

DIOCESAN LENTEN STUDY 2026



*Suffer The Little
Children to Come
unto Me*

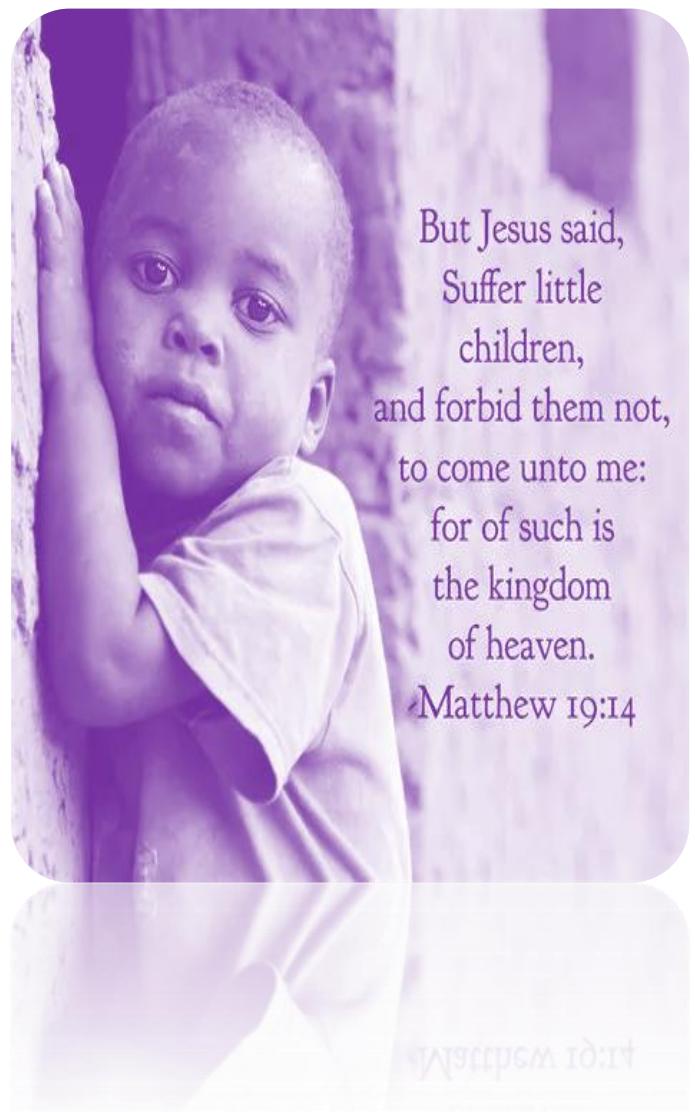
ABSTRACT

Diocese of Barbados Lenten Study Guide 2026

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FOREWORD

The holy season of Lent invites the Church into a time of deep reflection, repentance, and renewal. It is a season in which we intentionally turn our hearts toward God, examine the ways we live out our discipleship, and recommit ourselves to the work of Christ in the world. As our Diocese is currently concerned about the wellbeing of our nation's youth and our call toward a more concerted response to their needs and development, we undertake this year's Lenten journey under the theme "Suffer the Little Children...", drawing from Jesus' tender yet urgent command (Matthew 19:14). These words of Jesus are not merely a gentle invitation; they are a charge to the Church. They remind us that children and young people are not peripheral to the life of the Kingdom but are to be full members and participants; and should be recognized and treated as such within the Body of Christ.

Throughout Scripture, God consistently calls the community to nurture, protect, and guide the young. We hear it in the wisdom of Proverbs to "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). We see it in the prophetic promise of Joel, where young people are not passive recipients but active bearers of God's vision: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28). And we witness it in the ministry of Samuel, David, Esther, Josiah, Jeremiah, Mary, Timothy and the boy with the loaves and fishes—each demonstrating that God often speaks and acts powerfully through the young.

This Lenten Study Guide for 2026 invites us to reflect deeply on the gift children and young people in our midst and the ministry we are to offer them. When we minister to our children, teaching them the faith,

surrounding them with love, safeguarding their wellbeing and offering them opportunities to grow, we create the conditions in which their own ministry can flourish at the present and in the future. Furthermore, when we honour the ministry of our youth—listening to their insights, valuing their gifts, and empowering their leadership—we strengthen the whole Body of Christ.

Lent provides a fitting moment for this reflection. As we journey with Christ toward the cross and resurrection, we are reminded of the sacrificial love that shapes our calling. This season challenges us to examine how faithfully we have responded to Jesus' command not to hinder the little ones. It invites us to repent of the ways we may have overlooked, underestimated, or failed to protect our children. And it encourages us to renew our commitment to raising a generation that knows the Lord, knows who they are in His eyes, walks in His ways and lives with purpose, courage and hope.

Let me thank the Canon Missioner, Senator The Rev'd Canon Dr John Rogers and his team in preparing this Lenten Study Guide to invite us to listen more attentively to what the Spirit is saying to the Church and Nation and to respond more faithfully to the sacred responsibility entrusted to us as parents, godparents, citizens and guardians. As we walk this Lenten path, may the Holy Spirit renew our vision, deepen our compassion, and strengthen our resolve to nurture our children and youth in the way they should go, so that they may grow into the fullness of the life God intends for them.

Every blessing as we begin this journey of reflection, repentance, and renewal.

+Michael Barbados

Session 1: Every Child is a Gift from God



Children are a heritage from the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is a blessing...Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them
(Psalm 127:3,5a)

Permeating the lines of Holy Scripture is the underlying truth that God ordained children to be here and that each child is a special gift from God. Integral to this truth is the belief that God is intimately involved in the shaping of every human being. The psalmist in Psalm 139 proclaims:

“For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I will thank you because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well.” (Ps. 139:12-13)

Quite similarly, in calling the prophet Jeremiah to his prophetic ministry God alluded to the intricate nature of the relationship he had with the prophet even before he was born.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”
(Jer.1:5)

The relationship goes beyond mere formation, as important as that is, to an ongoing bond as God declared through the prophet Isaiah; “Behold, I have carved you on the palm of my hands; your walls are continually before me.” (Is. 49:16) While the passage is about God’s love toward Israel, that love is likened to what is perhaps the most intimate of relationships between two human beings, that of a mother and a child. The point being made is that God’s love for his children supersedes even the closest of relationships between two human beings.

Covenant

So important are children to God, that the entire survival of the nation of Israel was predicated on the procreation of children. When God initiated the covenant with Abraham and his descendants, it contained two promises by God in return for their obedience. First, they were promised a portion of land that they could call their own, and secondly, their descendants would be greater than the number of grains of sand on the seashore or the stars in the sky. Central to the covenant was the procreation of children.

In the Old Testament, particularly in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), there is a running theme of barrenness linked to the covenant made between God and his people. Barrenness is a central theme in the Old Testament in general. However, in the Pentateuch, it is linked to covenant. Everyone through whom the covenant was to be passed, their wife was found to be barren. Abraham’s wife, Sarah, was found to be barren. Scripture says it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. That means she had passed the age of childbearing. However, God intervened and opened her womb and she bore Isaac.

Isaac's wife, Rebekah, was also found to be barren. She later gave birth to Jacob and Esau. Likewise, Jacob through whom the covenant was to pass, his beloved wife Rachel was found to be barren as well. One may recall that Jacob was married to Leah, who was Laban's first daughter, and he had children with her. However, Rachel was the one whom he loved, and when he finally had the opportunity to marry her, she was found to be barren. Rachel later gave birth to Joseph and Benjamin. In all these instances, it was God who was active amid the situation and opened their wombs so that they bore children.

The theme of barrenness continues throughout the Old Testament with the heroes of some stories being born to women who were once deemed to be barren. In similar circumstances to that of Abraham and Sarah, the mother of Samson was also barren. The angel of the Lord appeared to her and promised her the gift of a son. The boy Samson would become one of the greatest judges of Israel, and the one who was instrumental in defeating Israel's fiercest enemy at the time, the Philistines.

Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was also found to be barren. Her story would also bear similarity to the Abraham and Sarah story regarding the shame associated with being barren. Hagar the servant woman who had borne a child to Abraham with Sarah's consent, began to mock Sarah's barrenness. In similar fashion for Hannah, Peninnah the other wife of Elkanah her husband, provoked her because God had closed her womb. God therefore heard her prayer and opened her womb, and she bore Samuel. He would then go on to be one of the most prominent people in pre-monarchical Israel. He became the prophet, priest, and kingmaker.

The themes of God's intimacy in the formation of children stretches into the New Testament with the birth of the two holy children, Jesus and John the Baptist. Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, is described as barren and advanced in age. The narrative almost mirrors the story of Abraham and Sarah, where when the messengers of God came to visit them at the Oaks of Mamre, Abraham and Sarah doubted God's promise. Likewise, Zechariah, John the Baptist's father also doubted that God could possibly fulfill the promise he made about Elizabeth giving birth when she was well past the time of childbearing.

Jesus' birth, though not linked to barrenness, also highlights the intimacy of God in the process as conception was achieved without the participation of another human agent. Mary's concern upon hearing that she will bear a son was; 'how can this be when I have no husband?' It was a genuine concern considering all that was understood about nature and the birth of children. Yet God effected the miracle by himself participating intimately in the process in a way he had never done before or since. We attest to this in our creed when we confess; 'She conceived by the Holy Spirit.'

All these examples are reminders to us of the complexity of human nature and the undeniable truth that every child born in this world is specially shaped and intentioned by God. These are matters that still hold center stage in political and ethical discussions in our world.

One of the Nobel Prizes in 2020 was awarded to two scientists, Emmanuelle Charpentier and Jennifer Doudna, who made a significant breakthrough by developing CRISPR-Cas9 or the 'genetic scissors' which has led to significant breakthroughs in the area of gene-editing.

This branch of science deals with the ability to delete genes which are responsible for certain diseases and unwanted traits. While it can and has had some positive effects in eradicating some diseases which affect children, there is always the flip side where ethics is concerned. Who determines what traits are desirable or undesirable? Can it be seen as meddling with God's work?

Similarly, in the recently concluded elections in the United States, one of the central themes was IVF treatment (in vitro fertilization treatment which literally means fertilization 'in glass'). IVF involves the possibility of women who may be deemed barren by science, having children that are not conceived within the womb but are conceived within the laboratory. Once fertilization is achieved, an embryo or several embryos are then implanted into the womb of the prospective mother or a surrogate who has agreed to bear the child for the mother to be. The egg and the sperm may come from a particular couple but there is a carrying mother or a surrogate mother who carries the child on their behalf. The issue of surrogacy also introduces new ethical questions about motherhood.

Perhaps the closest likening to surrogacy in Holy Scripture would be the family dynamic of Sarah, Abraham and Hagar. Though they didn't have surrogacy back then, it was deemed that the child that Hagar was carrying was a child of Abraham to which Sarah had consented because in their minds it was the only possible way that the covenant with God could be fulfilled. They therefore deemed the child to be the fulfilment of the promise which God had intended for Abraham and Sarah. As mentioned before, God intervened and rendered null that attempt at 'surrogacy'.

Apart from the integral role that God plays in the formation of every child, the issues

highlighted here also reflects the anxiety experienced by parents surrounding conception and the birth of a child. For all of humanity's advancements in technology, there are still many unanswered questions related to the conception of children. How children come into this world still has attached to it an element of mystery and ultimately the one answer that comes to the fore constantly, to which even some scientists attest is God's active participation in the creation of our children

The biblical community realized this and rightly acknowledged the intimacy of God in every step of the process. Their testimony suggests that every child is specially touched by God - every child is a gift of God.

The writer of Isaiah in chapter 49 reinforces this point by suggesting that every human being is carved on the palm of God's hand.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think it means that God knew you before you were born?
2. In light of Scripture's witness to God's intimate activity in the creation of life, how should the Church understand and respond to modern scientific advancements such as fertility clinics, IVF treatments, and gene-editing technologies, and is it possible to view these developments as God working through human knowledge and skill?
3. How does or should the understanding that every child is a gift from God shape the Church's or every Christian's response to our youth regardless of their status or state in life?

Session 2: Children should be dedicated to God



“For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me my petition which I made to him. Therefore, I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.” (1 Samuel 1:27-28)

Holy Scripture records several scenes of children being dedicated to the service of God. However, I believe one of the most riveting accounts is that surrounding the conception, birth and dedication of Samuel to the Lord.

Hannah, having prayed earnestly to God for the gift of her child Samuel, dedicated him to the service of God. We are told that when the child had been weaned, Hannah and her husband Elkanah took him to Eli the priest at Shiloh. What makes this scene so touching is that Hannah not only dedicated little Samuel to God, but in response to God's graciousness towards her, she gave him up to the service of God. In her time, that meant leaving little Samuel in the care of Eli the priest at the shrine of Shiloh. One gets a vivid image of little Samuel in his little robe serving at the altar.

We are told that every year his mother made a little robe for him and brought it to the shrine. Certainly, in today's world dedication of a child does not involve leaving one's child with the priest! However,

dedication can be seen more in the form of ensuring that the child actively participates in the life of the faith community, just as is promised at baptism. At baptism, the parents and God parents are instructed:

“The child whom you have brought for Baptism will by reason of their infancy, depend on your help and encouragement to grow in the knowledge, reverence and service of Almighty God, our Heavenly Father....it is also your duty to see that they are instructed in the good news of God's salvation in Christ, the Church's Creeds and Catechism and all things which a Christian ought to know, believe and practice as a member of the family of God. As they grow up, they will also need the help and encouragement of that family, so that they learn to be regular in public worship and private prayer...” (BCP 274)

It means that baptism is not meant to be simply a one-off event, but the child is being dedicated to a life of service to God. The ministry of the Sunday school is central in this regard. Once children have been baptized and have reached an age where there is some level of independence, they should be enrolled in Sunday school, where they can interact with their peers as they learn about the God who created and sustains them.

In similar fashion to little Samuel, children should be dedicated to participating in the worship life of the church through their talents and service around the altar. I propose that as a diocese we foster a “Samuel Generation”, this will be children who are dedicated from early, to the life of the church. It will augur well not only for their own personal development, but also for the

development of our church and our community.

As we look around our society today, we see so many young people who are going astray and many of them would have had some dedication ceremony in a church, somewhere in this country. However, dedication has now become traditional rather than intentional. It ought to be our duty to make it intentional again, to recapture the essence of what it should be for our children. It should be an intentioned commitment to the spiritual development of the child by setting him or her on a path to spiritual maturity.

Integral to the life of Israel, was their various dedication ceremonies. In fact, just recently during the season of Epiphany we observed one of those dedication ceremonies, the dedication of Jesus at the temple, or what is referred to as the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple or the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. We are told in the Gospel according to St. Luke:

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus...and when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") [Luke 2:21-23]

Here St. Luke points to two different traditions which perhaps over time became amalgamated into one ceremony. The first being the purifying of a woman after childbirth which has its genesis in the book of Leviticus which states:

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days; ...and on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying...And when the days of her purifying are completed,...she shall bring to the priest at the door of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering... [Leviticus 12: 1-4,5]

The second tradition, the consecration of the first-born male is found in Exodus 13:2 where it is written that:

The Lord said to Moses, "Consecrate to me all the first-born; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine." [Exodus 13:2].

Mary and Joseph were following that tradition that they had received and which the Christian faith still celebrates liturgically by chronologizing these events as a part of our liturgical year. We celebrate Christmas on December 25th and then eight days later January 1st we observe the Feast of the Circumcision of our Lord, which is also called the Feast of the Holy Name. Thirty-three days after January 1st is February 2nd, when we observe the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple which is also known as the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

One can imagine this beautiful image of Mary and Joseph, with the little baby Jesus coming to the temple, and the aged Simeon, who had longed to see the liberation of Israel and whom God promised he will not die until he saw the salvation promised for Israel.

We are told that when Simeon saw the little baby, he took him in his arms and blessed him, saying:

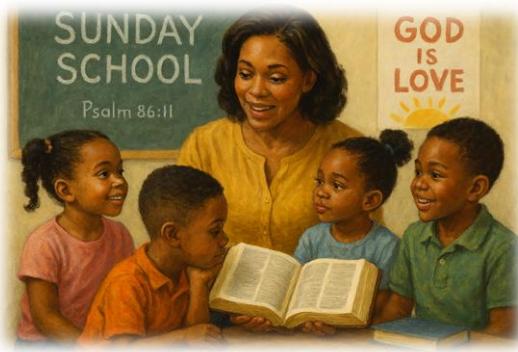
Lord, now you can let your servant depart in peace, because your word has been fulfilled for my eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared for your people to be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of your people Israel. [Luke 2:29-32]

This was a dedication ceremony not dissimilar to the dedication ceremonies that we have at holy baptism.

Discussion Questions

1. What can the church do to encourage parents to be more intentional in the dedication of their children to God?
2. What approach or methods can be used to make baptism a more meaningful moment for parents?
3. What new programs or ministries do you think should be developed or existing ones enhanced for the church to minister to children who have been baptized?

Session 3: Children are to be nurtured in the knowledge and ways of God



Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with men (1 Samuel 2:29)

If our children are going to be guided and nurtured in the way of God, the dedication is just one thing but there must be more. We are told throughout Holy Scripture, especially in the story of Samuel, that the little boy grew in the temple and he matured. Similarly, John the Baptist “grew and became strong in spirit” (Luke 1:80) and Jesus “grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.” (Luke 2:40). So too our children must be nurtured to maturity in their faith.

While the dedication of children is important, one can imagine that there still needs to be much more involved in bringing a child to maturity. Though Holy Scripture does not provide any details of the youthful years of any of the children who were specially dedicated to God. One can envisage that they would have faced what one hymn writer described as the “slippery paths of youth”. Yet in the case of Samuel, John the Baptist and Jesus, there seems to be this recurring theme of the child growing in stature and becoming strong in spirit. This points to the fact that alongside their

physical development, there was a corresponding spiritual growth.

The ‘slippery paths of youth’ has always been a critical time for young people no matter what epoch of human history one studies. It was Socrates the great Greek philosopher who described the youth of Athens in his time in this way:

Our youth love luxury. They have bad manners and despise authority. They show disrespect for elders and love to chatter instead of exercise. Young people are now tyrants, not servants of their households. They no longer rise when their elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up food and terrorize their teachers (Socrates 400BC).

I am certain that what Socrates described may be seen as quite an apposite assessment of the youth of our time. The ‘slippery paths of youth’ is that time when young people are now discovering themselves while grappling with the challenges the world presents. As a result of the chaos of what our Book of Common Prayer describes as “growing up in an unstable and confusing world”, our young people may at times come across as out of place. It is for this reason that guidance and nurturing is of paramount importance.

In scripture, we encounter young Jesus, perhaps at his Bar Mitzvah at the age of 12 or 13, presenting a bit of the challenge for his parents Mary and Joseph. Like many of the youth in today's world, he possessed great knowledge as he was able to sit with the rabbis and discuss the deeper matters of the faith. While that was commendable, like many young people in our time, through no fault of their own, he seemingly lacked the emotional intelligence to comprehend

what his actions would have done to his parents who would have been worried about him and his whereabouts. While the passage is about Jesus realizing and embracing his divine purpose, it can also be seen as indicative of the disconnect that can occur with the transitioning from childhood to young adult.

This has never been easy, and it certainly is not easy in today's world with so many alternative views and voices competing for the attention of our youth. This is compounded by an age of technology that is advancing more rapidly than we can process its advancements. Given the foregoing observations, there is a great danger creeping into our view of the world. It appears as though some parents have begun to cede their authority to technology, because they are both overwhelmed and intimidated by the apparent level of knowledge that their children seem to possess. However, it must be noted that the regurgitation of information is not the same as the ability to analyze and utilize the information responsibly. Young people still need to be nurtured and guided as they navigate their way through the sociologically and psychologically complex 'slippery paths of youth.'

Advancements in technology have also led to the perception that God has somehow become obsolete and incapable of addressing some of the critical issues which affect our lives.

An answer may seemingly be more readily furnished by a Google search than a prayer. How do we deal with this apparent conundrum? Perhaps we need to go back to the first principles that children do not come into the world on their own and therefore their own development and maturity must not be left to them. They come within the context of a family and the community. All

the little children in holy scripture were guided and nurtured by their community. The development of a child is a gradual process which requires guidance and nurturing at every step of the way.

In the Old Testament, children held such a primary place that we encounter constantly the notion that they must be instructed, they must be guided and nurtured. The book of Proverbs urged the people of its time as it does us, to "train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6)

The book of Deuteronomy is even more granular in its approach as it sets out the method for instruction.

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long... Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:1-2,7-9)

Deuteronomy leaves nothing to chance where the guidance and nurturing of children is concerned. Faith must permeate every facet of the lives of the children and there must be constancy and consistency. That means that faith is not only to be

instilled within the context of the faith community or the church, but the faith must go beyond the church into everyday family life and into the experiences of the wider community. This is what we say in our baptismal preparation that parents and godparents are to ensure that the child is instructed in the good news of God's salvation in Christ and that they "learn to be faithful in public worship and private prayer, to live by love and trust in God." That instruction recognizes that the development of children is a process which involves every aspect of their lives.

Usually when parents come for baptism, I ask them facetiously, where does this child sleep? And invariably, I would get an answer like, in a cot/crib in the bedroom or in the bed with us. I would say, but why? Why do you keep the child there? Why not put the child outside until he or she is old enough to learn the ways of the household? I do this just to initiate discussion concerning infant baptism versus adult baptism.

However, it is also to highlight the importance of the process of the child gradually growing to maturity. Just as we do not leave our children outside the home until they are mature enough to come inside, we do not leave our children outside of the faith community until they are mature enough to come in. Instead, we gradually nurture them in the faith just as Samuel, Jesus and John the Baptist were nurtured; they grew in wisdom and stature. Having the child within the house, the child gradually learns the ways of the household. They learn to do little chores. They learn to pray when they rise in the morning, before meals and when they are going to sleep. All these things are part of the process to enable the children to grow strong in the spirit.

While not giving a detailed account of young Timothy's development, St. Paul alluded to the nurturing environment in which Timothy grew up when he reminded him;

I am reminded of your sincere faith that once dwelt in your grandmother, Lois and your mother Eunice, and now I am sure dwells in you. (2Timothy 1:5)

Young Timothy's faith was nurtured within the context of his family. St. Paul highlights the existence of a familial and generational faith being responsible for Timothy's growth and maturity. This passage also underscores the point that, it is not God's intention for young people to be left to their own devices to figure out life for themselves. Rather they must be guided and nurtured by a community. This evokes the old African proverb which says, "It takes a village to raise a child."

The community plays an integral part in the faith journey of children. It is important to establish and maintain what I like to refer to as the 'Social Trinity'- the home, the school and the faith community. When these three institutions are working together, they provide a barrier of protection for, and by extension an enabling environment in which, children can mature physically and spiritually. The 'Social Trinity' helps to foster and strengthen familial and generational faith akin to what Timothy would have experienced.

The concept of community and generational faith is not foreign to us. Indeed, it was our way of life. Our community had developed a generational faith, where Sunday school and church were not optional for our young people. Parents ensured that we were there, and even if they did not attend church the children attended. Adults often allude to the diligence of their parents in ensuring that

what was taught at Sunday school was reinforced at home. Faith was an integral part of our households. Similarly, what was taught in church and reinforced at home was also supported and fortified in school. There are still many in our community who can recall and recite hymns that they learned decades ago in school.

Shifting Perceptions and Values

To recount the experiences of the past with even an inkling of hope for a return to that kind of community may be regarded as utopian in today's world. Much has changed- in some instances by the natural development of human awareness of self in the world, and in other instances by an almost rebellious attitude to the value system to which we were accustomed. The world has become busy, and far too many have become cynical about God and somehow live as though they have progressed beyond God. The end result of this is that our young people are suffering. Most Barbadians of a particular vintage knew that they went to church or Sunday school at least three times on Sunday, and sometimes at different denominations. Many laud their upbringing because of how they perceive it has shaped them.

However, despite the positives that were derived from the value system and faith foundation of the past, some parents and guardians have seemingly determined that their children do not need the kind of upbringing that they had. Instead, we rely on our knowledge and material and technological advancements. In far too many instances, our children are deprived of the firm grounding we received because we now deem it non-essential. Yet physical and spiritual development still require a process constrained by time. It still takes time for a child to develop emotionally and psychologically. It still takes the same

amount of time for their cognitive skills to fully mature. It still takes the same amount of time for them to reach a stage even of physical maturity. Therefore, those things that kept us grounded in the past and helped to nurture us and shape us into who we have become are needed for our children as they navigate the 'slippery paths of youth.'

We are encouraged to remember that children need to be nurtured, guided and disciplined. Young Samuel, Jesus, John the Baptist, and young Timothy were all nurtured under the watchful eyes of their parents and the vigilance of their respective communities.

So too, we must guide and nurture our children in the faith, having dedicated them to God. We must now teach them of the God who loved them, who created them, who nurtured them, and who will sustain them through all things.

Discussion questions

1. How can the church influence children who are not a part of its membership
2. What programs can the church implement to nurture the children in its care
3. How can we be "village builders" in our current context in raising and nurturing children in our nation, of "suffering the little children..."? What level of "suffering" or even sacrifice will be required of us?
4. What measures can we take to strengthen the 'Social Trinity' as we identify the 'slippery paths of youth' facing our children today?

Session 4: Children are dear to God and should be cherished and protected



“Unless you become like one of these little ones, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven - if anyone causes one of these little ones to stumble, it is better that the millstone be hung around his neck and he be thrown into the outer depths of the sea.” (Matthew 18:3, 6)

One of the underlying aspects of Jesus' ministry as it is presented in Holy Scripture is that He saw children as signs of true innocence and love in our world. Thus, whenever Jesus was making a point to the people of Israel about how He expects them to operate, He uses the image of a child.

These messages are all there to remind us that children are God's children. They are just loaned to us as human beings, and He expects us to care for them and to nurture them as His children. This nurturing, we expounded earlier, comes out in our ensuring that they are dedicated and grounded in their faith as they develop.

Just as important, children must also be protected from the many dangers and evils that are out there. It is incumbent upon us as Christians, as parents and as a church, to ensure that our children have safe environments in which they can develop to maturity. That involves advocacy for such

things at the level of the community, the church and the individual.

However, for us to speak convincingly to our community and nation, “judgement must begin with the household of God” on the level of our local congregations. It is imperative that we ensure that our churches remain safe spaces for our children. Parents must feel comfortable that they can leave their children here, knowing that they will be taken care of in the best way possible and they will not be robbed of their innocence in any way. This is an area that continues to be a scourge on religion throughout the world where, because these little ones are so innocent, people who ought to know better take advantage of them. It is the church's duty to ensure that they are protected, just as God cherishes us and protects us as His children. The prophet Isaiah records God's deep care for humanity as His children:

Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea, even she may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold I have carved you on the palm of my hands; (Isaiah 49:15-16).

Though the passage is about Zion, it speaks to God's care for all His children which is beyond even the care of a mother for her child. God is saying, you are mine and I will look after you. This kind of protection is necessary in a world where children are still being abused daily, sometimes by the very people in whose care they are entrusted

In our region, a UNICEF press release of 2022 reports that 2 in 3 (67%) of children between ages 1 to 14 have experienced violence at home. According to the release,

-sexual abuse and homicide stalk millions of children and adolescents

in Latin America and the Caribbean. The regional child and adolescent homicide rate (12.6 per 100,000) is four times higher than the global average (3 per 100,000). And homicide is the leading cause of death among adolescent boys aged 10-19...boys are seven times more likely to die by homicide than girls. Meanwhile, girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence after age 10.

That is not a good look for us as a region. While the Caribbean region may not be the major contributor to these appalling statistics, there is still great cause for concern. The release points directly to some traditional practices which we would do well to address with a level of immediacy. According to the release,

-most children in Latin America and the Caribbean are exposed to violence almost from birth and, often, by the people they most trust: Their parents, caregivers, peers, and neighbors...Unfortunately, in many communities across the region, violent discipline is socially accepted.

It is therefore incumbent upon the church to be the change it wishes to see. Our theme reminds us during this Lent season, to be the safe place where our children can grow and develop without the hindrance of people preying upon them because of their natural vulnerability. Jesus' words in Matthew 18, quoted above, highlight how serious a matter this was for Him that He would prescribe death for those who take advantage of His children.

In addition to the physical, emotional and psychological abuse which far too many children experience on a daily basis as a result of adults preying upon them, there is also the trauma they suffer when they become the pawns in conflicts between adults who manipulate them in an effort to punish other adults who the children may revere or upon whom they may depend. The church must emulate our Lord in such circumstances and intervene on behalf of the children with those loving and reassuring words "Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not".

Horrible images from conflicts around the world are vivid on our television screens and devices where we have seen innocent children become collateral damage in conflicts that had nothing to do with them, and about which they knew nothing. The number of children who died in Gaza and the Ukraine ought to be jolting shocks that should bother us when we consider how God regards children. It is a reminder to us that we have a fiduciary duty to ensure that our children are specially cared for and specially guided.

How can the church prevent some of these problems? The church must provide time and space to become a haven for children where we know that abuse takes place or there is propensity for abuse. After school programs can be helpful in keeping our eye on children to make sure that they're not preyed upon in those critical hours between reaching home from school and their parents or a responsible adult arriving home. We have a duty to care for our children.

Discussion Questions

1. What measures can the church take to become a safer space for children?
2. Considering Jesus' warning about causing "little ones to stumble," when we examine our own attitudes, behaviours, and church culture towards our children and youth, what have been some of the signs or ways that we have at times been unintentionally contributing to harm, neglect or spiritual stumbling in their lives?
3. In what practical ways can we, as the Church, extend Christ-like advocacy and protection to children in our wider community—especially those who may be vulnerable to abuse, neglect or exploitation?
4. What can the Church do to sensitize parents about the dangers of child abuse?

Session 5: Children are a sign of God's Divine Providence



God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it." (Genesis 1:28a)

In as much as God has ordained for children to be here and has encouraged us to dedicate them and to nurture them and to protect them, ultimately, it is God's intent that we see children as a sign of His blessing upon our community. Therefore, they must be specially cared for and specially catered to.

Holy Scripture is replete with examples of how God sees children. The very covenant relationship between God and Israel was bound by the gift of children. One of the critical aspects of the covenant was that God would make the descendants of Abraham a great nation. In essence, that children will be a sign of Divine Providence- that God will ensure the survival of the community.

And he brought him forth and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to number them": and he said to him, "So shall thy seed be." (Genesis 15:5)

Whenever the community was in trouble and in need of a fresh start or was being reassured in the face of impending danger, the image of a child would be evoked to herald this new beginning. The book of Isaiah particularly employs this mode of communication. The book contains a series of child signs which serve as indicators of hope, renewal and new beginnings. The sign of a child relates to what was mentioned previously. There is hope for the future because God has brought or is bringing a special being into this world - a child.

Perhaps the most widely referenced child sign from the book of Isaiah came out of a geopolitical crisis in the eighth century where the survival of the nation of Judah was under threat.

The threat was posed by Israel and Syria to Judah. King Jotham and later his son King Ahaz of Judah were approached by their northern neighbours Syria and Israel seeking Judah's support to join an alliance to revolt against Assyria. Failure to join would have been met by an invasion of Judah by those territories and the overthrow of the government. The prophet Isaiah gave the two child signs contained within the prophecies of Isaiah chapters 7 and 8 to assure king Ahaz that it was not God's will that he should join the alliance and the children being born will be signs of God's providence for Judah.

The first of those prophecies is what is commonly referred to as the 'Immanuel Prophecy' which is referenced at Christmas because St. Matthew evokes it concerning the birth of Jesus.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; Behold a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Immanuel...For before

the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread, will be no more. (Isaiah 7:14,16)

In the second prophecy, the child of the prophet will be the sign of God's providence for Judah. The prophet records:

And I went unto the prophetess, and she conceived, and bare a son. Then the Lord said to me, Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz. For before the child shall have knowledge to cry, My father, and my mother, the riches of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria shall be taken away before the king of Assyria. (Isaiah 8:3-4)

The prophecies in the passages quoted above from Isaiah 7 and 8 reference the same event. In the first instance, the prophet identifies a pregnant young woman known to both him and the king. The child she was carrying would be a sign that the community would be spared. The child was a sign that God was with them - Immanuel. The second prophecy reinforced the first by referencing the prophet's own child as a sign. The essence of the prophecies was not so much in the identity of the child but rather to establish the timeline in which God would act to bring about his purposes. In one instance the timeline is 'before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good" and in the other it is "before the child shall have knowledge to cry, my father, and my mother" – the nations of Israel and Syria will be no more. The prophecies of Isaiah 7 and 8 were actually fulfilled where Israel is concerned. Those prophecies are dated some time during the reign of king Ahaz of Judah, most likely at the start of his reign in 735 BC. The nation of Israel, also known as

the Northern Kingdom, was assimilated into the Assyrian Empire in 722 BC, just thirteen years after. God was assuring Judah that they would be spared such calamity if they remained obedient to Him. The birth of those children would be the sign that He intended for the nation to flourish.

Similarly, Isaiah issued prophecies for the governance of Judah and the restoration of the kingdom in the form of child signs. Two prophecies which reflect this theme can be found in Isaiah 9 and 11.

The first of these prophecies seeks to remedy the problem of a divided nation. There was an element of equality which had existed for centuries that needed to be fixed. There were some people in the nation who were deemed to be dwelling in a place of darkness and needed to be brought into the light - needed to be restored. Isaiah prophesied that this could be remedied through the birth of a child, a new leader who will bring a fresh approach and usher in a new dispensation.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light: they who dwell in the land of the shadow of death, on them has the light shined...For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder... (Isaiah 9:2,6)

The second prophecy is like the first where equality, equity and peace will be the hallmarks of a new leadership ushered in by a child. The prophet foresees:

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: ...The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young

lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:1,6)

These prophecies both speak to God's Providence in preserving the life of the community by providing a fresh approach to leadership.

Likewise, the loss of a child is an occasion for great mourning. Just as much as the birth of the child is seen as God's Divine Providence, the loss of a child is a great tragedy to a community. It creates a void within the community and threatens its survival. The book of Isaiah also noted this threat where it records:

For, behold I create new heavens and new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come to mind...There shall no more be in it an infant of only a few days, nor an old man who does not live out his days; for the child shall die a hundred years old;... (Isaiah 65:17,20)

Child signs were used as evidence for the Old Testament community that God was going to provide for them.

As we reflect upon these things, the ultimate understanding is that children are a heritage from the Lord as the psalmist reminds us. And every time a child comes into this world, it is a sign that God is among us - that he is actively working his purpose out in our lives.

Long before Whitney Houston immortalized the words "I believe that children are the future..." Holy scripture had already embraced the notion. The book of Deuteronomy in particular, constantly points towards the next generation. It is the next generation that was seen as integral for the survival of the community. Therefore, the

book emphasizes that the children must be specially instructed in the way of the Lord so that the community continues to function.

If that continuum is broken, then everything falls apart because children are integral to the survival of the community. There is an old saying attributed to the Native Americans, which though used to speak of the environment, alludes to children being the future. It simply says:

'We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors. We borrow it from our children.'

In other words, the next generation is always the most important thing in the community because the next generation is a sign of our ongoing sustenance. The next generation is a sign that God is with us.

Living on through children

In the Old Testament, there was also the concept of Levirate marriage. In the law of Moses, if a man died and did not have children, his brother after him should come and have children with his dead brother's wife, so that his name would not be blotted out in Israel.

This was an important practice because it spoke to their concept of the afterlife; that one lived on in one's children. If a man had no children, he could not go on into the next generation; he did not live on- his name was blotted out. Children were therefore a sign of continuity, and God's providence.

Of course, this is prior to the advancement and understanding of the immortal soul where the afterlife is not bound up in offspring but the righteousness of the soul. Hence, the individual now lives on for him/herself.

This shift is noticeable in Isaiah 56:

...neither let the eunuch say, Behold I am a dry tree...Even unto them I will give in my house and within my walls a place and a name better than sons or daughters: I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:3b, 5)

In this passage, the eunuch who was a man either castrated or naturally unable to have children, would have been regarded an outcast and not eligible to be a part of the covenant community. However, now he can be a part of the community and will be given a name better than sons or daughters and he will no longer be cut off. His living on in the afterlife will no longer be dependent upon having offspring, and his impediment of being castrated will no longer cause him to be 'cut off.'

Jesus picked up on this tradition and used it to teach the people of his time about the nature of the afterlife. In Matthew 22 the Sadducees, a Jewish sect which did not believe in resurrection, sought to expose the absurdity of the resurrection by presenting a scenario which involved Levirate Marriage where seven brothers were married to the same woman. Their concern was, "whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" Jesus' response was very succinct; "In the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are like angels in heaven." (Matthew 22:30)

That notwithstanding, children were a sign of God's blessing. It is for this reason as was reflected upon earlier, barrenness plays such a central role in God's plan for Israel. Barrenness meant that God did not bless you to go on into the next generation. In science, we say the ultimate characteristic of a living thing is to reproduce itself into the next generation. The continuity of the community is essential for its own

development and ultimately, survival - and children are the determining factor.

This speaks to us directly in this country, our region, and other parts of the world, where there are declining birth rates. In this region much of that came about as a result of the family planning drive of previous decades that perhaps was so successful that it may now be working to our detriment.

Perhaps the most pertinent question for our time is how do we see children within our community? In speaking with some young people in today's world, admittedly maybe a minority but a significant enough minority, many say that they do not want to have children. One is left to wonder what is driving this mindset. Some argue that it is too costly to have children. Others think that the world is so corrupt that they do not want to have to bring a child into this world. While it may appear amplified in their time, the world has always been corrupt and flawed because human beings live in it.

Additionally, what is necessary to raise a child in this world has not changed. Many of us grew up with just the bare minimum to survive. In today's world even those who are considered less fortunate have much more than the bare minimum of former generations. Perhaps this is why Jesus noted that poverty is relative when he said, "the poor we will always have with us". (Matthew 26:11, Mark 14:7, John 12:8)

It may well be the standards of the world and the things that we see as important to call ourselves successful that have pushed us to perceive that even what we have is not enough. As a consequence, the conception of children is what suffers.

Of significant concern as well is that we are in a fast-paced world, and far too many businesses are seemingly family averse. Young professionals work to the point of

burnout, keeping horrendous work schedules with little time for building a family.

Particularly in the corporate world, and this is a generalization, where to climb the corporate ladder, having a child for a woman can be seen as a negative thing, because it reduces her working hours. She has to have maternity leave, then she has to take time out for the child, she has to be there to make sure that she can be present at nursery when the child is going to nursery, go to little meetings, and there are some businesspeople who have problems with these things. This puts pressure on our women, it puts pressure on the development of family life, and ultimately it hinders the development of community.

So, we must ask ourselves, where is our decline in birth rate coming from? What is the mindset of our people? Remember that children are a sign of God's providence. What are we saying to God when we refuse to accept the blessings that He has given us? Of course, this will spark much debate and perhaps the reversal of some strongly held notions in society.

The question is now how do we bring things back to the middle? How can we foster the creation of families by encouraging our young people to bring these little gifts into our world, because they are signs of God's divine love and providence amongst us. How can we shape communities where families are nurtured and encouraged? How best can we create an environment where young people are embraced and supported in building families so that our community can continue and the hope that comes with the gift of a child can be alive among us?

Discussion questions:

1. How should the belief that children are signs of God's Divine Providence shape the way we welcome, nurture, and support families within our church and wider community?
2. In a time of declining birth rates, shifting family priorities, and increasing pressures on young adults, how can the church actively encourage a positive, faith-filled view of children and promote environments where families can flourish?
3. Considering the various biblical "child signs" that symbolized hope, renewal, and God's presence, how might our church discern the ways God is calling us to invest in the next generation today and what practical steps should we take?

