

## Chapter 16

### **Spirit-Empowered Global Christianity: The Pathway to Agency for Children at Risk (Mary Mahon)**

#### **Introduction**

Luis Gonzalez grew up in Linda Vista, a community in extreme poverty on the margins of the capital of Costa Rica. He experienced hardship throughout his childhood: violence, fear, anxiety, a lack of affection, and hunger leading to malnutrition. As the eldest of five children, he was often called upon to care for his younger siblings. Luis was a hard worker and a good student who attended a Christian school which was a ministry outreach for children in poverty. When Luis was eleven years old, the local church held a Bible memory verse competition. The child who could recite sixty verses would win a new bicycle. Luis was determined to win that bicycle, so he memorised the verses. Luis remembers the day of the competition:

That day I had to recite the sixty verses, and I thought I could not, literally *could not*. Because of my condition at that moment of poverty in self-esteem and of intra-family aggression, I felt paralysed. It was there, in total dependence when I heard the voice of the Lord telling me, “Yes, you can! I am with you!” And it was precisely there that I received the baptism in the Holy Spirit with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues. What a glorious moment! I have that image in my heart. It never goes away: the pew, the church, the children, the altar, and me receiving the empowerment to be able to win.<sup>1</sup>

Luis was a child living at risk. *Children at risk* is a term that can be intuitively understood.

Perhaps one thinks of street children in Brazil or Romania fending for themselves. Or perhaps the girls trafficked by modern-day slave runners come to mind. Children at risk could also be closer to home: a neighbourhood child who trembles in fear of abuse from a drunken stepfather.

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<sup>1</sup> Luis Gonzalez, personal communication with Mary Mahon, in-person interview, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

We could say that all children are at risk due to their vulnerability and dependence on adults. For that matter, it could also be argued that all humans live at risk.

### **Children at Risk**

The Lausanne definition for children at risk highlights that children are considered at risk when they are living with risk factors that could prevent them from fulfilling their God-given potential.<sup>2</sup> Risk factors restrict a child from developing within the safe and healthy environment God intended. The presence of poverty is the most consistent risk factor among children at risk. Many ministries exist to reach children at risk and to help mitigate the effects of the risk factors on the lives of the developing child. However, more than external factors need to be considered to bring about sustainable transformation in the life of a child at risk. I propose that an essential protective factor, that reduces the negative outcomes due to such risk factors in the lives of children, is agency. Additionally, I propose that Pentecostal Spirit empowerment can provide a pathway to agency contributing to the resiliency needed for children living in risk to thrive and fulfil their God-given potential.

Lausanne calls on those who work in mission to children at risk to empower children as “vulnerable agents” by embracing them as active participants in ministry and the mission of God.<sup>3</sup> I would like to take this concept a bit further. While those who work in mission to children at risk can empower children to participate in ministry activities, I believe that the empowerment of the Spirit can prove more impactful in the development of the child. Spirit empowerment in

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<sup>2</sup> Lausanne Consultation on Children at Risk, “Who are Children-at-Risk: A Missional Definition”, Quito, Ecuador: Lausanne Movement, 2015, [Available at: <https://lausanne.org/statement/children-at-risk-missional-definition>], [Last accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2024].

<sup>3</sup> Desiree Segura-April et al., “Mission with Children at Risk”, Lausanne Occasional Paper 66, 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> November 2014, Quito, Ecuador: Lausanne Movement, [Available at: <https://lausanne.org/content/lop/mission-children-risk-lop-66>], [Last accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2024].

the life of a child can spark a sense of agency within a child who otherwise may feel powerless. This Spirit-empowered agency enhances a child's ability to overcome their risk factors and to truly flourish.

Winning the bicycle was a turning point in Luis' life. He says he does not know what he learned to love more in his little Christian school – education or the Lord – but he learned to love them both. Spirit empowerment that day gave Luis hope for his future. As he says, “Empowerment in the Holy Spirit offered hope for a better tomorrow because I began to realise that people were telling me that surely God had a plan for me. That definitely gave me a hope that I did not know.”<sup>4</sup> Today, Luis holds multiple degrees in both theology and education, including two doctorates. He serves in pastoral leadership, teaches Bible school, and works as an elementary school teacher. Luis acknowledges that it was the Spirit's empowerment the day he won the bicycle that began his path toward agency.

### **Children at Risk and the Pentecostal Encounter**

Several Pentecostal affirmations are impactful in the lives of children living in risk that can help them build the internal strength they need. Three emerge from the stories of the children: the presence of the Holy Spirit in one's day-to-day life; the guidance given to the individual by the Spirit; and the empowerment that comes from a Spirit encounter.

Pentecostalism as a “religion made to travel”<sup>5</sup> has adapted across national, cultural, and social barriers which accounts for its rapid growth throughout the world.<sup>6</sup> Expressions of Pentecostalism worldwide have been both adaptive and pragmatic, reaching a variety of groups

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<sup>4</sup> Luis Gonzalez, personal communication.

<sup>5</sup> Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (eds), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999). pp. xiii-xvi

<sup>6</sup> Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995): 102.

and subcultures.<sup>7</sup> Children at risk exist as one of these groups. Many Pentecostal ministries direct their mission toward children living in risk. For that matter, most Pentecostal churches are located in communities of poverty and high social vulnerability within the Majority World where the greatest risk factors for children are prevalent. The question remains, however, as to the response within the child when the Holy Spirit empowers them and what enduring difference the Spirit makes in their life as a child at risk.

Edward Cleary notes that Pentecostals centre their lives on experience.<sup>8</sup> This is true among children as well, as the experience with the Spirit generates transformation in their lives. Although Pentecostal empowerment in the lives of adults is to gift them for service<sup>9</sup> or to help them bear witness,<sup>10</sup> in the life of a developing child, Spirit empowerment can build a pathway toward a better future by fostering agency within that child. Everett Wilson notes that rather than persuasion, crisis is what most often brings people to their “personal Pentecost”.<sup>11</sup> This can be true for children as well. The crisis may result from a parent leaving the home, not having enough food for the family, or even the stresses of school for a child with academic aspirations higher than those of their parents.

For Danny Gonzalez, that crisis happened when he was in first grade. His family was thrust into extreme poverty when their father left the home, and the loss of his father caused a personal crisis for Danny. He recalls a deep sadness because he missed his father. An intuitive

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<sup>7</sup> Edward L. Cleary, “Latin American Pentecostalism”, in Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (eds), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999): 145.

<sup>8</sup> Cleary, “Latin American Pentecostalism”, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Frank D. Macchia, “The Struggle for Global Witness: Shifting Paradigms in Pentecostal Theology”, in Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (eds), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999): 15.

<sup>10</sup> Macchia, “Struggle for Global Witness”, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Everett A. Wilson, “They Crossed the Red Sea, Didn’t They? Critical History and Pentecostal Beginnings”, in Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen (eds), *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1999): 87.

teacher responded to Danny's crisis and told him about his Heavenly Father who would never leave him. As she led Danny in prayer, he arrived at his "personal Pentecost." Danny remembers that day: "I no longer felt sad about the absence of an earthly father but focused my hope on the fact that I had a Father in heaven who would always be with me and make all my dreams come true. Not only was this an experience of a new birth, but also one of having joy because of having the Holy Spirit in my heart."<sup>12</sup> As Danny grew, the presence of the Spirit in his life empowered and guided him to good decisions that would help him achieve his goals. Today, Danny is medical doctor and serves on the pastoral team at his local church.

### **The Development of the Child**

The construct of self begins early in a child's life. Children are not born with social roles or self-representations to define themselves. Their identities are developed as they grow and interact with others in various social settings and cultural environments. Yet, once these identities form, they play a crucial role in the control and management of everyday life.<sup>13</sup> The development of a child's identity takes place within a cultural context and occurs as the developing child participates in social interactions within a particular cultural-historic situation.<sup>14</sup> The self helps to maintain the permanence of the culture, as well as reacts to its evaluation of the culture. Jerome Bruner compares the self to a barometer, which in essence responds to the local cultural weather.<sup>15</sup> The self also has the capacity to overcome the negative aspects of the culture. By using its capacity for reflection and imagining alternatives, the self can reframe what the

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<sup>12</sup> Danny Gonzalez, personal communication with Mary Mahon, WhatsApp audio, 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "On Assimilating Identities to the Self: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective on Internalization and Integrity within Cultures", in Mark R. Leary and June Price (eds), *Handbook of Self and Identity* (New York: Guilford, 2003): 253.

<sup>14</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990): 107.

<sup>15</sup> Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, 110.

culture is offering and envisage a better future.<sup>16</sup> This agentic nature of self must develop in order to help children overcome the risk factors that may prevent them from thriving.

### **Agency**

The quality of agency within the construct of self is particularly important in the empowerment of the developing individual. A sense of agency over the world and oneself includes a recognition of the individual's control over their own destiny.<sup>17</sup> Agency refers to the capacity of the individual to initiate and carry out activities and thereby implies skill and know-how.<sup>18</sup> A Pentecostal community of faith can play a critical role in the formation of self and the development of agency through Spirit empowerment in the life of a child at risk.

A child is in the unique stage of being and becoming. In this process of development, the child constructs a theory of self in order to make sense out of their world and experiences.<sup>19</sup> A child born living within vulnerable circumstances experiences the reality of the powerlessness of the world in which they live. Their agency is constrained by these realities. Jayakumar Christian explains this powerlessness as captivity in a web of lies – a “world of flawed assumptions and interpretations.”<sup>20</sup> For a child born into poverty and living at risk, the lies influence their worldview and can negatively affect the development of self. Powerlessness is perpetuated by the worldview of the people living in a vulnerable community.<sup>21</sup> It is not only a current reality but a continuous disempowerment in the lives of the children.<sup>22</sup> This cycle of disempowerment

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<sup>16</sup> Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel N. Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (New York: Basic, 1985): 123.

<sup>18</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, *The Culture of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996): 34.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Harter, *The Construction of the Self: Developmental and Sociocultural Foundations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Guilford, 2013): 1.

<sup>20</sup> Jayakumar Christian, *God of the Empty Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1999): 161.

<sup>21</sup> Christian, *God of the Empty Handed*, 160.

<sup>22</sup> Christian, *God of the Empty Handed*, 157.

within this context presents a risk factor that limits a child's dreams for the future, preventing them from fulfilling their God-given potential.

María Meza, a child of immigrants who lived in a community of extreme poverty, had struggled with disempowerment her whole life.<sup>23</sup> The influence of her community and the culture that prevailed caused her to battle insecurity in her own abilities to achieve her goals and make something out of her life. If her success had depended on her environment, she would have had little to no sense of agency. María was raised by her grandmother and her mother. From an early age, María's Pentecostal grandmother, who sensed her negative self-perception, prayed with her and shared Scriptures with her. The belief that she could do all things through Christ who strengthens her became a personal motto. This message and subsequent empowerment were echoed in her Christian school class devotional times and weekly chapels services.<sup>24</sup>

María has reached one of her goals: she graduated from high school and is studying at university. As she looks back on her journey, she recognises that it has been the Holy Spirit empowering her from early on. Even when she was alone, the Spirit would remind her of that verse, and she could overcome her doubts. As she recounts, "God has helped me a lot. I have achieved things I never thought I would be able to do at this moment. I have a job, I am healthy, and I am studying. All those things I never thought would happen to me, but God helped me, and I owe it all to him."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> María Meza, personal communication with Mary Mahon, WhatsApp Audio, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

<sup>24</sup> María received a scholarship to attend a Christian school that was an outreach of a local Pentecostal church in her community.

<sup>25</sup> Meza, personal communication.

## Children's Spiritual Development

Children's spirituality is important to the development of a child and is an ongoing focus of research that overlaps multiple disciplines within the social sciences.<sup>26</sup> While earlier research focused on areas of religious education and used cognitive and moral development stage methodologies to determine a child's grasp of concepts about God, current research is based on the theory of spirituality as an innate aspect of the developing child and not culturally constructed. As David Hay, Helmut K. Reich, and Michael Utsch observe, spiritual awareness is biologically structured in human beings and expressed culturally.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, spirituality is a universal feature of humanity regardless of religious beliefs or lack thereof.

These concepts are key as we consider Spirit empowerment in the lives of children at risk. I review here several key religious and spiritual formation theorists to provide a basis for understanding spirituality and Spirit empowerment within the lives of children. James Fowler<sup>28</sup> was a pioneer in faith development and the first to study how a person's concept and understanding of God evolves. Robert Coles<sup>29</sup> listened to the stories of children, many of whom were facing great difficulties, as they applied their spirituality to provide meaning to what was happening around them. These two individuals lay the foundation for David Hay and Rebecca Nye's concept of spirituality defined as relational consciousness that will be used to evaluate Spirit empowerment in the lives of children at risk.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> David Hay and Rebecca Nye (eds), *The Spirit of the Child*, rev. ed. (London: Fount, 2006); Donald Ratcliff (ed), *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2006); Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, et al. (eds), *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> David Hay, Helmut K. Reich, and Michael Utsch, "Spiritual Development: Intersections and Divergence with Religious Development", in Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al. (eds), *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006): 50.

<sup>28</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

<sup>29</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 109.



### *James Fowler*

In the area of religious and spiritual education, Fowler's research provided a shift away from the study of the development of religious concepts to the study of faith development. His work integrated theories of psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development to identify six stages of faith development that span a person's lifetime.<sup>31</sup>

Faith development theory defines faith in both a functional and structural way that includes many faith traditions as well as secular ideologies.<sup>32</sup> Faith is understood in an inclusive sense and is qualified as the foundation for beliefs, values, and meaning, which provides an essential centring process giving direction to human beings, assisting them as they relate in community, and empowering them to deal with the challenges of life and death.<sup>33</sup>

### *Robert Coles*

Coles avoided paradigms and labels as his research evolved and he listened to children's stories, noting an innate spirituality that promoted a resiliency among children living in challenging circumstances. Rather than assessing what a child could understand regarding spiritual matters based on their capacities within a structured situation, Coles spoke directly to children and allowed them to lead the flow of many of the conversations. Coles assumed that all human beings possess awareness or consciousness and, through language, people – children and adults alike – attempt to understand and express what they learn to others.<sup>34</sup> Coles also noted a connection that children drew between meaning and spirituality. He observed that children draw

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<sup>31</sup> Fowler's stages of faith development are (1) intuitive-projective (toddlerhood and early childhood), (2) mythical-literal (middle childhood and beyond), (3) synthetic-conventional (adolescence and beyond), (4) individuated-reflective, (5) conjunctive faith, and (6) universalising faith.

<sup>32</sup> J.W. Fowler and M.L. Del, "Stages of Faith from Infancy through Adolescence: Reflection on Three Decades of Faith Development Theory", in E.C. Roehlkepartain et al., *Handbook*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Fowler and Del, "Stages of Faith", 36.

<sup>34</sup> Coles, *Spiritual Life of Children*, 22.

upon religious experience and their spiritual values to understand what is happening to them and why.<sup>35</sup>

*David Hay and Rebecca Nye*

The work of Hay and Nye has identified the core of children's spirituality as the construct of relational consciousness. According to their research, the simple basis of children's spirituality seems to lie in a relational consciousness from which arise religious experiences that are aesthetic and meaningful, providing personal responses to the mystery of the world around them, and inspiring moral insight.<sup>36</sup>

Spirituality in this sense refers to the consciousness a child expresses always within the context of a relationship. The spirituality of children presents itself as a profound and detailed thought process that can be termed *consciousness* all the while confined within a clearly relational realm.<sup>37</sup>

Hay and Nye identify three categories of spiritual sensitivity that provide a foundation to the study of spirituality and that they believe are part of any person's spiritual experience – awareness-sensing, mystery-sensing, and value-sensing.<sup>38</sup> Awareness-sensing is more than involuntary alertness or focus of attention. It also entails a reflexive process in which the child is aware of what they are experiencing.<sup>39</sup> Awareness-sensing of children's spirituality is seen in the ability to become lost in an experience and to be in touch with the felt sense of reality. Mystery-sensing is the transcendent aspect of spirituality. It refers to the awareness of incomprehensible

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<sup>35</sup> Coles, *Spiritual Life of Children*, 100.

<sup>36</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 109.

<sup>37</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 109.

<sup>38</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 109.

experiences in the person's life.<sup>40</sup> In the expression of spirituality in children, mystery-sensing is seen in the constructs of wonder, awe, and imagination. Value-sensing, a term first coined by Margaret Donaldson in 1992, is the third category of spiritual sensitivity. It refers to the moral expression of children's spirituality. Value-sensing is conveyed through delight and despair, ultimate goodness, and meaning. These qualities of relational consciousness, as defined by Hay and Nye, inform our discussion of Spirit empowerment for children at risk.

The three-fold expression of spirituality as relational consciousness – awareness-sensing, mystery-sensing, and value-sensing – sets the stage for the Spirit empowerment experienced by children at risk. Children at risk often feel alone. Many are actually alone for much of their time. Others experience a deep sense of loneliness because the adults around them are not caring for them. As these children experience the Holy Spirit, they become conscious of the ongoing presence of the Spirit in their daily lives. They tune in with what the Spirit is doing in their lives, become acutely aware and open to the miraculous, and have a sense of moral values.

Coraíma's story illustrates what this relational consciousness looks like in the day-to-day life of a child at risk.<sup>41</sup> Coraíma lived in a marginalised *barrio* in Caracas, Venezuela. Her neighbourhood was known for gangs, drugs, and violence. After school one day, second grader Coraíma, caring for her special needs sister, returned home to find her mother was not there. Her father was in the house with other men, and they were drinking. Coraíma soon realised the men wanted to molest her and her sister, and she felt threatened. However, she did not feel alone. She knew God's Holy Spirit was with her, so she prayed to Jesus to help her and her sister. When she

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<sup>40</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 75.

<sup>41</sup> Coraíma, personal communication with Mary Mahon, personal meeting in June 2008, Caracas, Venezuela. Note: I have chosen not to provide her last name here.

shared the story the next day to her spiritual mentor, she recognised the miraculous in the event and declared, “Jesus helped hide me and my sister from those men.”<sup>42</sup>

The scientific data provided by Hay and Nye’s research supports the view that spirituality is entirely natural and grows out of a biological disposition. Although spirituality is innate in the biology of human beings, it can be dimmed or enhanced by culture.<sup>43</sup> Spirituality is essential to culture, providing the foundation for individual and societal contentment. Children have a rich capacity for spirituality that is merited to their psychological qualities and biological make-up. Spirituality naturally flows through the life of children whether they can define it or not. Their understanding of spirituality and experience is not based on religious knowledge or the moral rules that they have been taught.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Hay and Nye’s research demonstrates the importance of a child being aware of themselves as a subject in order to encourage the interpretation of the world in relational terms.<sup>45</sup>

While the culture of communities of high vulnerability can dim the spirituality of children at risk, the culture of a Pentecostal community can enhance it and help children to flourish. Children receive comfort knowing that the Holy Spirit is a constant companion. The Spirit in a child’s life also guides them toward good decisions to help them achieve their goals. Mostly, the empowerment of the Spirit gives the child the agency and internal strength to be able to achieve their goals.

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<sup>42</sup> Coraíma, personal communication.

<sup>43</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 141.

<sup>44</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 93.

<sup>45</sup> Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, 109.

## Conclusion

All children are created in God's image with great possibility. God intends each child, even those born in a vulnerable state, to grow in a loving and healthy environment. Sadly, many children live in difficult circumstances and are at risk of not fulfilling the potential with which God created them. While alleviation of risk factors remains crucial in ministry with children at risk, the internal development of agency is what empowers a child to make decisions and take actions for their own life. With such empowerment, a child can have hope and move toward goals for a better future.<sup>46</sup>

Children are created with an innate capacity for spirituality that is expressed through relational consciousness. Children quite naturally receive an experience with the Holy Spirit. In our ministry with children, we must trust the Spirit to move in their lives. In the same way, we must trust the child's individual spirituality and ability to connect with God on a personal level.

A personal Pentecost can prove transformational for a child at risk, empowering them to overcome the difficulties in their day-to-day life and to envisage a better future. Dr Danny remembers his childhood experiences with the Spirit:

I remember those moments as a child in chapel as transcendental moments, where the Holy Spirit touched my heart. It was where I cried in the presence of the Lord, where I could feel the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and where the Holy Spirit took away the anguish, fear, and sadness because of family situations. It was about one hour a week when we were exposed to the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit ministered to our hearts, bringing inner healing, bringing freedom, and transforming us in our minds.<sup>47</sup>

Experiences such as these make a significant difference in the life of a child at risk. As the Pentecostal community provides opportunities for children to experience the Holy Spirit, lives

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<sup>46</sup> Chris R. Snyder, "Measuring Hope in Children", in Kristin A. Moore and Laura H. Lippman (eds), *What Do Children Need To Flourish?: Conceptualizing and Measuring Indicators of Positive Development* (New York: Springer, 2005): 61.

<sup>47</sup> Danny Gonzalez, personal communication.

will be transformed. Children who live their daily lives with the presence of the Spirit will never be alone; they will have divine guidance to lead them toward good decision making, and the empowerment of the Spirit will foster the agency needed to help them fulfil their God-given potential.

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### **Abstract**

In recent years Global Christianity has seen its greatest growth in the Majority World where the highest concentration of the one billion multi-dimensionally poor children live. Poverty is the greatest commonality among children who are at risk of not fulfilling their God given potential. This presentation will take a look at how spirit empowerment can be transformational for the development of children at risk by providing a pathway to agency or the capacity to make decisions about one's future and carry them out. We will hear the children's voices telling of how the Spirit empowers them to change the trajectory of their lives, achieve their potential, and fulfill God's purpose.