

# Worship with Children

## Agentive Participation in Dutch Protestant Contexts

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### 1 Introduction

Children participate in liturgical rituals (worship), for example during Sunday services, family or church-and-school services, children's church, crèche or Sunday school. This dissertation is an invitation to discover the fascinating dynamic between how adults adapt worship to suit children and how children appropriate, contribute to, and change worship. The research question is: How are liturgical rituals with children performed in Dutch Protestant contexts, how do these practices contribute to children's agentive participation, and what is the theological significance of these practices?

To improve the readability I often use *worship* as a shorter and less technical stand-in for the concept of *liturgical ritual*. Developed by Marcel Barnard, Cas Wepener, and Johan Cilliers, liturgical ritual unites the perspectives of anthropology and theology. The many existing definitions of ritual show that ritual consists of actions, is patterned, and communicates something. I speak of a *liturgical* ritual to draw attention to the opportunity for encounter between God and people in worship. In particular, I focus on liturgical rituals as they are performed. People shape the liturgical ritual through their actions while in turn, they are shaped by their liturgical ritual performance.

To answer the research question I interviewed eleven youth work professionals and did participant observations. Interview topics included definitions and examples of liturgical rituals with children and trends and developments in the field. I participated in twenty-one liturgical rituals with children at fifteen congregations in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). During the participant observations, I participated in the liturgical ritual, engaged in many casual conversations, and held interviews with children and organizers. Additionally, I attended organizational meetings, evaluation meetings, and arranged follow-up interviews.

In this summary, I will elaborate on the relevance of the research topic, answer the research question in brief and then summarize the findings per chapter. I conclude with suggestions for further research.

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## 2 Relevance

In the existing literature from practical theology and related fields like children's spirituality, children's theology, religious education and liturgical studies, empirical studies of worship with children are few and far between. Most writings are based on the authors' own practitioner knowledge, sometimes supported by interviews and observations in their own or other contexts. Practices are rarely described, analyses often short. Instead, most arguments are a variation on the theme that worship with children should be intergenerational, informed by practitioner knowledge and theories about formation and socialization. At times, the call for intergenerational worship seems to represent the liturgical moral high ground, where any practice that does not live up to that standard is automatically dismissed (and therefore not mentioned, let alone described and analyzed). The result is a lacuna in our knowledge of practices of worship with children and a lacking understanding of how different worship practices contribute to children's agentive participation.

Two academic authors who do write about worship with children based on empirical research are theologians Karen-Marie Yust and Joyce Ann Mercer. Mercer's book *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* is a reaction against the influence of consumerism on worship with children. Helpfully, Mercer nuances that while the shape of the practice matters, God can also work through segregated worship. Mercer also rightly observes that adults often fail to recognize children's ways of participation in worship as such.

Extensive qualitative research on worship with children mostly comes from outside practical theology or its related fields. One example is religious studies scholar Susan Ridgely's dissertation on children's interpretations of first communion in two Catholic parishes. Ridgely pays close attention to the effort the children put into mastering a successful performance of the ritual and takes into account the context – parish, family, ethnicity – in which children's meaning-making happens. Ridgely's work supports her conviction that children have concerns of their own and perform the roles that adults create for them in their own way.

In sum, there is not only a lack of research on actual practices (rather than good practices or idealistic representations of worship), but Mercer and Ridgely show the need to pay attention to how children participate in those existing worship practices.

## 3 Main conclusion

There is a great variety in how Dutch Protestant liturgical rituals with children are performed: in varying settings, with and by different groups of people, and using a wide range of methods and formats. Most practices include singing, praying, and listening to a Bible story. Often, the interaction with the Bible includes verbal and embodied elements. Children worship with peers and adult liturgical-ritual

leaders, and their parents, grandparents, siblings, teachers, classmates, or the wider congregation may also be present.

In the performance of worship with children, adults play a central role. Adults set the stage for worship with children when they (re)design worship and through the roles they perform. Decisions that adults make about worship are often informed by their intentions. Those intentions include, but are not limited to, the hope that children will develop their faith or spirituality, the aim to teach children about the liturgy, the wish that children will belong to the community, and the desire that children and the adults themselves will have good experiences in worship. Simultaneously, children appropriate and negotiate the social norms, the worship content, and the extent of their participation. How children influence worship shows what they find important in worship. Children value embodied participation, activity, relationships, giving input, and well-organized worship.

Worship allows children to participate in something bigger than they are. At the same time, worship takes place in a social context in which children are actors. Children claim space for themselves, for example, by making themselves heard, negotiating how they participate, asking theological questions, or turning the worship space into a playground. Adults contribute to children's participation when they show interest in the children's values, ideas, and theology and stimulate children to give input during worship and the surrounding decision-making. When adults recognize children's agency, it validates children's worthiness as participants in worship. It is interesting to recognize that the material environment influences the options for action that children and adults have in worship. For example, a cathedral makes children's talking or singing voices rebound in a way that a small room does not. Theologically, liturgical rituals with children are significant because of children's uniqueness and children's membership of the congregation. In the first place, children enrich worship with their agency, spirituality, and theology through the movement, reflections, creativity, and the values they bring in. Children's participation points to the theological significance of sensory experience. Children help create the liturgical-ritual space. In particular, the sounds that children make, like the lightness of children's singing voices and their rustling in the pews, contribute to how people in different congregations experience and understand their liturgy. Children's participation also sparks discussion about liturgy. It enables liturgical experimentation, which regularly leads to new liturgical rituals with children.

In the second place, children's mere presence in worship is theologically significant because children are part of the congregation as the Body of Christ. Children showed and said how they valued being together with peers and family in worship. Adults were spiritually nourished by worship with children, at least in part because of children's presence and contributions to worship. In worship, adults and children co-perform God, embodying theology by the way they interact and engage in story, ritual, and play. In sum, worship with children is theologically significant because it generates enthusiasm, provides lessons, and creates a playground for adults and children to meet and worship God together.

## 4 Rethinking worship with children

The main conclusion prompts further reflection on children's participation and the theological significance of Dutch Protestant liturgical rituals with children. Therefore, the following elaborates on the sub-questions about the variety of practices, the participation of adults and children, the role of materiality, and performance of God in worship with children.

### 4.1 Ideals of worship with children

Chapter 2 answered the question: How can we describe and understand the variety in worship practices with children? This chapter sketched historical and contemporary worship practices. The historical sketch showed that Dutch worship practices responded to international developments.

The historical sketch clarified that the relation between regular services and worship aimed at children was tense from the start. The analysis of contemporary worship practices with children in the Netherlands illustrated that these are 'target-group' and 'intergenerational' to different degrees. For example, interviewees defended children's church or family services (in other words, worship aimed at a specific target group), based on their intergenerational qualities. Thus, these terms are ideals, rather than purely descriptive terms.

Contemporary writers still often treat regular worship and worship designed for children as opposites. Ideally, many theologians argue, the whole congregation should worship together in one service, children included, rather than exclude or compartmentalize children. Theologically, the intergenerational worship ideal draws on the metaphor of the congregation as the Body of Christ, which is incomplete with some of its members missing. In contrast, proponents of target-group worship noted that the uniqueness of each child is a theological given that necessitates practices of worship that are more attuned to children.

In reality, intergenerational and target-group worship almost always co-existed in some way. Nevertheless, there was a great diversity in practices and developments were irregular. In some parts of the church, congregations had just started having a children's church (often in a hybrid form, alternating it with participation in the Sunday morning service), while in other parts of the church, children's church had existed for decades. In those congregations, practices like monthly family services or a children's church involving adult congregation members attempted to connect children to the larger congregation. Another example of a practice where adults and children worship together is Messy Church, which involves exploring a Bible story through play and activities, a time of worship, and a meal.

In sum, Chapter 2 showed that rather than thinking of target-group and intergenerational worship as mutually exclusive, it is helpful to see them as complementary to each other.

## 4.2 Adults' involvement

Adults determine much of what happens in worship with children. Therefore, Chapter 3 answered the question: How do adults shape worship with children? Adults shape worship through their design choices, the roles they perform, and their intentions.

In the first place, adults adapted methods and formats for use in a local congregation. When unable to make changes, some adults changed their intentions. For example, the Sunday school teachers used a method that emphasized learning but instead, they focused on creating community.

In the second place, adults performed contributing, directing, and facilitating roles. Contributing roles are mainly organizational and supportive, while directing and facilitating roles related directly to how adults approach children in worship. In directing roles, adults determined more of the format and content of worship. In facilitating roles, they gave children more opportunities to influence worship.

In the third place, *intentions* were the hopes that motivated adults' involvement in worship with children. Adults hoped that the worship would lead children to faith or encourage their spiritual development. They hoped that children would learn about the liturgy, become part of the faith community, and have (good) experiences. The analysis of the experience category revealed the importance of spirituality in adults' own experiences of worship. Based on literature on the topic of spirituality, I suggested that worship with children may ignite or deepen adults' spirituality because in worship with children, adults experience children's difference. Moreover, various adults mentioned their trust that in the end, God was at work, which seemed to positively influence their experience of worship with children.

Thus, adults set the stage for liturgical rituals with children, but precisely the focus on adults showed that children and God are other important actors.

## 4.3 Children's agency

Chapter 4 further explored how children contribute to worship, asking: How do children show agency in worship? Agency is an anthropological concept that emphasizes how people are not only shaped by their social and religious contexts, but in turn shape those contexts through their practices. Children showed their agency through their participation and by negotiating and appropriating the worship content and social norms. During the worship, children's presence altered the worship space. Regularly, children performed responsible tasks. Children also influenced the decision-making surrounding worship through official procedures, like preparation and evaluation meetings, and informally through social structures, like when a parent shared their child's idea with other organizers.

Chapter 3 already illustrated that children influence adult roles: one Messy Church organizer explicitly linked her awareness of the children's creativity to her readiness to take on a facilitating role. Chapter 4 further described that children have their own motives for participating in worship.

The children valued embodied participation, activity, relationships, giving input, and well-organized worship. They expressed these values in words and through their participation.

These children's values proved crucial to the children's worship experience. For example, some children remembered the theme of a particular Messy Church service through the food they ate. The children's value of well-organized worship revealed that children are aware of their and others' performance. One girl even wanted to help coordinate with the various worship leaders to prevent miscommunication between them. The values related to embodied participation, relationships, and giving input together illustrate that it is important for children to have safe spaces where they can practice their liturgical-ritual skills. A parent recounted that she practiced participation in the Lord's Supper at home with her active five-year-old. Thus, while their values show that children experience worship differently from adults, those same values illuminate that children want to feel part of the worshipping community.

From a theological perspective, children's agency rests on the interdependence of adults and children: adults should give children opportunities to take responsibility and participate in the worship performance, design, planning, and evaluation. The analysis of Chapter 4 underlined that children's agency was much more evident when the adults around them recognized their agency. Whenever children felt they could have a say in the faith community in general and in the liturgy in particular, their input grew. For example, Your!Church, a locally developed service that children of eight to twelve helped prepare and perform, gave children a sense of ownership. The regular meetings encouraged children to share their ideas and opinions and adults to listen to those. These children could literally voice how much they valued being able to share their ideas and opinions and take responsibility, even when they did not use that possibility.

Various researchers have remarked that children experience ritual through their bodies and senses, which was a key reason to engage with the field of material religion.

#### 4.4 Materiality

Chapter 5 wondered: How does materiality play a role in worship with children? During the analysis, materiality proved too broad. Therefore, the question became, How do adults and children manage the sounds of children in worship? The chapter combined concepts from liturgical studies and material religion to reflect on worship with children. The concept of liturgical-ritual space, coined by Barnard, Cilliers, and Wepener, was reframed as a lived-in or Thirdspace, where imagined space and material space intertwine and comprise 'something more'. Liturgical-ritual space theorizes that a place becomes a space of worship when people use it with a sense of imagination and anticipation.

The analysis of children's sonic participation in two pre-Reformation church buildings brought out how sounds that children made contributed to the creation of a liturgical-ritual space. At the same time, people interpreted sounds differently. In one congregation, the trained children's voices gave a

lighter sound to turning points of the liturgical year. Some of the children's parents felt that the service revolved around the children's performance (in its connotation of a concert performance). However, the cantor contended that the children had a service task. In the second congregation, listening to the Word characterized the liturgy. The small sounds that children made during an evening service sustained rather than distracted from that contemplative spirituality. During the morning service, the young children's attendance of Bible class reinforced the quietness. At the same time, precisely the children's louder sounds caused discussion about the tension between 'not correcting, letting go' and maintaining the quietness; thus, between inclusivity and the spirituality characteristic of this congregation.

The chapter listed various implications of the analysis. First, people, the material, and the imagined are closely intertwined: the creation of a liturgical-ritual space depends on people who enter and use a material environment with anticipation and imagination. Second, studying sound gives access to *affect*, conceptualized by Jon Bialecki as the bodily response that precedes emotion. Third, the contestation of children's sounds brings out power dynamics: children often self-regulate the sounds they make but may make louder sounds on purpose. Fourth, also in Protestant contexts, sound, besides its content, also creates emotions and spiritual experiences. The affective qualities of sound teach children how to interact with an environment where they may encounter God.

The topic of sound as it rebounds in a building resounded themes from earlier chapters, like power relations between adults and children and the relation between children's church and congregational worship. Adults tried to manage the quality and volume of the sounds that children made in worship and debated the interpretation of those sounds. Conversely, children showed their agency in how they attempted to regulate their sound production and made more disruptive sounds. Also, how the space is arranged and how people move in the space has theological implications. For example, side rooms open up new possibilities for the worship that takes place there, like drawing from evangelical song repertoires and including more movement and interaction. The theme of theological implications of material and embodied aspects of worship returns in the following chapter.

## 4.5 Performing God

Chapter 6 answered the last sub-question: How is God performed in worship with children? This chapter started from the premise that in worship, people perform God: they act in ways that assume God's presence, pray to God, and talk about God. Who God is does not coincide with human performance of God, but worship may nevertheless reveal something about God.

The analysis included four practices: two services with children and two children's church-like settings. In the different performances, affective knowledge of God was emphasized and God's existence was discussed. God was performed as a God who loves, invites, resurrects, and helps. In all four practices, God was performed through story, ritual, and play.

Story, ritual, and play returned in the dataset as a whole, including the interviews with youth work professionals. Various interviewees reflected on how Bible stories could be made tangible for children. The theme of ritual highlighted a longing for new ways of being church. In recent years, various new formats for worship with children were introduced and developed locally. Play highlighted that children's play and the rules of liturgical play may be at odds. Exceptionally, during Church on Lap, a liturgical ritual with toddlers and preschoolers and their parents, the children's free play was embedded in the liturgical play. The way adults allowed children to play while inviting them to interact with the acts of worship helped perform God as inviting and accepting of children as children.

Chapter 6 illustrated that worship aimed at children often provides children with opportunities to bodily and verbally reflect on God and Bible stories. Like Chapter 4, it showed that children's presence impacts the social dynamics of worship, but also argues that children's participation highlights particular theological meanings in the performance of worship. The chapter concluded that the performance of God is contextual and target-group related, and results from the interaction between adults and children. Next to children's individual theologizing, scholars need to pay attention to how children theologize with others in the context of worship.

## 5 Further research

The presented data and analysis led to the following suggestions for further research. First, researchers could investigate non-congregational worship with children, like Christian camps or liturgical rituals at school, combining the perspectives of liturgy, ritual, and materiality. Second, future research could investigate liturgy and ritual in children's daily lives. Such research may aid further reflection on children's embodied theologizing. Third, on a methodological level, the increased awareness of children's agency calls for brave researchers who approach children as collaborators despite the challenges this poses. Finally, the focus on sound in worship leaves many topics open for study, like the sensorial aspects of worship besides sound and the question of how faith and environment shape each other.

Researchers and practitioners should take the following two discussion points into consideration. First, the debate about worship with children needs to focus on actual worship practices with children rather than dwell on normative or idealized concepts of worship. The current discussion about intergenerational worship seems to be at a dead-end. Various authors argue more or less the same thing while at the same time everyone interprets differently what exactly constitutes 'intergenerational worship'. It is often unclear what situation or practice authors condemn because of a lack of empirical descriptions. The way forward is empirical research that highlights children's agency. Not to nullify adults' needs, roles, or contributions, but to show that children's agentic participation is a mutual process that from a theological perspective, is the adults' responsibility to foster.

Second, scholars currently focus on how theology is translated to children and on children's theology and spirituality. Instead, the analyses in this research showed that theology is embedded in



the material environment, performance, and interactions between adults and children. This research illustrated the importance of doing qualitative research and paying attention to theology as an embodied performance. Researchers should pause, to first look around at the angle from which children see the world. Such ethnographic research validates that practical theologian Richard Osmer calls this research phase ‘priestly listening’.