

# The Growth of Love

Paper for CCCF Annual Forum 29<sup>th</sup> April 2008

## Introduction

Perhaps it was the novelist, Niall Williams, who wrote the book, *Four Letters of Love*, who unconsciously suggested the theme of this annual event. Be that as it may the ending of his later novel, *As it is in Heaven*, had an impact too. It tells of a love relationship between a man and a woman, each with traumas in their pasts, and the effect that the birth of their baby girl has.

By the end of the story the three are together: mother and father with the child by her presence leading them to understand that:

*“though we live in the impotency of our dreams to make better this world, the earth and its stars spin through the heavens at the rate of our loving and is made meaningful only in the way in which we give ourselves to each other.”* (Page 310)

We are not surprised when novelists, poets and dramatists use the word love: they are allowed to! Thus it felt wholly appropriate when Mary Hawes quoted at some length from *The Velveteen Rabbit* as she opened this Annual Forum.

Likewise we are not surprised to learn that Janusz Korczak', the Polish carer who gave his life to be with the Jewish orphans entrusted to them as they headed to the gas chambers, also used the word in the farewell speech he gave to each child leaving his orphanage in Warsaw:

*“Unfortunately I can give you nothing but these few poor words.  
I cannot give you God, for you must find Him in quiet contemplation, in your own soul.  
I cannot give you a Homeland, for you must find it in your own heart.  
I cannot give you love of Man, for there is no love without forgiveness,  
And forgiving is something everyone must learn to do on his own.  
I can give you but one thing only –  
A longing for a better life, a life of truth and justice: even though it may not exist now, it may come tomorrow.  
Perhaps this longing will lead you to God, Homeland and Love.  
Goodbye. Do not forget.”* (Page 144)

And really radical teachers like Paulo Freire find the word non-negotiable:

*“It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up ...We must dare, in the full sense of the word, to speak of love without the fear of being called ridiculous, mawkish, or unscientific, if not antiscientific.*

(Freire, P. *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, Cambridge MA: Westview Press, 2005, page 5)

And of course we expect the theologians and hymn-writers to use the word, love. Try taking it out of hymnals and songbooks and see the extent of the gaps that are left!

But for some reason it has become a seemingly inappropriate four letter word to use in the U.K. when we think of children, childhood and our engagement with them, or their relationships with each other and the world that is their home. As the invitation to the CCC Annual Forum puts it, “it has become noticeable by its absence”.

Perhaps one reason is that it is a word so difficult to pin down that it can't be used in projected learning outcomes. How would Ofsted measure it, for example? If this is a partial reason for its demise, then we would do well to ponder whether the most important things in life (including childhood) cannot be measured: quite a sombre thought when it comes to the way we understand and evaluate education and care provision for children in the UK today!

With all this in mind it may come as a bit of a shock to find first a conference and then a book where the word is not smuggled in under cover as it were, but inescapably at the heart of the whole day, and every part of it. And as we allow it centre stage it may remind some of us of the dramatic encounter between Nicky Cruz and David Wilkerson: “I could kill you, preach!” “Yes, you could Nicky. You could cut me up in a thousand pieces and every piece will say ‘I love you’.”

### **CCCF and Love**

It so happens that the period during which the book, *The Growth of Love*, has been gestating coincides almost exactly with the lifespan of CCCF. And the roots of both can be traced back to somewhere near 1979, the International Year of the Child. And what *TGOL* and CCCF have in common, when they use the word love, is the desire to understand, respect and nurture children in a way that is both fully Christian and also fully professional. No compromise either way.

Today the book and CCCF combine to offer the word love to both professionals and Christians:

to professionals who find they must use many different terms and frameworks although they realise deep down that love is at the heart of what they know of the needs and nature of children and childhood;

to Christians involved in supporting, teaching, nurturing and caring for children as a means of connecting or re-connecting their life and faith with their vocations and work.

CCCF is guided by a vision: you have a copy in your conference pack. It is a vision of what you might call a “Good Childhood”:

“a society in which children and young people have a rightful place, and responding in love from common Christian perspectives, to the needs of children and families.”

We have emphasised different aspects of that vision in previous gatherings, but today we draw attention to the phrase “*responding in love from common Christian perspectives*”.

Do we not share a sense today that as Christians we have been entrusted by grace with one of the profoundest insights into the very heart of things when we glimpse the love of God as revealed in the life and death of Jesus? Is it not a fact that what binds us most strongly together today is this “love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all”?

Christian theology gives a unique privilege to the language of the personal and love said Rowan Williams in a lecture on plural society at Westminster Cathedral on 17<sup>th</sup> April 2008. It reminded me of one of my novelist friends at university. He told me that although it was far from politically correct to say so, and that although I could therefore never quote him as saying it, the fact was that not until they heard the Christian Gospel of the love of God in and through Jesus, did his people have any idea of what this kind of love meant.

In the Annual Forum in 2004 I shared with you some of the treasures hidden in our common Judaeo-Christian heritage. One of my abiding concerns is that as Christians engaged in forms of child care and children’s ministry we seem either to have forgotten, or are reluctant to share, some of the treasures that are our heritage. Perhaps familiarity has something to do with it; perhaps we are anxious about how we are seen and supported in and by a plural society and culture. In that paper I listed four treasures, and on revisiting it there is no doubt that love is the common thread:

I began with the *Ten Commandments*. Please notice the summary: “*Love* the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and *love* your neighbour as yourself.”

*The great stories of the Bible*. This is a resource that Thomas Barnardo used in his very first encounter with a child. He told Jim Jarvis on that historic occasion “the story of Bethlehem’s Babe. He told him of Jesus’ tenderness and compassion, His sympathy and mercy, of *His love* for children...”

*Then there is a perspective on time and history* that is in sharp contrast to short-termism, or the opium of being caught up in a consumer-inspired concern only with what we eat,

drink and wear. Our faith reaches into the depths of primal time, and leads us to contemplate the very end of history; pre-birth and after death. What is it that lasts through the whole of a child's life and after death? Certainly not learning objectives; not even tongues or prophesy, but love. *Love* is stronger than death. *Love* never ends.

*Finally I shared some of the inspiring visions of society* to be found throughout the Scriptures. I often use them when teaching those alongside children in the five continents of the world. I hope and trust that these will find a central place in the splendid work of TGC Inquiry. The child playing among the creatures of the earth, and caring for them (Isaiah 11: 6-9) and the streets of the city filled with the sound of children playing (Zechariah 8: 3-5) are two to expand our horizons. But there are many, many more to be found throughout the Scriptures and in a variety of models in church history, all with love as an implicit dimension to what is described.

It is our hope as trustees of CCCF that today's forum will rekindle our sense of responsibility for, and trust in, this common heritage. If we do not witness to our heritage in our lives as well as our words, then who will?

### **The Book, *The Growth of Love***

#### **Mill Grove (Chapter 1)**

Let me give you a very brief summary of the book. *TGOL* is an attempt to reflect on thirty years of practical experience alongside children and young people living at Mill Grove. There is a brief description of Mill Grove in Chapter One, for those who do not know about this little Christian extended family in East London. This is where I have seen love grow and develop. I do not know how or why this is, but because of the long-term nature and commitment of those who have welcomed, lived alongside and cared for about 1200 children in need since 1899, it has been possible to observe this love spanning lifetimes and the whole of the world. Enough said today, but please remember that the name Mill Grove is deliberately intended to avoid any labelling: it is *sui generis*, and defies categorisation. It is a work of faith with no government funding or subsidy: a radical model of what child care looks like when rooted in the same family, house and neighbourhood over a period of 108 years.

#### **Perspectives (Chapter 2)**

The reason for writing the book was not to propose or develop new child care theories, but rather to find a way of gaining a better understanding into what I had been privileged to witness throughout my lifetime: the growth of love in and between children and young people who had been badly hurt emotionally in their early years. Forgiveness of a parent who had abandoned her children; long-lasting relationships and marriages standing the test of time; close and empathetic bonds between those who lived together throughout their childhoods although they were not related by blood; self-worth and esteem that grew until it was possible to help others; care and love for those less well-off.

In attempting to understand how all this might have come about, I use two primary frameworks, or perspectives: psycho-social and theological. The questions that drive the book are, “How has love grown?” And in the light of this, “What sort of environment best nurtures the seeds of love?”

There are two working definitions of love at the outset: one from the work of Dr John Bowlby, and the other from the Apostle Paul. Bowlby has in mind a “warm, intimate and continuous relationship, in which both (mother and child) find satisfaction and enjoyment” (page 15). Incidentally because the book and my practice owe so much to John Bowlby, whom I met as a research student at Edinburgh University, it was a great joy and encouragement when John Bowlby’s son, Sir Richard, agreed to write a foreword to the book and to endorse its contents so warmly.

St. Paul famously describes love as “patient, kind; not envious, boasting or proud...not self-seeking, or easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs; it protects, trusts, hopes and perseveres. It never gives up.” (Page 30) (Jo-Joy Wright delighted in the fact that the book and its themes resonate so richly with the notion of “hesed” the steadfast, covenant loving-kindness of God described so often in the Hebrew Scriptures.)

These definitions encapsulate much, if not most, of what professionals and Christians believe about the essence or nature of love. I don’t think we need detain ourselves any longer at this point: we know what we mean. We are not talking about romantic or sexual love; perverted forms of human feelings as represented by the word “paedophile”; nor about something that is engendered by formal education, psychology or care, however informed and well-intentioned. A critical point to make here is that if we do not affirm what we mean by love as Christian professionals, then other definitions will prevail by default.

I do not go into detail about how the two perspectives, psycho-social and theological, can be mutually illuminating, and how they might be related to each other conceptually. But it is important to say that neither is the junior partner. They are invited to challenge and critique each other. But I would like to draw your attention to a section on theological contributions to theory (pages 39-44), and to invite your reactions. It calls for a fundamental revision of the relationship that takes seriously the reality of pre-birth, death, the search for meaning and love, the limited nature of cognitive and other forms of development in helping humans come to terms with death, and the overwhelming significance of grace in Christian theology and the lives of Christians. Put simply it calls for some radical rethinking of the theoretical basis of much of our work with children.

And this call comes at a good time, for over the past five or so years there has been a flourishing of thinking and writing about children and childhood from various theological perspectives. I have had the privilege of working alongside groups doing this on every continent, and of reading some substantial contributions from scholars and theologians. We no longer need to operate as Christian professionals in a theological mist or vacuum. I commend to you particularly the work of the Child Theology Movement and a few of its publications available here today. It is a blessing to have had input from Jerome

Berryman, and to have Marcia Bunge as one of the trustees. Recently CTM has been working alongside international Christian children's organisations helping to develop their theological base and practice, and I hope that this will begin to happen in the UK too.

Given this, how does this love grow in babies and children? And if we know how it grows, what sort of environment best nurtures such love? In seeking answers to these questions we seek to bear in mind children in every type of setting and situation, from those in settled and caring families, to those who find themselves in unpredictable, uncaring, chaotic if not abusive contexts, wherever they are in the world. If we are to find alternative or substitute environments for children, who are deprived of love, what pointers or principles can we find?

### **The Five Key Themes or Components of Love (Chapters 3-7)**

Many of you know that I have been working on the five themes described in *TGOL* for a long time. They derive from a study of all the relevant literature and clinical experience that I could lay my hands on, professional and theological. In choosing five words I was attempting to identify readily accessible and understandable, non-specialist themes that would resonate within both professional and theological communities. They are intentionally inclusive and allusive, rather than restrictive. They are security, boundaries, significance, community and creativity. They come best in this order in my experience, but are not a form of progression such as, say, Erikson's stages or Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Put together they represent much of what we mean by the word "love", but also the key elements in the environment of the growing child that nurture this love:

**Security:** bonding, attachment and particularly the experience of "being held".

**Boundaries:** predictability, discipline, patterns, routines, space, privacy, safety.

**Significance:** I-Thou; respect; reciprocity; self-worth, esteem and identity.

**Community:** associations, clubs and groups beyond the initial significant others.

**Creativity:** life, spontaneity, dance, colours, rhythms, play.

Each theme forms the basis for a chapter, and of course it has been necessary to list them (you can't have simultaneous chapters!), but I stress that they are not to be seen as in a fixed order or associated with particular stages of child development. In fact they are not mutually exclusive, and creativity could be said to be a dimension of the other four. Love grows in a myriad individual ways and combinations, but these words encapsulate much of the world's wisdom on how it grows. They are not prescriptive. And they are not simply an exhaustive list of needs or even hungers. Resilience theory and observation shows that somehow children can learn to give and receive love without all of these in

place. So I, like love itself, have tried to break free of regimented and institutionalised child development theory, while at the same time drawing from the best of it.

Somewhere among them there should be aspects of every psycho-social theory, and theological insights. If these aspects and insights have not actually been named in every case then the intention has been to clear space for them, so that they can be appropriately located. The five themes have been tested out on every continent for ten to fifteen years. That does not put them above contradiction or refinement, but it does mean that in however small a measure they can be said to work.

I would like to highlight one discovery made during the writing of the book. Some of you know that another project in which I have been engaged over the past 21 years has been a new presentation of the Bible. It is intended for ordinary people who want to read the Bible for themselves, but who have little or no knowledge of the content or the way in which the Bible is arranged. In the process I have worked at providing simple notes that a Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist or agnostic, might find useful in reading the text if English is their second language. So I have found myself immersed in the whole of the Bible text for a number of years. In writing about the five themes, I have drawn deeply from this vast reservoir. My testimony is that the Scriptures are full of life-giving water if we are seeking that which will nurture the seeds of love.

Each of the five themes has been, in my view immeasurably enriched by the insights and light thrown by the biblical material. I suppose that what I am saying is that as Christians engaged in some form of care of children and young people we must ensure that our reading of current journals, policies and theory does not outstrip our delving into the Bible.

You will recall that some of the pioneers of psychiatry drew heavily from Greek stories (an obvious example is Freud and the so-called “Oedipal complex”). What we still need to do is to reframe and rediscover some of our child development theory in the light of the great stories and literature of the Bible. And we have to find a way of allowing the Bible to connect with the children and young people we seek to help, and of them connecting with it. When this happens it is as evocative, alive, real and resourceful as ever. It connects with the deepest fears, anxieties, longing and hopes of all people. Don’t overlook it or take it for granted!

That said, whether or not we are believers and drawing on this biblical material, if we are to participate in creating the best environment in which the seeds of love can take root and grow (a good childhood? good enough parenting? a child-friendly society?) then these five themes will be among the best guiding principles. Certainly if we were to ignore them or work against them, love would be threatened and at risk. As the five themes have been explored in groups around the world they always seem to resonate, to make sense and to provide memorable, because, simple principles that can be applied in their own way and culture whether in parenting, teaching, social care, church, formally or informally.

### **Caring Adults (Chapter 8)**

There is a chapter that seeks to apply the themes to the assessment and understanding of the needs and qualities of the adults who consider choosing to be alongside children. Jo-Joy Wright has provided a model of how this can be done, and it is listed in an appendix.

### **Risks to the Growth of Love (Chapter 9)**

Sadly there are many factors that undermine or threaten the growth of love in children around the world and through history and I try to discuss some of those in our contemporary world. In doing this I try to go beyond the obvious factors such as war, disease, famine, paedophilia, abuse and so on, to examine some of those factors and frameworks that we may take for granted or even consider to be beneficial. Love demands that we look more deeply and widely at the contemporary environment than conventional research and policy.

When we place love at the centre of our endeavours and perspectives, it shines light on every aspect of our lives and work. It may cast a warm and encouraging light, or provide a searchlight revealing hidden flaws and contradictions. In the UK we have long proceeded in the realms of child care and education without the centrality of love. So we invent terms like “Every child matters”, “corporate parenting”, “safeguarding children” “looking after children” without setting them in a more overarching and holistic context. If this seems overly critical of our own principles and practice it is because I am concerned to seek to get our own house in order rather than assuming a spurious moral superiority over other parts of the world, other cultures and traditions.

At the launch of the CCCF at Portcullis House on 14th March 2001 there was some criticism because I had described aspects of life in the UK including church that were not child-friendly. It was a Lord Bishop, no less! Yet the UNICEF Report on children’s wellbeing in the UK published in February 2007 did not give us any grounds for complacency. And the recent Good Childhood survey of 11-15 year olds which concludes that 10% suffer from mental health problems, and 27% of 14-16 year olds admit feeling depressed, give sombre food for thought. Sadly I have seen little reason to change my views. There is much that is child-unfriendly in the UK despite the best intentions of many.

If we put children and love at the centre some surprising potential conclusions emerge: perhaps the very things that we prize and cherish unintentionally undermine the growth of love. I remain haunted and challenged by the hymn of Graham Kendrick, “Who can sound the depths of sorrow in the Father heart of God?” The line “We have sacrificed our children on the altars of our gods” comes far too close to modern day realities than I care to admit: perhaps it has always been so.

### **Villages and Compost Heaps (Chapter Ten)**

In looking ahead we must of course avoid positing a golden age or being nostalgic about times past. We are concerned to be hard-headed and real in a fast changing set of currents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What should a government concentrate on? What should professionals, faith-based organisations and churches set out to do?

I cannot see how any single initiative can serve as a panacea, given the five themes on the one hand, and the variety of human experience, on the other.

So I come up with something that may seem rather open-ended and lacking in specifics in a culture that is so outcome focussed, and seeking to tick boxes. Love thrives in what I term “villages” or “social compost heaps”. So the key is not “the family” or “education”, or children’s centres, or parenting, or whatever else you care to single out. Children thrive where there is a rich texture of interwoven relationships, institutions and groups, formal and informal. I suppose some would link this in some way with ideas of civic society. The scary thing is that the way modern urban life is going such “villages” may well be threatened. Or if this seems too bleak an analysis they are not being created and nurtured.

What I have in mind is not about outcomes and intentional actions, government initiatives and guidelines, and certainly not about services and the extension of government interference in everyday life. It is much more about creating space in which love can thrive: warm and safe space, rather than services. Love is not all to do with giving and receiving in a conscious way, but more often than not spontaneous and serendipitous discoveries and relationships.

One of the most precious gifts that adults can give to children is reliable, creative personal space, where adults are content and relaxed in each others company, and where children can be, and play and experiment in such a social context without being the objects of attention, teaching, care, admiration or concern. Not age-appropriate activities and lessons, but space in which children can be themselves without fear of neglect on the one hand, or zealous concern and activity on the other.

In many extended families and communities worldwide much of this space exists either in reality or potentially. Adult relatives or neighbours come together regularly for a number of practical reasons with children able to play together in the middle of it all. This is a model for me of the setting in which love thrives best.

It is the essence of a child-friendly society. The child can be in the midst of everything without being the focus of attention. For example: a crèche around a crib on Christmas morning with the adult worshippers surrounding the group of babies, toddlers and little children. Yes, really!

I am seeking models, not policy statement or instrumental solutions. This may be a very important point for members of CCCF to consider. Should we focus on models of integrated practice and excellence rather than get into the numbers game? After all this was how Jesus went about inaugurating the Kingdom of Heaven!

## **Some possible implications for Christians and Christian organisations**

### **The model of church as a “village” or part of a “social compost heap”**

Church it seems to me offers a possible model for future action: not rigid institutional concepts and structures, but a community of people drawn from different walks of life and cultures, ages and profiles. Try as I might I keep coming back to the fact that unless churches and church function as models of these “villages” or “social compost heaps” then there is going to be an immense crisis in the UK in future generations. Contemporary trends are undermining much of what I have in mind by a range of factors that interweave with and affect each other. I will not detain you with an analysis now. But it is imperative that churches model what it is to welcome and accept children, and to be child-friendly.

And in saying this I see the work and practice of Christian organisations, and families, as part of church, not para-church. Which places and projects seem to you to be most like the communities that characterise the way of Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven? If we can't point to any in our organisation then a stark choice confronts us: to cease the pretence of calling ourselves Christian, or to change direction immediately and begin the long-hard slog of creating and sustaining alternative, pioneering models. The government and contemporary policy-makers urgently need integrated practice models that work.

These models will implicitly challenge prevailing policies and methods. They cannot be servants of government and in its pay.

### **Rethinking education and care**

I won't rehearse some of the arguments today, but I agree with John Westerhof that modern education and schools are at best like hothouses, and at worst like factories. We are going to have to develop new models, and this will require new language. Again it is for churches to model new forms of learning and care, where love has its rightful place, and where we do not automatically prefer reason and utility to the giving and receiving of love.

The examples of Montessori, Cavaletti, Berryman and others should not be limited to so-called Christian settings: they are the basis for new models. Barnardo was a pioneer in his day, and societies always need pioneers who are willing to venture into new, uncharted territory and find new ways of living, that others can learn from.

### **Covenant lived out**

Let's call a spade a spade here: love cannot thrive in children and childhood where there is no covenant or idea of covenant. (I have been influenced greatly by Iris Murdoch's philosophy of morals, which is based on the assumption that ethics require an idea beyond utility: something that transcends the everyday.) The marriage covenant is not

theologically speaking a human invention, but something on earth that mirrors or embodies the covenant at the heart of the Trinity, and between God and His people, bought with the blood of Jesus the Christ. This is not to hark back to a golden age, or to assume that marriage as we have known it will again be the social norm. But it is to say that we cannot let go of the marriage covenant: it is not ours to do so.

There have to be places and families where we can point to covenant love in action. And once again this leaves us with a clear choice: either we can do so in our churches, our projects, our marriages, or we must point to the Cross of Jesus, to the Eucharist. What we cannot do is remain agnostic on this. My concern is that Christian organisations are being squeezed into the mould of contemporary society and its norms (conformed to it) rather than being transformed and transforming vehicles through which covenant love is lived out, incarnated and en-fleshed.

Love will not thrive without this. If we are serious about the growth of love then there will be serious changes and sacrifices ahead.

### **Parenting appropriated by all**

At the beginning of the book I tell a story about a time in Switzerland when I realised that I was experiencing what it meant in practice for a village to parent three nursery school children. By virtue of driving through this village (Trogen in Appenzell Canton) we had become temporary parents ensuring that they crossed the road safely. In the UK parenting is largely confined conceptually to the nuclear family and one or two parents; or to the corporate parent. The parenting role of every villager is not acknowledged. We are expected to pass by on the other side.

So parenting has to be redefined, rediscovered and re-modelled. If Mill Grove has taught me anything, it is that it takes the whole community to parent. And this is where the church is such a significant potential model.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the help of many, *TGOL* is a personal book, and I take full responsibility for its weaknesses, omissions and any errors. It is being launched at the Annual Forum of CCCF. There is clearly a synchronicity between the two, but they (the book and CCCF) should not be confused in any way. All the same, what might the book have to say to CCCF and its members in the light of the history, vision and practice of CCCF thus far?

At its inception or conception at NCH on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2000 the potential members of CCCF met to plot its priorities. It must be Christ-centred, child-focussed, distinctively Christian, reflective, bold but not arrogant, personal, practical, creative and open to constructive change. The chaplain of NCH prayed that it might be so. It is appropriate that we have a successor of his with us today.

This is what I have attempted to do in *TGOL*, and it is for CCCF trustees and members to work out practical implications for the next stage. We could do worse than to suggest

that on our website we should share our experiences from our own personal experience of where love has grown in and among children and young people. We could then see if there is any sign of the village or compost heap where the shoots have appeared.

I close with some words from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of 1 John 4:

“My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other, since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love – so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about – not that we one upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God. My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. No one has seen God, ever, but if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us – perfect love!”

Keith J. White