

**FROM A CHILD'S WORDS**  
**Plenary Response to Statement 3:**  
**“God Gives Children As Gifts To Welcome And Nurture”**

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**W**RITING this response proved to be a much more difficult task than I had ever imagined. I believe that God gives children as gifts to welcome and nurture. I try to act upon it, but when I sat at my computer, I could not articulate the reasons and behaviors behind my belief. After years of working with children, listening to their wonderful stories, watching them play with such abandon, and genuinely being blessed because they let me step into their world from time to time, I did not know how to express it for you.

I had nothing left to do but to go back to children. I have been adopted by 19 young girls as their Joni Auntie. They have been my language teachers, my prayer partners, my cooking assistants, my storytellers, and my huggers. In the midst of their trauma and painful memories, they have found a way to laugh, to encourage one another, to initiate hugs, and to forbid me from coming to speak to you today. They own me in ways I still can't explain. Their acceptance of me, a one-time foreign stranger, is a great gift. I cherish it and wish I could multiply it for every adult in the world. God knew what He was doing when He gave us children. He knew the many ways they would bless our lives, the lives of other children, and even animals. I marvel at their persistence and resilience to keep trying to heal, to succeed, to learn, and to have fun.

So, in intermittent light due to numerous power cuts one evening, I asked the girls what I should tell you today. They were a little shy and needed time to think, but they responded far more simply than I would have done. They said: “Children are gifts from God because He loves us.” “Children should be loved.” “Parents must correct us.” “Adults should understand us, even what's in our hearts.” Finally, “Adults must have the right behavior.”

**“Children are gifts because He loves us.”**

I'm astonished at the frankness of that statement. I look for the theology and the Scriptures, but Neelam, only 4 years old, simply states the obvious. God, in His great love, gave us children. Jesus made them role models to help us, as adults, see what the kingdom of God is all about. Several years ago when Keith White talked about the child in the midst of us, he described the kingdom of God in a more childlike and less adult way. He said, “The Kingdom is in fact not like an earthly kingdom at all! It's the opposite in every way. Upside down! Inside-out! The best way of describing it is not as a place or territory at all, but as ‘God's way of doing things’” (“A Little Child Will Lead Them,” Cutting Edge III). If we look closely, we can see children showing us God's way of doing things as they turn work into play, run to console a crying child, find resourceful ways of using rubbish, and simply stating the obvious.

Our organizations work hard and long to prove our belief that children are gifts from God. We design programs to help children recognize their own gifts and abilities. In fact, our offices and buildings are furnished with their creative expressions. We treat children with respect and train our staff and visitors to do the same. We love them for who they are, rather than for what they do. We provide opportunities for them to explore their spirituality, to learn to worship God in their own ways, and to be responsible for their own walk with Him.

**“Children should be loved” and “Parents must correct us.”**

Because God loves children, we love children. When I asked how parents and adults show that they love children, the girls surprised me. The first thing they said was, “Mom corrects me.” I’ve seen many mothers, fathers, older siblings, and other adults correct children, and I normally wouldn’t associate it with love. I cringe when I hear the hard slap of a hand on a child’s back or face. But, when Goma explained her statement, she described correction more than punishment. She said that her mother loved her so much that she would tell her a different way to do something. Pushpa added that people who love children help them to understand right and wrong.

Love and correction. What an astonishing combination! Several times when I asked the children about showing love, they would come back to the idea of correction. Isn’t this an illustration of that upside down nature of the kingdom? Most of us would say that we do the work we do because we love children. But doesn’t much of our work revolve around correction? We see children’s rights being plundered, so we raise awareness and teach children and communities about the Convention on the Rights of the Child. We hear about a child being sexually abused or exploited, so we work with local and national governments to enforce their laws on abuse, trafficking, exploitation, and labor. We create hotlines and drop-in centers to protect children and provide a safe place for them. We develop skills training and income generation programs for sustainable development so children don’t have to continue in debt-ridden situations. We see problems for children, and we set out to correct those problems. In essence, our programs are corrective measures. Goma and Pushpa would say we love them.

**“Adults should understand us, even what’s in our hearts.”**

God gives children to welcome and nurture. Each time, I visit the girls in the home, I feel welcomed. Often, they are sitting on mats in the living room watching for my entrance through the door. Sometimes, as I’m walking up the stairs, I hear them whispering, “Joni Auntie is coming. It’s Joni Auntie. She’s here.” Usually, the minute I step into the room, nineteen girls jump to their feet and surround me, waiting to give me their greeting – a hug and “How are you, Joni Auntie?” You have all experienced the same thing in your programs. The welcome that children give us is often overwhelming. It challenges me to welcome them as well as they welcome me.

At the last Cutting Edge, Haddon Wilmer mentioned “the premature adultization” of children as a form of child abuse (“Child Theology,” Cutting Edge IV). It’s easy to see children being treated as adults when they are beaten with full body blows or sexually penetrated or inscripted into the military, but the statement made me wonder about other ways children are robbed of their childhood. We believe we should listen to children and encourage them to participate in our programs. However, I believe the challenge lies in knowing the balance between participation and direction for a child. This is becoming even more challenging in the face of the HIV/AIDS crisis where large numbers of children are becoming parents to their siblings. How can we understand what’s in the heart of children who are faced prematurely with the responsibilities of parenthood while they are still learning how to grieve the loss of their parents? To what extent should child soldiers decide how to play with children when they’ve both witnessed and been party to the deaths and abuses of other children and adults? Our organizations work to welcome children and nurture them, no matter what they’ve done before we met them, but we must understand the child’s heart. They are not adults. They are children. As we listen to them and help them to participate in our programs, let us always encourage and expect children to be children.

## **“Adults should have the right behavior.”**

So much of welcoming and nurturing children involves appropriate adult behavior. We train our staff and visitors how to interact appropriately with children. We train our children about how adults should act with them and how they should act with other children. Much of the Bible revolves around appropriate behavior because we live in a sin-centered world. In our fallen state, we forget how to act in kingdom ways. Many of our children come from homes and communities where they have seen more dysfunctional behavior than any of us would like to imagine. How do we train a child to trust the police when she has seen them rape and beat her mother? How do we restore innocence to a child whose parents sold him to the army for the war effort? How do we teach a child to dream big dreams when her relatives have never been to school and none of them has had any other job than ragpicking?

We have taken up the mandate to protect children and to expect their communities to protect them. We have developed community awareness programs on every imaginable social issue. We have developed parent support systems and parenting skills programs to strengthen the family structure. We have created safe havens for children through drop-in centers, evening care centers, daycare programs, and safe houses. We have taught children, and their parents, about God and His ways, allowing the Holy Spirit to renew right behavior.

As the girls helped me to write this plenary response, I was reminded of Manisha’s story and how she came to the home. Her story illustrates how her parents saw her as a gift, how they welcomed her into their lives, and how her father took care of his little girl in the only way he knew.

*Manisha came to the girls’ home because her father feared keeping her. When her mother realized she was pregnant with Manisha, she went to great trouble and danger to carry her baby full-term. The brothel owner had tried several times to induce an abortion, but each time Manisha’s mother had found a way to stall, to lie to disobey the owner. She wanted this baby. Her “husband,” a steady customer, wanted this baby, too. They had been allowed to live together in a sort of marriage, as long as Manisha’s mother continued to serve the many customers who visited the brothel. They looked forward to the birth of this child.*

*When Manisha was only 2 years old her mother was sold to a brothel in Singapore. Her father missed her mother, but he needed help taking care of Manisha, so he took on another “wife.” But, the second wife did not like Manisha. She wanted no reminders of the “other woman” in her home. So, she treated Manisha badly and begged her husband to get rid of the girl. He loved Manisha and did not want to lose her. Finally, though, in desperation and tears, he begged Ambika-didi to take his daughter to the girls’ home.*

*“I fear for my daughter’s life,” he said. “My wife beats her and neglects her. See how beautiful she is. I cannot protect her from my new wife or the customers who might see her. Please take her and give her a safe place.” So Ambika-didi did, and Manisha came to the girls’ home.*

Manisha’s story, with many variations, has been played out 18 other times in our home and thousands of times around the world. We did not want to take beloved daughters away from their mothers and fathers, but we found it impossible to ignore the pleas of parents desperate to protect their girls from the dangers of living in a red-light district. Each of the girls in our home knows she has a mother, father, or guardian who loves her.

I wish I could show you a video of Sunday afternoons at our girls' home. That's the day Mom calls to talk with her daughter. You should see each girl's excitement when Anita-didi or Kiran-didi calls her name to come to the phone. We all cheer as she goes to the phone. Her Mommy has called. She is a beloved daughter. We don't want to diminish that relationship in any way. Rather, we want to see it grow to be all God had planned it to be from the beginning. When Manisha's daddy calls, she is cheered, too. Without her mommy around, he knows that she is a gift and a reminder of the woman he loved in a red-light district in India.

In my imagination, I see you doing the same. You celebrate each of your children as gifts. You lovingly correct them, their families, and their communities. You welcome them with open hearts and wide arms. You enable their parents to be better nurturers of them. Your love for children strengthens your belief that they are a gift from God. Your programs with children and their communities reflect your belief that they should be welcomed and nurtured. You are doing the work of the kingdom with children. You face every challenge – limited funds and resources, not enough staff, power cuts, water shortages, bombs, and corruption – because you know God has a purpose and plan for every child. May you be blessed with all the strength, wisdom, and provision you need to help children know this too.