

Network Training Course - Unit 1: Foundational Principles

Key Scriptures

Refer to Network Development Reflections 1- 4 (pages 9-21)

The Power of Collaboration

Genesis 11:1-19

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Respect Begins with Humility

Philippians 2:1-13

God's Heart for Working Together in Unity

Matthew 20:1-16

Luke 10:2

Child Protection: It Takes a Village

2 Corinthians 8

Main Themes

Having strong foundational principles means that:

- The network and its members know why they are committing to the network, what they are working towards and how their efforts are contributing to a bigger purpose
- Having core beliefs or principles that everyone agrees to undergirds the vision and all activities – having clarity on these is vital.

In this section, we start the Network Training Course by looking at the four central themes that are at Viva's heart and that possibly distinguish us from other organisations. Let us consider how important you think they are to the collective work of the network. We will cover the following four Principles:

1. Who are the Children we serve?
2. God's Heart for Children
3. The local Church the hope for the world
4. Working Together

Principle 1: Who are the Children we serve?

Viva uses the term '**children at risk**', but some networks use '**vulnerable children**', and others just say '**children**' because all children are at risk or vulnerable in some way. In 2014, the Lausanne Children at Risk Working Group defined 'children at risk' as:

'persons under 18, including the unborn child, who experience an intense and/or chronic risk factor, or a combination of risk factors in personal, environmental and/or relational domains that prevent them from pursuing and fulfilling their God-given potential'. iii

Whatever term you use, you need your own clear definition of who it is that you are serving. The key questions for each network to consider are:

- Which children?
- What risks?
- Why are they at risk?
- How at risk are they?
- What causes these risks?

It is possible to argue that virtually every child is somehow 'at risk', but a key purpose of the term is to **highlight and prioritize those situations where children are experiencing great unmet needs and where outside engagement is most urgent.** In reality, there are unmet needs everywhere (both the poor and the non-poor, child and adult, the non-west and the west; spiritually, physically etc). Good practice in work with children at risk also celebrates the value of child participation, so that children can see themselves as agents of change in their own lives rather than as defenceless objects of charity.

Typical examples of children at risk focus on certain factors that groups of children face, such as homelessness, child labour or sexual exploitation. These types of "categories of need" can be helpful, they don't explain the complexity of real children's lives. The overlapping and messy social challenges that children who are most at risk face are not so easy to label. The biggest risk factor for a child is the presence of poverty. Children living in extreme poverty (i.e. living on less than \$1-2 per day) are far more likely to experience other complex risk factors.

While the term "children at risk" highlights the risk factors in a child's life, young people also have access to personal, environmental, and relational resilience factors that can erase the most destructive aspects of some risks. So, while economic assistance can help to enhance some of these factors, others are more dependent on functional social networks and family connections that can endure even despite financial hardship. In any case, identifying and fostering resilience is often a first, best step in helping any young person who is at risk.

Every child is connected in a series of systems which give them a sense of belonging, such as a family, community and nation-state. Often the most needed interventions are those that address the structures (political and social) that prevent a child's healthy development through public-awareness campaigns and other political initiatives, and which smaller-scale solutions cannot begin to address.

As Christians we also want to think about the spiritual dimensions of risk. A child is a holistic being, so we recognize that a broken spirit, weakened faith—or the lack of access to the gospel—can cause a child not reaching God-given potential. However, just because a child has not received Jesus, we would not automatically categorize them as being 'at risk'.

Understanding children at risk is especially important for the global church in the 21st century because some churches have failed to fully appreciate the responsibility they must bear for the state of children within their own communities and beyond. We invite churches everywhere to promote and expand the effective work with children that they are currently doing, and strive to develop innovative, integrative, systemic and collaborative approaches that will realize the Kingdom of Heaven more fully for children, their families, and their communities.

Principle 2: God's Heart for Children

Violence and abuse of children is wrong!

In our societies, violence and mistreatment of children is widespread. Recognising the God-given value of every child, we work to take children out of darkness and into the – whether through direct contact in child-focussed programmes or indirectly by supporting those who care for them and promoting structural changes.

But what does the Bible say? What does that tell us about God's Heart for Children?

We would recommend that you study and use Viva's training course, **Understanding God's Heart for Children**, accessible through the Viva website, written with the expectation that church congregations will sit together and consider how scripture might inform their thinking about the importance of children.

The training course (UGHFC) explores many bible passages about children.

It is essential to understand how we view childhood and how God views children. Do we know their needs, expectations and aspirations? Are these different for babies, toddlers, young children and teenagers? What are their qualities, characteristics, abilities, role and responsibilities? How do you understand their needs in 6 areas:

spiritual, social, emotional, economic, intellectual and well-being? Before your network can begin to take actions, do you understand the daily realities faced by children in your city? Can you define risks faced and resilience required? What factors influence children's vulnerability and resilience? Children grow up. Do you know standardised age-related benchmarks of development and transition and how these compare with local children's growth? What rites of passage do you observe and how appropriate are these?

Viva values children as partners in our work. We do not see them simply as objects of our advocacy and care. When networks work with and for children their impact on children's situations increases many times over.

A Child-Friendly World

When Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and don't get in their way,' (see Mark 10:13-16 and Matthew 19:13-15) he was emphasising how highly he valued children, and how important they are to him. Yet today life is often difficult for our children. As we write our values, we need to think about children who are at high risk due to the adverse situations in which they have to live today.. Poverty, exploitation, neglect, abuse, illness, war and displacement, may be some of the factors.

What was God's original intention for children? In the world God created, there was wholeness in human relationships, and people were to be good stewards of creation, which would provide for the needs of all. Sin has marred and broken what was once untainted and whole. Despite this, God's intention for all mankind is still at work today through the redeeming, reconciling and restoring power of Christ's death on the cross and rising to new life. A primary task of new networks is to explore the bible together to discover God's vision and intention for children.

As new understanding grows, networks will find ways to give children a voice and to be their advocates as well. This will vary within local and national situations and contexts so these need to be explored and defined for each network. Some children are very articulate in explaining the issues that children face, either by themselves or with the support of an adult. They may choose to speak from personal experience, or peer research (where they ask other children of the same age what their concerns are).

We encourage networks to spend some time researching international understanding of children (from development agencies and government departments). Look up the 'State of the World's Children' published annually by UNICEF www.unicef.org.

Vision & Reality

For a network to have credibility as well as strong foundation, members must review existing research about situations children face. Sources of inspiration should be shared. The role of the Church and the role of para-church organisations should be understood. All of this understanding contributes to a collaborative effort in making the world fit for children.

Principle 3: The local Church the hope for the world

Supporting the local saints

Viva works alongside the amazing saints who have responded to God's call to reach vulnerable children in their community whatever the cost. These individuals respond sacrificially to the injustices they see on their doorstep with courage and tenacity often with very few resources and very little support from their local church or elsewhere. Many burn out from the intensity and emotional strain.

Strengthening the local church

The church is collectively usually the biggest provider of care for children in the city and is also the largest civil society grouping of all. Viva has a heart to empower the local church to be the force for change that it is meant to be, to have greater impact in the lives of vulnerable children in their community, to work together to impact the wider city. The local body of believers is God's 'Plan A' for reaching vulnerable children. The local church is God's heart, ears, eyes and hands. This is exactly why Viva supports the building of effective networks that brings the wider Church together to be **an amazing force for change for children**, hopefully bring in technical skills and mechanisms to enhance and strengthen the work:

*“What you have to understand is that some of us church leaders believe to the core of our beings that **the local Church is the hope of the world...** We believe that the Church is the only God-anointed agency in society that stewards the transforming message of the love of Christ. **We believe that the Church addresses every human being’s deepest need.** We believe that the Church can lead people into a whole new way of living and loving and serving, and can thereby transform society....”- Bill Hybles*

Being A Body

‘Now you are the Body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it’. 1 Corinthians 12: 27

Our calling as Christians to be united with fellow Christians is not an added extra but should be central to our understanding of how we are to work. Networks are not simply collectives or co-operatives but as Christians we have a biblical understanding that Jesus prayed for and taught us to be one Body. This changes and shapes everything we plan and aim to achieve. We start by coming together recognising our one-ness is Christ.

A picture is given to us in the New Testament of this family being the physical body with the head being Jesus Christ. Every part of the body needs all of the other parts in order to be useful. The Bible also talks about the church as a house of worship (1 Peter 2:4-6). In this house, Christ is the foundation and each believer is a living stone. In our networks, we preserve unity through openness, trust and submission. We may have to give up our own agendas in order to work for the shared vision. The word used time and again in the New Testament for unity is the Greek word *koinonia*. This translates as communication, fellowship, community, communion, and contribution: all expressions of togetherness. **So as networks of Christians we learn to rely on each other and support each other. We enjoy a sense of belonging that removes any sense of isolation that could come from working hard in difficult roles. We find sharing ideas leads to a stronger understanding of children’s needs in our locality.**

This helps us to trust each other and develop a common vision that is on a much bigger scale than we could have conceived on our own. We gain confidence that our lives are better within God’s calling and boundaries so we feel safe to trust Him for more strength and greater miracles.

Just being together in this way helps remove the sense of tiredness and dangers of burnout. When we start to address the causes of child vulnerability and bring about transformation of situations children are facing, we are increasingly aware of our own limitations. Our networks are there to help us face the greater challenges not alone but together because in the Body Christ is our strength and security.

Being Together in Love

In Ephesians 5:21, we are called to... *‘submit to one another out of reverence for Christ’*. Reverence for Christ is our love for Him and our worship of Him. This love is the reason why we should submit to one another.

Submission is not an easy thing to do. We fear we will lose control and that others will not see things our way. It seems that we will follow our vision and calling best if we hold it tightly without letting others in. We fear that by working with others, our project will disappear and we will be taken over by people with a different agenda. None of this needs to happen. We each have a unique calling from God but as we open up to working together, we will find ways to extend our own work and place it in a bigger framework.

Philippians 2:3 tells us: *‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourselves’*. In this way we make our ‘rights’, what we want, less important than those of others around us, laying aside our own individual goals and priorities. We are also to have the same attitude of humility as that expressed by Christ: *‘who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant’*. Philippians 2:5-8.

Sharing Ideas and Prayers

Through coming together we have the advantage of ‘being of one mind’ as Christ is the head of the body. By sharing what is on our minds, our ideas and thoughts we find that others have similar thoughts that complement

ours. This adds new dimensions and perspectives that bring clarity and understanding. The early church in Acts talked through many issues together and there was wisdom found in the council of many.

We also find sharing ideas and information leads to a stronger understanding of children's needs in a locality. Isolation can blind us to what is happening on our doorsteps.

The power of united prayer cannot be over emphasised. Prayer can open jail doors, set the captives free, give boldness to weakened souls and overcome the plans of the enemy. Our battle is not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities in heavenly places. Petitioning the Lord in unity is often the only way for obstacles to be overcome. Many attempt to face the obstacles alone and to pray on their own only to find themselves overcome. The unity of the network in prayer and support is critical for surviving difficult times.

Principle 4: Working Together

Collective action is the missing component

The church has the biblical mandate, people with passion and compassion and is already active in most communities everywhere. The main issue is that churches are working independently, in isolation missing out on the power of 'togetherness'.

Viva's heart is to address this, such that their combined influence is a stronger witness for the Gospel than when working alone (John 17). We bring together people, churches, and organisations with a shared heart for children, sharing vision and building relationship to engage them all in collective action to both change children's lives and change the wider situation of children.

Finding God's Heart Together

In Galatians 5:16-26 we are called to turn away from the sinful nature and live a new life by the Spirit through Jesus Christ. We see how the sinful nature is only interested in getting ahead. It stirs up trouble and separates people into their own little groups. Jesus makes us one in Him so we can work alongside others appropriately and effectively.

When we work together, the Fruit of the Spirit becomes very evident: there is peace in our lives that comes from harmonious relationships with others and when we are united with others, we as individuals can also grow. Unfortunately the opposite is often the common experience bringing disappointment and hurt reinforcing the drive to work alone – but this is not how it should be – we have to pick ourselves up and push through the pain with God's help and the work of the Holy Spirit to establish the right principles. Many Christians start off their ministry to children from a place of community and gradually move into a place of isolation due to various factors. Viva feels called to address this isolation in the Body and call back the isolated into unity through a network of the local church.

Often, people working for the wellbeing of children at risk feel called by God specifically to address a certain need. This call fuels their passion and energy. These people then start their own ministries in their areas of calling. However, we have found that where the need is great, God calls several people to the same task. Often these people never find each other, or if they do, they assume that they are to operate separately as the call to service seemed so personal. However, this is an assumption to be challenged in the light of God's direct call to unity and to work together.

Sharing Resources and Funds

We know that the early church shared such a sweet form of fellowship that they decided to have everything in common, sharing among those who had need. Through the unity of a network, we have the ability to tap into this strength and abundance that was given to the early church by the Holy Spirit. Resources can be shared so overflow can be handed out and needs addressed. With open hearts, people give when they can and are helped when they are in need through the unity and fellowship developed through the community aspect of a network. This sharing helps us trust each other and enjoy a common vision. We find we work much better together than

we would as individuals. We gain confidence that our lives are better within God's calling and boundaries so we feel safe to trust Him for more strength and greater miracles.

Believing We are Stronger Together

No one person has all the abilities, strengths, or gifts. With the variety of gifts and strengths that we bring, our group will be strengthened rather than weakened. Within a single physical body, each part is obliged to work with the other parts. If the organs did not work together, the body would simply die. Although each of us functions differently in the Body, our differences complement each other and enable the Body to live properly.

Our time demands, difficulties, inabilities or weaknesses do not restrict God. Often we cannot see beyond the challenges to align ourselves with God's bigger picture. He sees how every individual person and situation fits into His bigger plan of living and working as one Body. This brings release rather than confinement because the Body is working together as it was designed. God formed us with a variety of skills, abilities, ideas, personalities and experiences and he chooses to put us together to accomplish more in unity. Being different reduces individual complacency and increases potential for powerful work and growth.

Fear of Togetherness Says:	Faith Says:
They won't understand me	I submit and am supported
I will be trapped	I can let go of my rights safely
They will take over my job	I am free from burdens that break me
I can work ok on my own	I need my brothers & sisters
God called me to my work	God calls me to work in the Body

Working Towards a Common Vision for a Bigger Purpose

If our first motivation for togetherness is that God desires it, the second must be that it is ultimately best for the children. It takes a sense of humility to admit that someone else might be able to do better or more for the children in our care than we can. It can be hard to admit that we need help or to see that the issues facing children are so overwhelmingly large and widespread that no few people working by themselves can effectively address these issues. This humility and understanding draws us towards unity, whereas pride or fear drives us further into isolation. By working together, we can ultimately do more for the children and their futures. Together we can look at the bigger picture and through starting to work collaboratively, we can develop a bigger vision, and start to look at ways to change the situations children face across our locality. This will make a much more significant difference to many more children than those within our individual projects. Before we may have addressed issues only for the children in our projects and been limited in what we could achieve on behalf of children generally. Now our shared contributions will become a part of something much bigger and stronger with the help of the Holy Spirit who will transform our thinking and our behaviour when we work together.

It may be that through the network a child finds dental care, counselling, better schooling, or specialist care. Together we can provide a more holistic response than would have been possible through individual action. If it is better for the children, it is worth making the effort to take united action.

When we work together, we will be blessed. The bible tells us this. Blessing is not just a religious feeling. It is the place and position of security and God's kindness. It is God's closeness in our being.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the Lord bestows His blessing, even life forever more. Psalm 133

This psalm shows the value and goodness of unity when lived out by God's people. God's anointing and blessing pours out on us as His people when we are working with each other. This does not mean that we will agree on everything, but we must agree on one purpose in life: to work together for God. When we work together for

Him, then God's blessing will come. Being united with one another also bears witness to those who don't yet know God.

In John 17: 20-23 we see Jesus' desire for us to work together in unity. This is what He prayed for us. Why was this so important to Him? Look at verse 21: 'That the world would believe in Him because of their unity.' Unity is so powerful that it will show the world that Christ lives. It is what the enemy desires least - he wants to spread disunity wherever possible. If we can see this and counteract it with Christ's desire for oneness amongst His people, we will be a powerful witness for the Kingdom of God. Unity joined with love will therefore be the stamp of authenticity on all that we do.

He has called us to be part of His family, to live as His Body in the world. In this way, He chooses to put different people together in order to accomplish His purposes. Whether in a church family, a working group, an office, a project or a network setting, all of these require us to work alongside one another. When we do this out of an attitude of love, we can accomplish much more together than we could ever do on our own.

Reflective Questions

1. Explain how you came to decide on the language you use to describe the children you work with (e.g. 'children at risk' or 'vulnerable children').
2. How do you think engaging with God's heart for children might impact those in your network?
3. Discuss the phrase 'The local Church the hope for the world'. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
4. What are some of the challenges and some of the benefits of 'working together'?

Action Plan

- What actions do you need to put into place as a result of this unit?