

“THE SHAPE OF THEIR LIGHT”
Report of the Children’s Ministry Future Directions Team
The Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee

The Land Before Us

During the last gathering of the Children’s Ministry Future Directions Team, the Chair of the Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee, Janice Frame, thanked members by sharing the story of the scouts sent into the new land to get a picture of what lay ahead for the community and bring back a report. “This is your story. You are our scouts. You have been sent ahead and we await your report.” (based on Deuteronomy 1:22-26)

We were invited by the Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee to go on ahead and “listen, examine and discern” ways the Maritime Conference might enable and support “new directions for children’s ministry.” We’ve been away for three years. Now we are back and here is our report.

In many ways we never left home. We began by looking back and asking youth and adults questions about their childhood experiences. It gave us a lens for peering into the future.

Indeed, we never left home but we created space and sat with today’s children and heard their questions and glimpsed the shape of their spiritual life. We were inspired – and startled.

We have not been to the future yet we bring a report that invites the Conference to journey in new ways so we may enter the future better equipped and inspired for ministry with children. This is not a time for huddling at the border hoping that yesterday’s ways will continue to serve. In many ways our children have already crossed over to a new way of being in the world. Their experience is not our experience. We must listen. We must learn. We must seek new ways to touch their hearts. We must offer hope.

This Report will outline our effort to glimpse into the future. We’ve made enquiries and we will share our insights, our discoveries and our questions. We’ve sat with children and we will tell you what we learned. We hope it will disturb you. We will make recommendations. They will not “fix” anything. They are simply supports for our faith communities to begin to engage the task of ‘crossing over’ into the future in order to be in faithful relationship with children. The children are ahead of us. They are already in a new place of being the church. We must catch up.

**“We started with
Children’s Ministry
but ended up talking
about faith
formation for all**

Background

In April 2005 the Children's, Youth & Young Adult Ministry (CYAYA) Unit of the Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee reflected on children's ministry, especially the Children at Conference (CAC) program. This program was held every second year alternatively with Intermediates at Conference (IAC). Although cherished by the Conference, the CAC program was failing. In 2003 and 2005 the program struggled to attract sufficient leadership or participants to make it viable. CYAYA also learned of national church trends which named the alarming decline of children involved in programs. The Committee was also aware, through the Pastoral Charge Conversations, that congregations in the Maritime Conference were naming "the lack of children" as a concern and source of grief.¹ The CYAYA Unit recommended to the Christian Life & Growth (CLG) Committee that a Children's Ministry Future Directions Discernment Team be established.

The Christian Life & Growth Committee listed qualities for team members and consulted widely for names of those bearing such qualities. We were named and accepted the invitation. We are: *Karen Brennan*, a teacher and mother of young children from Prince Edward Island, *Curtis MacDonald*, chaplain at the IWK Children's Hospital, *Anne Cameron*, staff associate at St Stephen & St Paul United Church of Canada in Kentville, NS, *Mat Whynott*, a young adult, youth leader and camping ministry enthusiast from Halifax, *Pam Reidpath*, minister of a multi point pastoral charge in Bideford, PE and *Janice MacLean*, Conference Minister for Christian Nurture & Enrichment. *Bethe Benjamin-Cameron*, a writer and children's ministry advocate and *Amy Crawford*, General Council staff person for Youth, Young Teens and Children's Ministry, joined us later in our process.

Our Work Begins ... An Appreciative Inquiry

We were appointed as a "Project Unit" of the Christian Life & Growth Committee with a three year mandate. We began surveying "the lay of the land" by exploring current resources² and getting to know one another. Sensing that our work was not to find a "quick fix" or easy answers we reviewed "frame-bending" planning³ and acknowledged we would take time to get as broad a vision as possible. We would try to see outside the box.

¹ *This Is what We Heard: Pastoral Charge Conversations*, The Maritime Conference of the United Church of Canada, Janice MacLean, 2005

² Such as: *The Vision for Children's Ministry in the United Church of Canada*, *Seeds of Change: Exploring New Approaches to Christian Education/Faith Formation*, UN Rights of the Child, information on multigenerational congregations, and the video: *Children: Our Present and Future (AVEL)*

³ Gil Rendle & Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations*. The Alban Institute, 2003

A couple of our members had experienced Appreciative Inquiry (a practice of approaching change through the art of asking questions that lead to new possibilities), so we designed and tested questions to help us understand what youth and adults remembered about a time they felt closest to God and what they felt were the most important contributions their church made for children. We also asked them their three wishes for Children's Ministry. We invited the Intermediate at Conference participants (ages 12-15 years) to participate in the inquiry and they interviewed adult delegates at the Annual General Meeting (2006). The demographics are summarized in Appendix I. We felt it was important to get a sense of what youth (recently out of childhood) and adults (today's leaders of children) valued and dreamed about in terms of children's ministry.

As we analyzed the interviews through the lens of major themes, values and dreams. We name ten themes of recurring significance and list these with quotes that highlight the theme. See Appendix II.

As we sat with the results of our Inquiry several questions arose which might warrant further exploration with children today:

- Relationships were named as faith-forming. What are the specific qualities that make relationships special?
- Music was named as important to those we interviewed. Was the desire for upbeat music coming from adults who felt this was "the answer" to attracting children and youth? Or is music a spiritual practice of a lasting nature that will speak to children today?
- A strong desire for fun was expressed. What is the need/desire for fun pointing toward? What is fun?
- The theme of death was significant to youth and adults who reflected on their childhood experiences. Is death still a significant theme for children today? If so, are we providing positive experiences of dealing with death? Are we protecting children from the harshness of the world?

Any of these paths might provide significant learning. We decided to proceed by planning forums with children to explore their faith questions.

The Children's Forums

We were fortunate that Amy Crawford, General Council Staff for Youth, Young Teens & Children's Ministry joined us offering her leadership and financial support for the test forum and following three regional forums. Beth Benjamin Cameron also helped design the process and offered leadership at the forums.

We used the book, *The Adventures of the God Detectives* by Linnea Good & Nancy Reeves as a basis for planning the Forums. We designed three “cases” so we could explore the faith questions children are asking, the choices/decisions children are faced with, and where they see signs of God in the world. We ran a test forum in Halifax with child relatives/friends of team members. This led to several refinements.

In September/October 2007 we participated in three forums: Summerside, PE, Fredericton, NB and Kentville, NS. Each forum was designed for 24 children and local churches were invited to send 4-6 participants. Locations were chosen to reflect both rural and urban realities in our conference. Leadership for the “cases” was provided by Amy Crawford, Beth Benjamin-Cameron and Janice MacLean. Members of the Children’s Ministry Team were present as “listeners” who journeyed with a group of children through each case. They completed a “Listeners Sheet” after each experience. (See Appendix III).

The Forums were held on either a Saturday or Sunday. We were disappointed not to have *full* attendance at any of the forums. We have wondered deeply about what contributed to the struggle to gather children. We learned that many children were occupied with other activities. We suspected in some cases the invitation was “lost” on desks and perhaps points to the low priority of children’s ministry amidst the many demands of ministry. It also suggests that any future Conference initiatives will need local partners in order to plan events. It may suggest that even regional events for children will not be met with large numbers.

We humbly learned that numbers do not make a difference to an individual child. We made a decision at the Fredericton forum not to take the three children through all the cases. Later reflection suggested we could have done so (and should have done so) as the thirst for the space we were offering was clearly appreciated and their disappointment at our decision was plain.

We offer our regret as learning. When space is created for children’s questions numbers are not important.

Learning from Little Pink Pigs

Using *Godly Play*, a method of Christian Education, Amy told the story of Abraham and Sarah. Listeners were amazed at how attentively the children listened to the story and how the story compelled them at a heart level. Many experienced themselves as descendents of Abraham & Sarah and wondering questions drew out insights and further questions.

The story was about choices Abraham and Sarah made in the desert and the children were invited to craft choices/decisions facing them in clay, pictures or stories. In one forum bright pink clay pigs proliferated!

“Our relationship with children needs to empower children and it needs to say, ‘Your story is important and it connects with ‘The Story’”

To adults it appeared the task failed to highlight issues facing children today. It was only in later reflection that Amy recalled the conversation among the children as they shaped their pigs. Each one spoke of a parent or friend's parent who was "away" working in Alberta. It is likely that the story of Abraham and Sarah leaving home evoked the issue. We learned to listen differently in subsequent forums. Often children speak of their issues in between activities; often we had to listen between the lines.

We also note that there is an issue of pastoral concern with children whose parents are working away from home. This is a particular reality for various communities within the bounds of our Conference.

If You Could Ask God a Question...

Three issues emerged as we studied the puzzle pieces on which the children recorded what puzzled or worried or made them sad about the world:

- Concerns about war and violence
- Issues around poverty and
- Worries about the environment.

Some puzzle pieces reflected a single issue, for example, child labour, smoking or litter. This suggests, perhaps, that issues "stick" in some children. It may be that they were introduced to an issue and were impacted profoundly and then continued to hold concern or unrest with it.

Some puzzle pieces reflected a personal relationship with the issue: Nanny having cancer, mom and dad going away in a car and not coming home, robbery at my school, to name some. Many pieces reflected global issues.

We asked children to respond to a wondering... I wonder if you could ask God any question about the world what it would be. We invite you to carefully read the list recorded in Appendix IV.

You will see curiosity about the "facts" about God: What was your last name? What did you eat? What colour hair do you have? Who is your best friend? There was also curiosity about their Self in the future: "What will I be when I grow up? When will I die? How much will I grow? Will I be rich?"

Many questions reflected the issues recorded on their puzzle pieces but with a clear wondering about the end of the world: When will the sun end? Is all the air in the world going to stay? What will our world be like in 50 years? Is our world going to change?

Many questions suggest God is pictured as "in control" and knowing the answers to their questions: When will the war end? When is it going to be world peace? What's going on in other places? When will the poor not exist any more? The image of God used by the

children almost exclusively in conversation was “Father” and “He.”⁴ This combined with their implicit sense of an All-Powerful/All-knowing Being who knows the answers and holds the future suggests a traditional theology.

However, many questions indicate a misgiving or questioning: Do you listen when we pray? What’s your reason for war? Why did you make cancer? Do you have a reason for everything? Are you going to help stop the wars? Why did you flood the world? Is God going to make the world better? Can you stop kids from being hungry? Do you have a reason for everything?

God is being challenged! The questions carry an assumption the God’s role is to “intervene” in human affairs but there is doubt that God will. The image of God as All-Powerful and in Control is not sitting comfortably with their experience of the world nor is it much comfort to our children.

Open to an Experience of the Holy

Many Listeners noted that the children were very willing to lie down on the carpet and close their eyes and enter into a Guided Meditation and reflection on their friendship with God. This time of stillness seemed to be appreciated. In each of the Forums we noted that children were very open to rituals (candle lighting, body prayer) and times of quiet. The meditation was often named as an important part of the time together at the end of day evaluation.

When invited to share the images of God they imagined in clouds, there were varied images from an ‘old man in the sky,’ a heart, as well as many Christian symbols such as cross and dove. Each child named a few images. In body sculpture games these traditional images took shape again as children formed a cross or a heart when asked to form an image of church.

At a nature “touch table” the children often named “beaches” and “water” as important places where they felt close to God.

Where is God?

While children were open to an experience of the Holy and clearly appreciated the opportunity to get into deep questions, we found little evidence to suggest that children had a sense of God present in the struggle or in the midst of their sadness. There was little or no indication that

“What surprised me the most was that there was so much going on in their lives yet no connection that God could be there in the struggle ... God seemed

⁴ We do note that many children were referring to God and Jesus interchangeably.

children were drawing upon faith resources to share their worries. We found no evidence that the church was a place where children could express their concerns or find meaning or hope.

It is here that we saw most clearly that the land before us is new and not well known. It is here that we sensed the shift from a focus on children's ministry to a sense that these questions call all of us to a new way of being and practice. It is here we began to ask new questions:

- How do we give children the resources to live faithfully with their questions?
- Will adults be able to sit with children in their sadness and listen?
- Will adults recognize the need to offer space to children without having answers?
- How do we create space for adults and children to spend time in dialogue learning to express concerns to each other?

In this new land we recognize that adults don't have all the answers. In some ways the questions children are asking are our questions too! As we gaze into this new land we deeply suspect that programs or curriculum will have limited ability to help us. This is a time for nurturing relationships. We know that relationships have always been faith-formative but this is a time like no other for creating a secure space where children can explore their doubt and express their faith, values and beliefs with adults who are comfortable with questions and disinclined to impose answers. This is a time, perhaps like no other in the church, demanding faith formation rather than information. We will need to move beyond superficial programs to deep relationships. We will need to move from doing crafts to crafting new hope together.

Glimpses of a New Land

We believe the children of the Conference want time in church to be meaningful. We believe we heard a voice in the questions calling for a sense of purpose and mission and a way of making the world a better place. We believe we heard our children say, 'take us seriously and offer us ways to find hope.' We heard them say, 'teach us to pray.' We believe there is a need for more images of God to help address the issues raised by their questions.

The Forums raised profound existential questions. The children were more attuned to the world and global issues than we expected. Sheltering children from "the world" is

"Adults don't have the answers and programs won't help us. It's about relationship."

-Team Member

injustice as their worries are big and we know if fear and imagination join hands those concerns grow larger. We suspect children are leaning into the issues of the world even if parents feel they are shielding their children from the harshness of the world. We wonder if we are addressing a church-wide spiritual issue when we look at the questions children are asking.

We imagine that intergenerational faith formation and story-sharing will need to be part of the new land where the church would be a safe place to contain worries. Our strategies cannot isolate children but will need to touch young families as a unit and the church as a whole.

We heard weighty concerns but they were lifted up in an atmosphere of fun and play. The children had fun and ‘the day was theirs.’ We know that *Godly Play* stirred the children and the *Godly Play* stories were consistently named as the best part of the day. We know that stories and conversations about the forum went home to Sunday School and to school. The day with its games, pizza, and significant conversations was fun but not superficial fun. We gratefully stumbled upon the knowledge that if we create a safe space for children where questions are welcome they will value the opportunity to give them voice. As participants we were stunned by the knowledge that we (as church) aren’t helping children find either voice or hope for their concerns. Perhaps the greatest challenge will be the need for adult restraint. We will need to learn to sit with children and listen to their questions and not impose easy answers or cheap hope. The way ahead is a hand-in-hand in a journey of seeking hope together. We will need to create a culture where the children are our guides even as we are their leaders and mentors.

Our Recommendations

Clearly the land is shifting and we are glimpsing the profundity of children’s questions and faith issues. We know that nothing less than a transformation of the church will faithfully support the children of today. We address our hope for a transformed and transforming church but begin with recommendations for concrete strategies that move us a step toward a new land.

- 1. We believe the Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee has a role in inspiring and equipping leaders for children’s ministry by:**
 - a. Making a commitment to *Godly Play* as a method of Christian Education that tells core Bible stories, evokes understanding through wondering questions and invites expression through response. Our understanding and practice of *Godly Play* can be deepened through informative workshops and training of teachers.
 - b. Developing regional workshops that invite parents and teachers/leaders to listen to children and learn to create secure space where, through play, children can give voice to their concerns, sadness and fears and find hope.
 - c. Providing resources for more effective ministry of “children’s time” recognizing that while we believe the future calls us to integrate children more fully into the life and worship of the church, at present children’s time is one of the most significant moments of contact the children have with the wider faith community and the minister. We need to take this

time more seriously, offer substantial content and develop an ethic of respect in storytelling. At the same time the Christian Life & Growth Committee needs to find effective ways to share the stories and practices of congregations who are exploring new models of including children in worship.

- d. Working with other Conference Committees to seek guidance in equipping leaders of children and developing resources to help in addressing children's issues. We note again the three primary issues that emerged in the forums were concerns about war and violence, issues around poverty and worries about the environment. Children need to be the focus and concern of more than one ministry unit. We need a cooperative approach.

2. We believe the Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee has a role in hosting/supporting events for and with children.

- a. We do not recommend a revival of the Children at Conference Program which served 26 children who were mostly children of delegates. We have no reason to believe that circumstances in these past three years have changed which would warrant renewed success of such a program. We are also aware that the Intermediates at Conference Program has grown over the last three years and is attracting more youth than can be accepted. Attention and energy needs to remain with the continued development of this program.
- b. We do, despite the challenges we met ourselves in gathering children for the Forums, recommend regional day events that provide children with a secure place to play, give voice to concerns and seek hope. We believe the Conference needs to partner with Presbytery/Synod in offering these days (perhaps during times of School breaks). We need to work together at strengthening a network of new leadership for children's ministry.
- c. We also recommend exploring the potential of All Ages events (and worship) as a model for dialogue and faith formation. There are resources that need to be highlighted and we need effective models to show the way.
- d. We believe that our church camps are best equipped to offer the first residential experience for children of the Conference. We note trends across the country that suggest, while attendance in Sunday Schools is declining, numbers of children going to camp is increasing. We need to find ways to support camping ministry as a significant place for faith formation.

- e. We know that our Sunday Schools remain a significant place of contact with children. We recommend the Christian Life & Growth explore ways of providing regional Sunday School workshops, perhaps through a Resource Pool, where Sunday School teachers can receive support and training and new tools to listen to children, teach spiritual practices and offer resources to nurture hope in their world.

These relatively traditional responses are to be considered as initial responses and first steps. They are not enough to bring us into the new land children are already experiencing.

3. We recommend changing a culture, transforming the church by finding ways to:

- a. Explore our adult theological understanding and language and broaden our images of God so that we offer children new theological ways to construct their world.
- b. Imagine and implement the possibilities of making a profound financial investment in our ministry with children.
- c. Give voice to children in all areas of the life and work of the faith community. Perhaps all ages need a renewed sense of faithful discipleship.
- d. Ask difficult questions and spark ‘holy conversations’ about the effectiveness of our Sunday Schools in changing times and explore options for creating new approaches to faith formation/Christian Education in our congregations.

The Shape of Their Light

The *Godly Play* story, “The Light” begins by lighting a candle for each child in the circle. Each child was named and told: “This is your light.” The story ends with changing the light, not just extinguishing it, but blowing it out and watching the flame lengthen and stretch and fill the room to be present with us in all times and all places.

We remember a child in one of the forums who scrambled forward to ‘change her light’. Watching the smoke from her candle rise and change she said with awe: “I will never forget the shape of my light.”

This is our report. We offer it with the daring hope that the children of Maritime Conference will always speak with a strong and awed voice within the faith community and continue to explore and express the shape of their light.

Children’s Ministry Future Directions Team Members

Karen Brennan

Anne Cameron

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Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee
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With thanks to Janice Frame, Chair of the Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee and Sue Betuik, representative from Children's, Youth & Young Adult Ministry who participated in shaping recommendations.

**Adopted by the Maritime Conference Christian Life & Growth Committee
March 10, 2008**

Appendix I: Summary of Statistics for Appreciative Inquiry Interviews

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY INTERVIEWS MAY 2006

AGE

0-15	55
16-30	13
31-45	8
46-65	37
65+	11

GENDER

Female.....	78
Male	47

LOCATION

Town or City.....	62
Rural.....	61
Unknown.....	1

NAME OF PRESBYTERY

Bermuda.....	5
Chignecto.....	7
Halifax.....	15
Inverness-Guysborough.....	4
Miramichi.....	6
Pictou.....	6
Prince Edward Island.....	11
Saint John.....	10
South Shore.....	7
St. Stephen.....	3
Sydney.....	5
Truro.....	15
Valley.....	7
Woolastook.....	10
Unknown.....	13

ATTENDED CHURCH/SUNDAY SCHOOL AS A CHILD

Often.....	112
Sometimes.....	9
Rarely.....	1
Never.....	2

Appendix II: Children's Ministry Future Directions Inquiry: Quotes Illustrating Major Themes, Values and Dreams

Youth and Adults Reflect on When They Felt Closest to God, the Most Important Contributions Their Church Made for Children, & Their Wishes for Children's Ministry.

We heard the importance/significance of:

Ritual

*Closest to God when "involved as a member in **the youth group** and was part of the worship service. It was the first time [I] was involved and felt part of the church."*

*"When I was being **confirmed** my friend in faith and I had some deep conversations and he gave me a gift of a plaque that says you can do all things though he who strengthens me and I keep this close at all times."*

*"During **prayer**"*

A Sense of Involvement/Inclusion

*"Everyone welcome to **communion**"*

*"When I was little I got a big part in a play and I **felt important**"*

*Contributions: "**Inter-generational services** with adults and children".*

Relationship and Belonging

*[I remember] "A particular **Sunday School teacher**, when you were in his class, it seemed as if you were closest to God."*

*"When I spent time with my **grandmother**. During my teen years/child she talked the most about God in my family and encouraged me to go to church."*

Music

*"The love, care and **ministry of music** had a large impact on my faith and love for God."*

*"When I was first in the Christmas Cantata and we were singing the **upbeat music** is when I felt closest to God."*

Fun

*Wish: "More children's activities during weekends and the summer because children need to learn as much as they can about **God while having fun**."*

*"If kids could **play** they would be blessed and have more fun [in church.]*

*"[Church] wouldn't have chairs; there would be circles and little ones could run around the middle. Totally disordered! [We would] sing and dance; children would **run and play**."*

Sunday School

*Closest to God: "We had a **Sunday School picnic** every year and we do lots of fun sports and lost of good food and its always fun and inclusive."*

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February 2008

*Contribution: "When I was in **Sunday School** learning about the bible."*

Camp/nature

*Closest to God "walking through **fields of daisies**, feeling the warmth of the sun, swimming in the river."*

*Closest to God: "**At camp when we were talking about God** and I felt like I really understood my faith a lot better."*

*Wish: "That children could **go to camp**, especially children that come from poor families."*

Projects

*"Last year youth at church (ages 12-14) **got together** and painted the walls of the Sunday School. It was originally a solid colour. It was decorated in the seven days of creation theme."*

*Wish: "That children would be involved in **outreach programs** such as food banks, visiting the elderly etc."*

Death

*Felt closest to God when grandmother **passed away**. "[I] never really seen someone in a casket. [I] wanted to touch her and [I] felt very close to God."*

*Felt closest to God "when my grampy got ill with cancer and de died shortly after in 2000. Our family was really close and it was **upsetting**."*

Voice/Participation

*Wish: "Youth boards where we can have **an official say** in what goes on."*

*Wish: "Try to open the elders minds to **new ideas**"*

*Wish "The church would look like a place where **children are welcome** to explore their faith alongside adults with no financial restrictions"*

Appendix III Children's Forums: Listener Reflection Sheet

The Children's Ministry Future Directions Team has a mandate to make recommendations to the Christian Life & Growth Committee that will strengthen and support children's ministry in the conference. The Children's Forums are intended to provide a space for children to name their faith questions and experiences. An analysis of what we hear combined with other research and interviews will help shape the recommendations. Thanks you for your listening!

Name: _____

Place: _____ Date: _____

What images of God did you hear the children articulate?

What words/ images or expression did you hear from the children that described their relationship with God?

What concerns/fears about the world did you hear the children talk about? How would you describe their awareness of God's presence in the world?

From your listening today what faith questions did you hear the children suggest or articulate?

What stood out for you? What stirred your heart?

If these children were typical of many in the Conference what would you suggest to congregation that would be helpful as they plan their educational ministry with children?

Appendix IV: List of Children's Questions
If you could ask God a Question about our world what would it be?

When will the sun end?
Will I be rich?
What will I be when I grow up?
What was it like when you were alive down here?
Will I help you in UNICEF when I grow older?
Do you listen when we pray?
When will I die?
How much will I grow?
When is Halloween?
When will the world end?
When will it be "waterworld"?

Why did you choose Mary and Joseph to have your son?
How tall were you?
How old are you?
What did your house look like when you were alive?
Why did you die for the world to be a better place?
What colour hair do you have?
What was it like when you were alive?
Who is your best friend?

Why did you flood the world?
What was your last name? Middle name?
Where did you find water?
What did you eat? What did Jesus eat?
Where did you sleep?

What's your reason for war?
Why God made people bad?
How did God get born?
Is God going to make the world better?
Why did God make cancer?
Do you have a reason for everything?

Is our world going to change?
What's going on in the places? (Afghanistan)
Is all the air in the world going to stay?
Are you going to help us stop the wars?
Are people going to stop shooting people?

What will our world be like in 50 years?
Why are all these disasters happening?
Will the war ever end?
Why don't people notice what they are doing to the planet?
Why do so many people get diagnosed with cancer?

When is it going to snow?
Can you stop kids from being hungry?
When will the poor not exist any more?
When is it going to be world peace?