberance of children. This spirit of joy is set in children by God in Jesus, who is the epitome of joy (Hebrews 1:9; Psalms 45:6,7; Matthew 11:17). Joyous children reflect the image of their creator. Therefore, a hopeful child has a grateful heart, allowing them to enjoy simple experiences and appreciate the kindness and love of others.
- **Wisdom** facilitates moral and ethical decision-making, and recognizes and accepts personal strengths and weaknesses. It is the capacity to understand oneself, the world around us, and how to navigate the complexities of life. Jesus, the wisdom and divine incarnate, chose to take the form of a human, journeying from childhood to adulthood (John 1:1-15). Children's hope of a better life motivates them to pursue wisdom and discernment (Proverbs 1:2-7). Therefore, a hopeful child understands their inherent value, reflects on life, and demonstrates strong character, exhibiting a willingness and ability to

act in accordance with what they believe is right, even in challenging circumstances.

- A **spiritual life** nurtures wonder and awareness of self, others, the environment, and transcendence/God. The analogy of the sheep and the Great Shepherd affirms that God calls, and the children hear his voice (John 10:14). Childhood spirituality finds meaning in rituals and spiritual practices like prayer and worship. A healthy spiritual life is a sign of hope in children because they are open to a greater source of help. While the theologians agreed that a spiritual life is an important sign of hope for all children, and it emerged as an important theme among children of all backgrounds in the VoC exercise, World Vision's approach to this sign is limited by the fact that the organisation only engages in programming that directly nurtures a spiritual life among Christian children. Therefore, the definition agreed on for a child who demonstrates a healthy spiritual life within World Vision is that a hopeful child trusts in and feels loved by God, experiencing a personal relationship with Jesus and gratitude for the work of the Holy Spirit, finding strength and meaning in spiritual practices and rituals, a more Christian focused definition. In the World Vision context, this sign is referred to as **personal faith**. There may be scope for partners of different faith traditions to expand on and refine this sign further.

Discussion and Conclusion

This process has affirmed to the team at World Vision and the theological consultants, that theology, children's voices, and development practice can work together effectively. As mentioned in the introduction, World Vision went on to use the framework developed through the theological child-centred reflection based on the VoC exercise, to develop and validate a measurement tool that will help programmes in seventy different countries plan for and report on children's experience of God's love in a way that is ethical, true to biblical values, relevant to children, and useful for World Vision's humanitarian audiences.

This exercise may offer a model to other Christian development practitioners for integrating children's voices into theologically-informed decision-making. The inclusion of children's priorities helped ensure that the framework was relevant and responsive, while the theological consensus process lent it credibility across denominational lines. A key contribution of this work lies in its affirmation that children are not merely passive recipients of development interventions but are active theological agents, a stance that all the theological

consultants felt was important and that resonated with World Vision's commitment to child participation. Their narratives reveal a profound spiritual awareness, often articulated through relational experiences rather than abstract doctrinal language, but which still helped instruct theological scholars.

Practically, the framework offers a tool for measurement that is both theologically grounded and contextually adaptable. It provides a way for World Vision and similar organisations to assess spiritual well-being without proselytizing, respecting the diverse faith backgrounds of the children they serve.

A key limitation of this work is that the framework was designed specifically to capture the contribution of World Vision programming in communities where World Vision works. It does not offer a comprehensive and definitive definition of hope. We do believe it advances research on child hope by bringing a deeper Christian theological orientation through the focus on hope as rooted in God's love and relationality. But we also acknowledge that while we have captured certain aspects and descriptors of hope, a straightforward definition of "hope" remains elusive.

Furthermore, while we engaged children of all different religious traditions in the research, we are aware that this work is limited by our Christian identity as an organisation. Faith-based organisations of different traditions, even those with no faith affiliation, may find this framework relevant but insufficient for their contexts.

Nonetheless, World Vision was able to develop a framework that reimagines hope not as a vague optimism but as a deeply rooted, relational, and transformative virtue. It affirms that hope is both a gift from God and a sign of God's presence in the lives of children, even in contexts of suffering and marginalization. It also affirms that God's love is powerfully mediated through human relationships. The emphasis on human connectivity as the primary conduit of divine love aligns with biblical themes of community, mutual care, and the imago Dei in every person. This understanding is a reminder of the importance of a holistic approach to programming which nurtures relationality and spiritual flourishing alongside other aspects of well-being.

This work also contributes to the broader field of practical theology by demonstrating a way in which participatory methods can enrich theological reflection, bringing children, theologians, and an NGO into dialogue and unity. It models a posture of humility and listening, where theology is not imposed upon children but emerges in dialogue with them. Such an approach honours the biblical mandate to welcome and learn from children, recognizing them as bearers of divine insight.

References

- Aghlmand, Siamak, Aboulfath Lameci, and Rhonda Small. 2010. "A Hands-On Experience of the Voice Of Customer Analysis in Maternity Care from Iran." *International Journal of Health Care Quality Assurance* 23 (2): 153-170.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/09526861011017085>
- Aguwa, Celestine C., Leslie Monplaisir, and Ozgu Turgut. 2012. "Voice Of The Customer: Customer Satisfaction Ratio-Based Analysis." *Expert Systems with Applications* 39 (11): 10112-10119.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2012.02.071>
- Bejou, Azam. 2012. "Customer Relationship Management, Exit-Voice-Loyalty, and Satisfaction: The Case of Public Schools." *Journal of Relationship Marketing* 11 (2): 57-71.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15332667.2012.686386>
- Best, Ron. 2016. "Exploring the Spiritual in the Pedagogy of Friedrich Froebel." *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 21 (3-4): 272-282.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2016.1231664>
- Bowers, Rachael M., and Edmond P. Bowers. 2023. "A Literature Review on the Role of Hope in Promoting Positive Youth Development across Non-WEIRD Contexts." *Children* 10 (2): 346.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/children10020346>
- Chitakunye, Pepukayi. 2012. "Recovering Children's Voices in Consumer Research." *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 15 (2): 206-224.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/13522751211215903>
- Cody, Kevina. 2015. "Hearing Muted Voices: The Crystallization Approach to Critical and Reflexive Child-Centric Consumer Research." *Young Consumers* 16 (3): 281-300.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/YC-10-2014-00482>
- Denove, Chris, and James D. Power. 2007. *Satisfaction: How Every Great Company Listens to the Voice of the Customer*. New York: Penguin.
- Duramy, Benedetta F., and Tali Gal. 2020. "Understanding and Implementing Child Participation: Lessons from the Global South." *Children and Youth Services Review* 119.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105645>
- Einolf, Christopher J. 2013. "Daily Spiritual Experiences and Prosocial Behavior." *Social Indicator Research* 110: 71-87.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9917-3>
- Fisher, John. 2010. "Development and Application of a Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire Called SHALOM." *Religions* 1 (1): 105-121.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel1010105>
- Grover, Sonja. 2004. "Why Won't They Listen to Us? On Giving Power and Voice to Children Participating in Social Research." *Childhood* 11 (1): 81-93.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568204040186>
- Hernandez, Brittany C. 2011. "The Religiosity and Spirituality Scale for Youth: Development and Initial Validation." PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College.
http://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3205&context=gradschool_dissertations
- Herth, Kaye A. 2024. "Hope as Perceived by Children and Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Pediatric Nursing* 50 (1): 17-27.
<https://doi.org/10.62116/PNJ.2024.50.1.17>
- Kamali, Mohammad. 1996. "Methodological Issues in Islamic Jurisprudence." *Arab Law Quarterly* 11 (1): 3-33.
- Kauffman, L. A. 2015. "The Theology of Consensus." *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 59: 6-11.
- Keyes, Corey L. M. 2002. "The Mental Health Continuum: From Languishing to Flourishing in Life." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 43 (2): 207-222. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3090197>
- Kennan, Danielle, Bernadine Brady, and Cormac Forkan. "Supporting Children's Participation in Decision Making: A Systematic Literature Review Exploring the Effectiveness of Participatory Processes." *The British Journal of Social Work* 48 (7): 1985-2002.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx142>
- Kraft, Kathryn. 2017. "Preliminary Literature Review: Spirituality of Children." Unpublished paper commissioned by World Vision International.
- Koenig, Harold G., Michael E. McCullough, and David B. Larson. 2001. *Handbook of Religion and Health*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Košćak, Marko, Mladen Knežević, Daniel Binder, Antonio Pelaez-Verdet, Cern Işik, Vladimir Mičić, Katarina Borisavljević, and Tina Šegota. 2023. "Exploring the Neglected Voices of Children in Sustainable Tourism Development: A Comparative Study in Six European Tourist Destinations." In *Methodological Advancements in Social Impacts of Tourism Research*, edited by Manuel Alector Ribeiro and Kyle Maurice Woosnam, 163-182. Abingdon: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003413165>
- Leyser, Y. 1988. "Let's Listen to the Consumer: The Voice of Parents of Exceptional Children." *The School Counselor* 35 (5): 363-369.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23901686>

- Montgomery, Derek E. 2017. "The Meaning of Hope: Developmental Origins in Early Childhood." *Human Development* 60 (5): 239–261. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26765177>
- Myers, Bryant. 2011. *Walking with the Poor*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Scioli Anthony. 2023. "Emotional and Spiritual Hope: Back to the Future." *Current Opinion in Psychology* 49: 101493. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101493>.
- Sezgen, Eren, Keith J. Mason, and Robert Mayer. 2019. "Voice of Airline Passenger: A Text Mining Approach to Understand Customer Satisfaction." *Journal of Air Transport Management* 77: 65–74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jairtraman.2019.04.001>
- Shelley, Bruce L. 2021. *Church History in Plain Language*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic.
- Shillito, M. Larry. 2000. *Acquiring, Processing, and Deploying: Voice of the Customer*. Boca Raton: CRC Press. <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781420025606>
- Snyder, C. R., Susie C. Simpson, Florence C. Ybasco, Tyrone F. Borders, Michael A. Babyak, and Raymond L. Higgins. 1996. "Development and Validation of the State Hope Scale." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70 (2): 321–335. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.2.321>
- Sparks, Lauren A. 2021. "How Do We Learn to Hope? The Development of The Parent Report of Child Hope." PhD diss., Wayne State University. https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4430&context=oa_dissertations
- Spiritual Care Partners. 2024 (June 1, 2025). *Measuring the Experience of God's Love in Children* (Research Report). <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2025-09/Measuring%20the%20Experience%20of%20God%27s%20Love%20Final%20Report%206.6.25.pdf>
- Thomas, Nigel and Claire O'Kane. 2000. "Discovering What Children Think: Connections Between Research and Practice." *British Journal of Social Work* 30 (6): 819–835. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/30.6.819>
- World Vision International. n.d. "Our Vision and Values." Accessed March 6, 2026. <https://www.wvi.org/our-vision-and-values>
- World Vision International. 2023. "Global Report on Child Participation in Decision-Making." Accessed 26 November 2025. <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2023%20Global%20Report%20on%20Child%20Participation%20in%20Decision%20Making%20External.pdf>

Kathryn Kraft is a sociologist whose work explores faith, child spirituality, and human flourishing in contexts of vulnerability and displacement. She is Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at the University of East London and Global Research Technical Director at World Vision International. She co-founded the Global Initiative for Faith and Child Flourishing and convenes international conversations bringing theologians, scholars, and practitioners into dialogue on faith-informed development and the well-being of children, with a particular interest in creative qualitative and child-friendly participatory methodologies.

Author email: kraft@uel.ac.uk

Ariola Kallciu is a Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Advisor, Global Faith and Development, World Vision International. With a background in psychology and over two decades of experience in humanitarian and development contexts, she leads impact assessments and strengthens monitoring and evaluation systems across diverse settings. Her work contributes to research on children's spiritual,

emotional, and relational well-being within faith-integrated programming.

Author email: ariola_kallciu@wvi.org

Zoe Silver holds a First-Class BSc (Hons) in Psychology from the University of East London. She has contributed to research projects in virtual reality and psychological processes, as well as perimenopause and memory studies. Her research interests include social identity, belief systems, psychological resilience, and psychological processes underlying social and political attitudes. She is currently based in Brazil.

Author email: zoeargent@live.co.uk

Jennifer Wortham serves as a research associate at the Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University, and is the Program Lead for the Initiative on Faith and Child Flourishing. She earned her doctorate in public health at the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health, and she has over 30 years of practice experience in health system transformation, strategy, and population health for leading healthcare organizations in the

public and private sectors. Dr. Wortham's research focuses on the impact of childhood adversity, trauma, and moral injury on health outcomes, and interventions that enhance spiritual and mental health resilience across the lifespan. She has led several global initiatives, including the establishment of the moral problem Z-code in the APA's DSM-5-TR; the development of the Child Hope and Love Measure in collaboration with World Vision International; and the establishment of a World Day at the United Nations focused on the prevention of, and healing from child sexual abuse.

Author email: jwortham@fas.harvard.edu
