

# like a child

Young leaders are guiding the world  
toward justice and the peaceable kingdom.  
What can we learn from them?

By Alex Kahtava  
*Blue Springs, Missouri, USA*

like a child born to pray  
and to show us the way,  
like a child here to stay,  
Jesus comes  
like a child we receive  
all that love one can conceive,  
like a child we believe,  
Jesus comes.

—DANIEL CHARLES DAMON,  
“LIKE A CHILD,” COMMUNITY OF CHRIST SINGS 403

**S**tanding in front of a simple headstone at Avalon Cemetery in Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa, I read these words:

**Zolile Hector Pietersen**

**August 19, 1963**

**June 16, 1976**

**Deeply mourned by his parents,  
sisters and a nation that remembers**

**Time is on the side of the oppressed today**

**Truth is on the side of the oppressed today**

**One nation, one people**

As I stood in front of that headstone, I realized how little I knew of Hector Pieterse (his family's preferred spelling). The nearby Hector Pieterse Museum, dedicated by Nelson Mandela in 1992, includes a memorial that reads:

**To honour the youth who gave their lives in the  
struggle for freedom and democracy**

At the age of 12, Hector Pieterse, along with at least 175 others, died in the Soweto uprising that began June 16, 1976. Thousands of others were injured protesting the government's enforced use of Afrikaans for classroom instruction. Black South Africans opposed Afrikaans, which was the language of their apartheid oppressors.

The protest began with a march as the students sang the hymn "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" ("Lord Bless Africa"). As students from multiple schools converged and pushed forward, the police first used dogs and then opened fire with weapons.

The museum and memorial are near the place where Hector and others were killed or injured. The Soweto uprising and a photo of a teenager carrying Hector's body with Hector's anguished sister Antoinette running beside them caught the attention of people around the world. It was a turning point in the Black South African struggle for freedom and democracy. The student uprising of June 16, 1976 is commemorated as National Youth Day, a public holiday in South Africa.

## **like a child, Jesus comes**

"How dare you!" thundered the voice of an indignant sixteen-year-old to world leaders at the United Nations in 2019. Greta Thunberg of Stockholm, Sweden embodied what TIME described as "one of the swiftest ascents to global influence in history" as the magazine's editors named her the 2019 Person of the Year. She is the youngest person yet chosen.

As an eight-year-old, she heard about global warming and thought, "That can't be happening, because if that were happening, then the politicians would be taking care of it." A growing awareness of the dangers the planet faced propelled her to take action (Charlotte Alter, Suyin Haynes, and Justin Worland, "TIME 2019 Person of the Year: Greta Thunberg").

She began what is now a global movement by skipping school starting in August 2018. She stood alone in front of the Swedish Parliament with a hand-painted sign: SKOLSTREJK FÖR KLIMATET (School Strike for the Climate). On the second day, a stranger joined her. She said that was a big day—one to two.

A few days later, a handful more joined her on the street. By September, enough people had joined her climate strike that she announced she would continue every Friday until the Swedish government aligned with the Paris Agreement on climate change. The Fridays for Future movement was born. By the end of the year, tens of thousands of students across Europe began skipping school on Fridays to protest their own leaders' inaction.

By September 2019, the strikes had spread around the world. Hundreds of thousands marched in New York City and London. TIME reported that "From Antarctica to Papua New Guinea, from Kabul to Johannesburg, an estimated four million people of all ages showed up to protest."

She demanded action, even in the face of ridicule by some, including national leaders. But she persisted with strong, unyielding words. Addressing the 2018 UN Climate Change Conference she stated, "You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes." In her response to being chosen Person of the Year she said, "I'd like to tell my grandchildren that we did everything we could, and we did it for them—for the generations to come."

In a crisis that especially affects the poor and suffering, her voice and her presence have helped place the climate crisis front and center.

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"We didn't want to wait until we were older to stand up for what we believe in," said sisters Melati and Isabel Wijsen (Jacopo Prisco, "The teenagers getting plastic bags banned in Bali," CNN.com). In 2013—when Melati was twelve and Isabel was ten—they began a campaign to rid Bali, Indonesia of single-use plastic bags. Growing up on the island of Bali, they were surrounded by the negative impact of plastic. They wondered who would do something about it.

After a lesson in school about change makers Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Lady Diana, they went home thinking about what they could do to make a change on their island. That inspiration led them to create Bye Bye Plastic Bags.

They started a petition to get the attention of the local government. They were granted permission to collect signatures at Bali's airport and eventually got more than 100,000. A year later, still unable to get a hearing with government officials, they decided to start a hunger strike, a decision inspired by a visit to Mohandas Gandhi's house in India. (The hunger strike was from sunrise to sunset and supervised by a dietitian.) Within a day they had their hearing, and the governor signed their memorandum of understanding to help the people of Bali rid the island of plastic bags by January 2018.

In 2017, they helped to organize an island-wide beach cleanup with 12,000 volunteers and spoke at the UN Headquarters on World Oceans Day. They were named among TIME's 25 Most Influential Teens of 2018.

Bye Bye Plastic Bags is now a global organization, [www.byebyeplasticbags.org](http://www.byebyeplasticbags.org). The mission is "to empower people to do what is right through education, campaigns, and political meetings. Start making that difference one bag at a time."

"If we could meet with world leaders and speak to them, we would tell them to listen more to the youth, consider us as more than just inspiration," Melati said. "We have bright innovative ideas of how to deal with some of the greatest issues of our time. We are the future, but we are here now, and we're ready. We've learned kids can do things. We can make things happen."

## like a child, Jesus comes

At the age of four, Iqbal Masih was put to work by his family to pay off their debts. He was born in 1983 in Muridke, a city outside of Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan to a poor, Christian family. Because the family borrowed money to live on from the owner of a carpet-weaving business, Iqbal was required to work until the debt was paid.

Each morning he made his way in the darkness to the factory, where he and other children were bound to the carpet looms with chains. At the age of 10, he learned that bonded labor had been made illegal by the Pakistan Supreme Court. He and other children escaped and went to the police, but, seeking a reward, the police returned the children to the factory. The children were punished with beatings and extreme starvation.

With the help of the Bonded Labour Liberation Front, Iqbal successfully escaped and attended a school for former child slaves in Lahore. He completed a four-year education in only two years.

After his story became known, Iqbal received a Reebok Human Rights Award in 1994. This award honors young activists who protect and uphold human rights. In his acceptance speech he said, "I am one of those millions of children who are suffering

in Pakistan because of bonded labor and child labor. But I am lucky. ...I am free, and I am standing in front of you here today. ...Today you are free, and I am free, too."

Iqbal and his family constantly received death threats from people upset by his fight against cheap child labor. On April 16, 1995, after an Easter celebration with his family in Muridke, he was shot to death under disputed circumstances.

Even though he was only twelve years old when he died, Iqbal left a legacy. Each year, the Iqbal Masih Award for the Elimination of Child Labor is presented by the United States Bureau of International Labor Affairs. The Iqbal Masih Shaheed Children Foundation runs several schools in Pakistan. He became a universal symbol for the fight against child slavery, and organizations around the world have been inspired to protect the rights of children.

## like a child, Jesus comes

Angie Valeria and Alan Kurdi—thousands of miles and a few years apart—are seared into the memories of people throughout the world.

Alan was three years old when he drowned with his brother and mother in 2015. They were found on the Turkish shore of the Mediterranean Sea after fleeing from the terror and violence in Syria.

Angie Valeria, twenty-three months, and her father Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez drowned in the Rio Grande in 2019. The family had traveled for several months from El Salvador, hoping to find work and one day buy a home.

Angie Valeria and Alan represent thousands of desperate migrants and refugees who flee war, poverty, and unrest.

## like a child, Jesus comes

Others named and unnamed challenge and humble us in our faith journeys by their tenacity, vision, and too often by their suffering.

In 2016, eight-year-old Mari Copeny wrote a letter to US President Barack Obama about a water crisis in her hometown of Flint, Michigan. The drinking water had become contaminated with lead, causing illnesses especially among children. The letter prompted the president to visit the city and survey the water crisis himself. He later approved \$100 million for drinking water infrastructure upgrades in Flint.

Malala Yousafzai defied death threats in Pakistan to campaign for education of girls. At fifteen, she survived an attempted assassination and has since become a global advocate for human rights, women's rights, and the right to education. She emphasizes the peaceful nature of Islam and the respect Islam has for education.

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Likely all of us have been touched by the lives of the young. That is certainly true in my life.

A teenager pointed a rifle at me through the window of the car in which I was traveling with several other Community of Christ ministers in Haiti. We were stopped at a tire barricade. This was in a time of political instability.

The soldiers at the barricade began to ask who we were and why we were there. While others responded to the questions, I found myself looking into the teenager's face—especially his eyes. What was I seeing? Fear? Animosity? I continue to remember and often think of him. Where is he now? What is his life like?

On a street corner in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, a teenager approached another minister and me. She wanted to know if we would have sex with her for money. We declined but began a conversation. She was prostituting herself to help her family. This was during an economic crisis in that nation resulting in political and social turmoil, and we had no reason to doubt her. I often wonder what became of her. Where is she now? What is her life like at this moment?

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Isaac S. Villegas, a Mennonite pastor, told of a church school class he taught on the story of Moses and the burning bush:


I lit a candle and asked them to listen to the flame. They squinted their eyes and tilted their ears toward the burning wick. I asked them what they thought God's voice sounded like to Moses. "God's voice crackled!" one child said. "God's words made a hissing noise, like when I whisper," said another. "I think God sounded like me," shouted a student, which provoked a shouting match as each kid claimed God's tone as an echo of their own...

Then a child who had sat in silence during the ruckus spoke up. "No," she announced. We all turned our attention to her. "God sounds like all of our voices, because we learn about God from each other."

—"The littlest judges,"  
The Christian Century, June 17, 2020

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The Community of Christ seal with the lamb, lion, and child reminds me of the continuing journey toward the peaceable kingdom. When I look at the seal and recall the phrase "a child shall lead them," I find myself saying "amen and amen." Children are

leading the way to that peaceable kingdom by their tenacity, wisdom, and righteous indignation. There are many others that will lead us in the days ahead. 

Alex Kahtava (he/him) lives in Blue Springs, Missouri, USA and attends the Colonial Hills congregation. He ministers as an evangelist and is a former member of the Council of Twelve Apostles.

Do not neglect the smallest among you, for even the least of these are treasures in God's sight. Receive the giftedness and energy of children and youth, listening to understand their questions and their wisdom.

—DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 161:4A



### OUR MISSION

Develop Disciples to Serve

We are called to equip adults and children to be true and living expressions of the life, ministry, and continuing presence of Christ in the world.