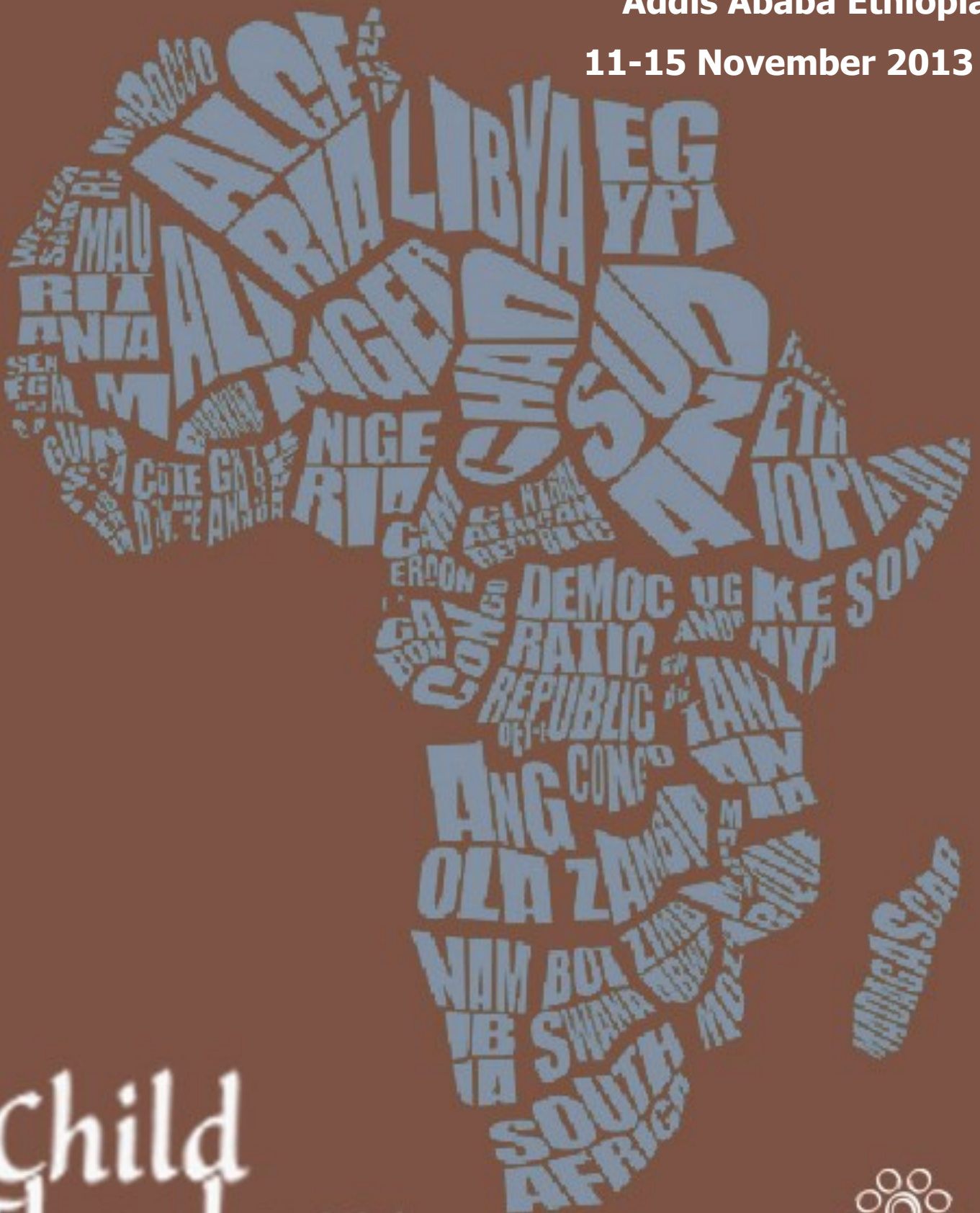


# THIRD AFRICA CONSULTATION ON CHILD THEOLOGY

Addis Ababa Ethiopia

11-15 November 2013



Child  
Theology  
MOVEMENT



Child Theology Movement

# Child Theology MOVEMENT

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# Conference Report

## Child Theology in Africa

*New paradigms for African seminaries with the child placed by Jesus*

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## Conference Workshops:

### Paper 4: Child theology in an African context: a focus on children with disability

Nassaka Olivia Banja

#### Introduction

This paper is focused on child theology in the African context with particular reference to children with a disability. It attempts to answer three major questions:

- What is the African perception of children with disability?;
- What does the Bible say about disability?;
- How can the church in Africa bring children with disability into the centre of her ministry?

To answer these questions this paper discusses the African worldview on children with disability, the common types of child disability in Africa, the Bible and disability and concludes with a discussion on the approaches to child theology and disability in Africa.

#### My interest in child theology and child disability

My interest in child theology with reference to children with disability grew out of a personal experience with my baby girl Abimanyi (in *Luganda* meaning God knows it all) who is now four years old. Abimanyi suffered severe birth asphyxia (insufficient supply of oxygen to her brain and other organs during birth) and jaundice. This resulted in a medical condition with low muscle tone, low immunity and physical weakness which left her unable to move or turn any part of her body. Many people, some doctors included, could not believe that she could survive the first month of her life. However, she did survive and the struggles for life and health care continued with God's grace. The whole family, community of friends and well-wishers were always on their knees asking God to intervene. In the process God raised a kind doctor and physiotherapists who stood with us to care for the baby's health and wellbeing. This meant a lot to us financially, socially and emotionally. It is against this background that I started asking God to explain to me the issues relating to disability and children. My curiosity was also intensified by some visitors and preachers who always came and preached to me about God's healing power, some attempted to find out if I had committed some evil that led to my baby's condition. My baby was described by some people, as 'snake like' and others called her *omugogo* ("immobile being" in *luganda*). All these images and names given to my baby caused a lot of pain and grief in my heart about the condition of my child. I sometimes preferred to hide myself and the baby.

I lived in fear of unkind preachers who might come around to preach and pray for the child. With all that confusion I started listening carefully to preachers who spoke about disability and I started to engage in deep reflection on this subject. The most common ideas related to disability being a result of sin committed by parents or ancestors. This kind of preaching was sometimes accompanied by deliverance prayers which many times would not result in healing apart from leaving the person disappointed and confused about what God was saying about their state of disability. On the other hand my experience drew me even closer to God. God brought kind people who sometimes would only pray and walk away and yet others offered help to look after the child whenever they were available. During that time my husband and I learnt to pray, reason with God about my baby's disability and to be thankful for any improvement that the baby got and patiently to wait on God. Nevertheless many questions continued floating in my mind, including:

- Does God care about the state of my child?
- What sin did I commit that my child should be in such a state?
- What sin did my ancestors commit?
- Does God love my child?

Through these questions many ideas came to my mind regarding my faith and disability and God also revealed to me more about children with disability, as illustrated below:

#### Rescue of a floppy baby girl

In February 2012, I rescued a baby girl who had a floppy neck and could not sit. This baby was born to a mother who had spent 10 years praying for a baby. The baby girl came as premature and after two months she was found to have a floppy neck and could not sit on her mother's lap. The mother was later informed by a doctor that the baby's brain was damaged and that she would never live a normal life. So the mother decided to dump the baby in a hospital where luckily enough my husband had been hospitalized. That afternoon, as I was nursing my husband, this lady walked onto the male ward determined to dump her floppy baby girl and disappear. First she posed as if

she wanted to use the bathroom and she asked my niece who was washing cups in the kitchen next door to help her with the baby. While my niece was carrying the baby, I felt that I needed to find out why she was taking so long to wash the cups. I decided to check on her, a her carrying a baby. I immediately asked whose baby it was and my niece explained that the mother of the baby had gone to the bathroom. I quickly went to the bathroom and was just in time to find a young lady rushing off in the opposite direction. I called out to her to stop. She stopped and broke into tears. She was very scared and did not know what to do. In the next hour that followed, I and my ill husband listened to her story. She had been two days without eating anything and so she did not have milk to feed the baby. I gave her food and some juice and asked her to feed the baby who was now crying. She was very scared and hesitant to feed the baby but I encouraged her to breast feed the baby after she had taken a cup of tea. In the process she opened up and told us her story and how she had decided to dump the baby in the hospital and disappear.

We prayed with her and reassured her that her baby was beautiful, and that the challenges that the baby had could be sorted out with prayers and the help of a knowledgeable doctor that we knew. So I rang my baby's doctor who kindly offered to see her and the baby that afternoon. After 30 minutes I rang the doctor who assured me that the lady had reached the hospital and that the baby was being attended to. In the weeks that followed I kept ringing the lady just to follow up on how the baby was progressing with the therapy.

A month later I met her at the hospital and she was very happy that her baby was making good progress. She faithfully did all that the doctor told her and she even kept me informed of the progress. Early this year she rang and told me that the baby was now perfect and that she is very beautiful, she finally said "your husband fell ill so that my baby may be delivered," and I replied "praise be to God."

### **The African perception of children with disability**

From the two narratives above, one can see some African ideas on children with disability. Before I proceed we ought to note that in this paper disability refers to physical, sensory and mental defects or impairments which include visual, hearing, learning or physical incapability, that impact on social, economic and environmental participation (Kabue Samuel, 2011).

#### ***Child Disability in the African worldview***

In many African communities disability is understood to be a bad omen, a misfortune caused by evil spirits, angry spirits or sorcery power. For instance among the Baganda in Uganda, disability is believed to be caused by an unfriendly spirit called *Wannema* (crippled spirit) who is the spirit of disability. This spirit strikes people and pregnant women who laugh at crippled people, resulting in them giving birth to lame children as a punishment. *Wannema* spirit can also affect pregnant women who look at crippled people. Therefore, disability among babies/children is considered to be shameful evidence of their parents' (especially mothers) offence to some spirits. That is why children with disabilities and their parents are looked at suspiciously and are sometimes considered to carry bad luck, a curse and misfortune. For this reason children with disability may be hidden away in houses, isolated and stigmatized.

Further, it is believed that some women who have offended their families or clans may give birth to babies with disabilities as a punishment from the spirit. Among the *Lango* in Uganda the evil spirit *Jok* from the woman's family is believed to cause disability in children. Also among the Bagishu in Uganda, children with multiple disability, are said to have been chosen by the evil spirit *Kisoni/Misambwa*. Thus, some children with disability are thrown away or abandoned by their parents as a way of getting rid of the curse and shame.

There is also a belief among some people in Buganda that some very rich people offer their children to evil spirits who strike the babies/children with multiple disabilities. In a sense the disabled baby/child becomes the abode of the evil spirit. This causes rejection for children with disability as people fear that the evil spirits in the children may attack or transmit the misfortune to them. Consequently, some parents do not even want to identify with their children with disability, for fear of being stigmatized.

Children with disability are also considered to be abnormal beings, less than human. For example in August 2013 a local TV station in Uganda ran a story of a young lady in a village who gave birth to a baby girl who had no arms. When one of the elders was asked to comment on the occurrence, he said that he had never seen *ekikulekule* (an abnormal being) like this before. The young lady was in great fear and villagers were flocking her home to see the 'strange' baby. It should be noted that such negative beliefs about children with disability expose them to abuse and neglect, yet these little ones entirely depend on their parents and family for their well-being.

#### ***Common types of child disability in Africa***<sup>23</sup>

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23 For more on this in other context see Tada Eareckson and Bundy Steve, 40-41

Many problems common in Africa, such as disease and malnutrition, may cause or predispose to disabilities such as: Spina bifida; Downs syndrome; Missing limbs; Autism; Lameness; Blindness; Brain injuries; Deafness; Post polio syndrome; Cerebral palsy; Blind/visually impaired; Deaf/hearing impairment; Speech impairment.

The physical and developmental disabilities listed above, may be caused by different physical factors but any of them may be attributed to evil spirits by some Africans. Some African Christians also believe that such disabilities among children may be a punishment from God to disobedient parents.

However, paediatricians and physiotherapists in Kampala and Mukono (Uganda) believe that some disabilities among babies and children are caused by delays in labour, a problem which is common in Africa due to the poor health infrastructure. In addition, ignorance about vaccination services, malnutrition, malaria, wars, accidents, genetic disorders, exposure to environmental hazards, failure to access antenatal services, drug abuse among pregnant women, malnutrition among pregnant women and children, child abuse and battering of pregnant women contribute to the risk of malformation of the baby in the womb. All this highlights the fact that disability among children is a multi-factorial phenomenon and at the same time a theological issue which cannot be ignored by the church and society. Thus as Christians we need to consider the issue of disability and what the Bible has to say about it.

### ***The Bible and disability***

In the Bible we find many forms of disability common among the people of the Bible world. For instance there are physical and mental disabilities that range from visual impairment of old age in Isaac<sup>24</sup> and Eli<sup>25</sup>. Divine punishment also resulted in blindness as in the case of Israel<sup>26</sup>. Jesus also healed a man who was born blind<sup>27</sup> while Paul was also struck blind<sup>28</sup> after his encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus.

There were also speech disabilities: Moses was a stammerer.<sup>29</sup> Ezekiel as a sign of his calling was struck dumb<sup>30</sup> and Zechariah was also struck dumb for disbelief.<sup>31</sup> Jesus healed people with speech disabilities.<sup>32</sup> There were also lame people such as Mephibosheth Jonathan's son, who suffered an accident as a child.<sup>33</sup> A cripple and paralytic was healed by Jesus.<sup>34</sup> Mental disability is also reported in Saul,<sup>35</sup> evil spirits are also reported to cause mental disability.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Jesus reinterprets disability***

We note that Jesus' teaching about disability reinterprets disabilities. While in many cases in the Old Testament the disabled are seen as blemished and hence not qualified to approach God's sanctuary.<sup>37</sup> Jesus' teaching and example on the other hand persuades Christians not to discriminate against people with disabilities. During his life on earth Jesus related and restored health to people with disability. Jesus challenged the Old Testament beliefs that disability was due to divine judgment for sin. Jesus gives another dimension of disability<sup>38</sup>. It could not always be divine judgment, but it could be for the glory of God. For this reason not all disability was healed by Jesus. At the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem for example he healed only one person although there were many with disabilities (Jn 5:1-15).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Gen 27:1

<sup>25</sup> 1Sam 3:2

<sup>26</sup> Deut 28:28

<sup>27</sup> Jn 9: 1-12

<sup>28</sup> Acts 9: 8

<sup>29</sup> Exod 4:10

<sup>30</sup> Ezek 3: 26; 24:27

<sup>31</sup> Lk 1:20,64

<sup>32</sup> Mt 15: 30, Mk 7: 37, Lk 11: 14

<sup>33</sup> 2Sam 4:4

<sup>34</sup> Lk 5:17 ff)

<sup>35</sup> 1 Sam 16:14

<sup>36</sup> Jn 10:20; For more see: Githuku S. 2011

<sup>37</sup> Lev 21: 16-23

<sup>38</sup> Jn 9:2-3

<sup>39</sup> Githuku S. 2011, 83

### ***Reading the Bible and disability***

From the discussions on the African perception of children with disability and the issues so far explored on the Bible and disability, we realize that how we read the bible, teach and preach about disability is largely influenced by our worldview. Many African Christians read biblical texts on disability with African worldview lenses and these are further reinforced with the Hebrew worldview found in the bible. This in effect leads many people and children with disability to feel guilty, pitied, helpless, stigmatized and rejected.

Secondly how we read the texts on healing in the Bible greatly influences the way we teach/preach about disability and our attitude towards people with disability. The teaching/preaching that causes a person to feel alienated from community is opposed to Jesus' healing ministries which were meant to incorporate and restore people into community<sup>40</sup>. Therefore, our teaching and praxis needs to take the liberating approach of Jesus Christ.

Teaching and preaching, well directed in understanding the people's situation and seeking God's guidance, results in healing and restoration. This can be physical, psychological, self- understanding, self-esteem and confidence in God's love and power and restoration into community.<sup>41</sup> God's power and love operate with and above disability. The stammering little boy Moses grew up into a man to whom God said: "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not the Lord? Now go I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."<sup>42</sup> This shows that God is aware of the disabilities and reigns above them. The grace of God showered on lame Mephibosheth as he receives the inheritance of his grandfather Saul, also tells us the significance of valuing and protecting all children, even children with disability.<sup>43</sup>

### **How can the church in Africa bring the children with disability to the centre of her ministry?**

#### ***Teaching and reflection with children and adults on disability***

My experience with children and how Christians receive them, whether in Sunday school or schools, reveals a lot about how Christians look at disabled children. Let me take you back to my experience with my baby Abimanyi's first time at Sunday school.

I took Abimanyi to Sunday school as a resolution I had made for the New Year 2011. I prayed to God to give me strength to do it. So I dressed up the baby, who at that stage could only sit up and roll on the floor, when she wanted to move to any place. When I walked into the baby class I was struck dumb by the cold looks of some teachers and mothers. When I sat the baby down all parents around turned to watch us. In a short while she was rolling into another baby and a mother screamed; and the teachers looked away. I wanted to pick her up and run off, but I prayed for grace to prevail and held my ground. I decided to sit her on my lap and waited for the end. When it was time to interact with other parents I was interrogated on what was wrong with my baby and some demanded an explanation on how it happened. All that time I was waiting for the last prayer to be said so I could run out with my baby. Indeed it came and I carried my baby and ran out, vowing never to take her back there. When I got out I found many people from the adult church outside and I did not even stop to greet them and I ran home. When I got home a friend at work who had been to the adult church sent a message that said "thanks for bringing Abimanyi to church, that was brave." That was very encouraging but I had to think about the next move. I prayed for help from God and said "God you gave me this child please take over." After a month, a Good Samaritan came out and offered to take the baby to Sunday school. This was a big relief and an answer to prayer, because my first attempt to take her to church was traumatic as some people could not hide their shock on seeing a very floppy baby.

Therefore our attitudes and how we receive disabled children in Sunday school contributes to building a welcoming church for all children.

#### ***Way forward***

From the above discussion and experience, the church needs to appreciate the image of God in children with disability. This is because all people were created in the image of God<sup>44</sup> despite physical and mental differences. Therefore, there is a need to build churches and congregations for all, through sermons, teaching and practice that reflects that fundamental doctrine. Use of appropriate language/images when referring to children with disabilities and their parents is important. The African cultural teaching and practices which dehumanize children with

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<sup>40</sup> Katy Black 1996/2002

<sup>41</sup> Deborah Beth, 2012,

<sup>42</sup> Exod 4: 11

<sup>43</sup> 2 Sam 9: 1-13

<sup>44</sup> Gen 1: 27

disability need to be discouraged and positive values from African culture and the Bible relating to children as gifts from God be emphasized.<sup>45</sup>

Disabled children need to hear and experience the love and power of God in his son Jesus Christ who took on human nature. With this purpose in mind we need to preach the salvation message to them and to reach out to them other than just pitying them. For example we need to encourage parents to bring out the children with disability and prepare appropriate messages for them.<sup>46</sup> Deliberate efforts and ministry to reach out to disabled children in their homes should be part of the church's ministry and also in the training programme for child workers. There is a need for policies and resources (easy access to church building e.g. ramps and space, sign language, braille, visual and audio aids) to enable disabled children to participate fully in the church and to receive God's message.

In addition to the above, Christians need actively to participate in programmes that focus on preventing disability. Safe motherhood practices, nutritious feeding for mothers and children, immunization and teaching against domestic violence, drug abuse and reckless life styles such as careless driving, should be part of the programmes for both training institutions and churches.

A multi-sectorial approach to advocacy for the wellbeing of children with disability at both family and national levels should also be emphasized in both training of child workers, teachers and church leaders.

Christian leaders, teachers and preachers following the example of Jesus Christ should teach, pray and encourage holistic communal support for families and children with disabilities, with the intention of healing and empowering them. Jesus announced his mission to be: "the spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach to the good news to the poor ... to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind and release of the oppressed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,"<sup>47</sup> This focus is paramount for all preachers in this world. Approaches to healing and deliverance of children with disability need to consider all theological dimensions: spiritual, physical social- cultural. In this way the church will be practicing a faith based on the belief in God who is almighty, who is not limited by human incapacity and abilities.

Finally, Jesus re-sounding his mission afresh in my life has turned the story of my child Abimanyi around. She is now 4 years old, goes to nursery school, plays with other children and even sings "Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me Alleluia ho! ho! Jesus loves me." I have found the answers to the four questions that I alluded to earlier on in this paper and continue to wait upon the Lord Jesus for many more blessings and service through this testimony.

My husband and I have now began **Abimanyi ministries**; focused on reaching out to children and parents with children with disabilities. Through this ministry we have now adopted a little girl Judith who has multiple disabilities and we are seeing God doing great things in her life and our family as well.

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<sup>45</sup> Ps 127:3

<sup>46</sup> cf. Lk 14:15-23

<sup>47</sup> Lk 4: 18-19