

Gospel Manifesto 2014: **Every Child Counts**

PROVIDING FOR ALL CHILDREN

Matthew's Gospel records Jesus saying the children should be allowed to come to him and not be hindered from doing so. In this, and other contexts, children were to be given a special and promoted place in the society in which they lived. Here then lies the genesis for reflecting on how well we provide (or fail to provide) for children and their needs in contemporary society. While New Zealand does well in providing for many of its children, there are far too many for whom our care and provision is woefully inadequate.

This is most clearly illustrated in ensuring all children have the basics they need in such fundamental areas as food, clothing, educational opportunity, health care access and the opportunity to participate in the recreational activities that their peers enjoy. Irrespective of how we measure it, around one in five (20%) of New Zealand's children live below the poverty line. While for a very small amount of these children this may be the result of not spending money appropriately or wisely, the vast majority of these children live in families which do not receive enough money. The majority are also families receiving a benefit of some kind. However, there is also a very significant group (around 40%) who are in households where there is somebody in paid work. Maori and Pacific children are significantly over-represented among children living in households below the poverty line.

By themselves, children are unable to change their own circumstances – they depend on what their parents do and what we do as a society do to ensure that all children are adequately provided for. Concretely, this means that if we are to improve the income of families with children so that poverty levels are reduced, we will need to do three things.

First, benefit levels will have to be increased.

Second, wages for those in low paid work need to be improved.

Third, we will need to remove the discrimination faced by children in benefit households whose parents are denied the Work Tax Credit simply because their carer is not in paid work.

What we do to improve the lives of these children and what we demand of our political leaders to put in place policies which reduce child poverty will be the most important test for this year's election.

Children have only one opportunity to enjoy and learn from the experience of being a child. As a society, we can do a great deal to make that experience the best possible for all children, supporting and encouraging parents or carers to provide for children, and what we demand from politicians. Phrases such as 'every child counts' and 'no child left behind' have been expressed frequently in recent years. This is an opportunity to demand that these phrases are given some real and concrete meaning for all children. The critical place to begin is with policies and programmes which reduce child poverty. These policies and programmes are important for the children now and important for us as a society, both currently and looking ahead.

So, the Gospel message about the special place of children in New Zealand society in 2014 contains two closely related elements.

First, ALL children matter and policies need to reflect this.

Second, reducing child poverty must be treated as a critical priority. The question we all need to ask of all policies is: how do these policies treat children and reduce child poverty?

Michael O'Brien
Associate Professor

University of Auckland
School of Counselling, Human Services & Social Work