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### **Make a joyful noise unto the Lord!**

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# **Make a Joyful Noise unto the Lord!**

## The Sound of Liturgy in the Wesley Methodist Church

*Mirella Klomp*

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### **1. Introduction and Research Question**

During my teens I dated someone who belonged to an orthodox segment of the Dutch Reformed Church. We went out for a little longer than a year, and during that time I used to go to church occasionally with him and his family. But those Sunday worship services invariably left me feeling depressed. This was not so much because of the doctrines proclaimed from the pulpit by the minister, although they were certainly different from those I had grown up with. My family belonged to the Lutheran Church, where hell and original sin received much less emphasis. But that was not the reason. Nor were my feelings of dislike triggered by the sight of the other churchgoers, even though many looked as if they were being punished. It had to do with something else.

When my boyfriend asked me why I had stopped going to church with him and his family, I remarked that I had come to dislike his church simply because their services sounded bad to me. They sang slowly, giving all the notes the same length, and the organist played far too loudly. The elder spoke in a plaintive tone when welcoming the congregation (which certainly did not make me feel glad I had come!), the minister's style of delivery was never less than elevated and could rise to an aggressive pitch during the sermon. When the sermon was over, the flock responded with a dejected coughing. I simply disliked the sound of their worship. It made me feel very uncomfortable, both physically and mentally. I could not stand it any longer.

A couple of weeks later, his mother informed me that I was no longer welcome at their home and that she did not consider me a suitable girlfriend for her son. Eventually, my boyfriend and I split up. And although there were other factors that contributed to the parting of our ways, the fact that I chose not to attend their church any longer was more than he and his family could accept.

This true story displays several important aspects about the sound of liturgy. It shows that sound plays an important part in people's perception and appreciation of liturgy. Sound can make people feel at home, but it can also make them feel uncomfortable or even turn them away from church. Second, it shows that people attribute meaning to liturgy and its sounds – meanings that are sometimes of crucial importance to believers. In addition, it illustrates the fact that sound is bound up with performance. Sound happens; it always implies some kind of action, even though the actual sound performance of liturgy differs from one church to the other. Third, the story suggests that the sound of liturgy corresponds in one way or another to the dominant theology of the celebrating church. Finally, it shows that the sound of liturgy says something about the community's cultural-anthropological and theological identity.

Because the sound of liturgy obviously carries a great deal of information, it is an interesting starting point for the investigation of the liturgy of immigrant churches. Moreover, it offers the opportunity to focus on the performance aspect of both sound and liturgy. In this article, I will map the sound of the liturgy of the Amsterdam Society of the Wesley Methodist Church, an African immigrant church. I will do so from a theoretical framework that is constituted by three important factors that appear to determine the field of study: liturgy, performance and sound. This leads to the following research question for this article:

*How is sound performed in the liturgy of the Wesley Methodist Church in Amsterdam and how does this performance relate to the incarnational character of liturgy?*

As we shall see, the sound of the worship services of this Ghanaian church is closely bound up with its physical performance: sound is embodied sound in their liturgy.

The article starts by sketching a theoretical framework and explaining the relevance of investigating the sound of liturgy. I will then elaborate on the research methods I used in the field and then describe extensively one of the worship services I attended in the Wesley Methodist Church. I will go on to map the sound elements that appear to be important and relate them to the way liturgy is performed in this church. Finally, I will conclude that sound and physical performance are closely intertwined in the entire liturgical event.

## 2. Liturgy, Performance, Sound

I have already mentioned the three areas that determine the field of study. The story with which I began this article shows that these areas are mutually related. However, I consider it important to elaborate on them before actually describing what I found in the field. In order to clarify the particular focus of my study, this section will discuss each area briefly.

*Liturgy* is understood in this article as an order of Christian rites and symbols (Barnard, 2000). This definition reflects the shift of the discipline of liturgical studies towards more cultural-anthropological dimensions of Christian liturgy. This approach takes into account the fact that liturgy is not only a theological affair but includes all kinds of dimensions, forms and aspects: cultural, social, anthropological, historical, corporeal, musical, etc. Moreover, this approach takes into account the fact that liturgy is always celebrated in a specific context by a particular group of people in a specific culture, in a particular time and at a specific place. Human nature is not the same at all times and in all places and we should not expect liturgy to be. Postmodernism claims that there is no such thing as an ‘essential human nature’: we all live in a specific culture that we form and that, in turn, forms us. Likewise, we cannot speak of universal liturgy: how liturgy is celebrated is always culturally determined.

In order to do justice to the dynamic relation between liturgy and culture, I choose to use the theological concept of incarnation. According to Tex Sample

the most important teaching in the Scripture on the Incarnation comes in the first chapter of the Gospel of John where it says: ‘the Word became flesh and lived among us’ (v.14). The word *lived* is an English translation of the Greek word *skēnoō*, which literally means “pitched tent”, that is, that the Word became flesh and “pitched tent” *with us*. (Sample, 1998, p. 105)

Sample states that incarnation points to God becoming flesh and participating in the indigenous practices of the culture of Jesus’ time. If we consider liturgy to be a place where the Word dwells with people, their way of celebrating liturgy is somehow related to the way their physical existence is culturally and historically ‘encoded’ and the way they themselves are socially constructed. These physical encodings – e.g. a worldview, the experience of life or the experience of the sacred – vary from time to time and from place to place. Sample (1998, p. 105) claims that ‘when so-called “traditional” churches are out of touch with the people who live around them, the problem is not that they are irrelevant, but that they are not incarnational’ (p. 105). If the sound of liturgy, which is obviously also determined by the physical encodings of those who are performing, is to be investigated, the concept of incarnational liturgy is promising.

*Performance* is another area that is involved in an investigation of the sound of liturgy. Although this term is currently used sometimes to describe how well a deodorant or car achieves its intended function or to indicate the returns of an investment or the achievements of speed skaters, the term originally referred to the presentation of a play, a text, a piece of music, etc. This is also how I use the concept in this study, i.e. as ‘the act of presenting something’ (Schillebeeckx, 2000, pp. 185-87). The very origin of the concept of performance lies in the completion of an act, a living through an experience (Turner, 1982).

Currently, liturgical studies consider Christian liturgy to be a ritual, i.e. a concrete pattern of ritual actions. This definition reflects one of ritual’s main characteristics: it does not exist except as performance. Without action, without actual performance or execution, there is no ritual – and thus no liturgy. Thus, liturgy is inextricably bound up with performance.

Performance always involves movement of the human body (verbal and non-verbal). This means that there is no liturgy without motion or, to put it another way: liturgy is always dependent on human gestural behaviour, which I consider to be the act of moving the limbs or the body as an expression of thought or emphasis. This gestural behaviour is characteristic of humans: they are after all ‘acting beings’, every human person is ‘an endless complex of gestures’ and humans ‘assimilate bodily the impact that this universe makes on them, and they display, bodily, adequate responses’ (Uzukwu, 1997, p. 2).

In liturgy, all kinds of movements are conceivable: from that of the vocal cords for speech or song to that of the body through playing an instrument, rhythmic hand clapping, swaying, etc. Body movement in liturgy is often accompanied by sound. In fact, liturgy always sounds, no matter how: speech produces sound, as well as singing or the ringing of bells. Even when liturgy is performed in silence, one can hear the sound of people taking seats, coughing or perhaps sighing. Thus, sound, performance and liturgy are inevitably related to one another. The way sound is performed in liturgy or, rather, the body motion that goes together with sound in liturgy depends on the (group) identity of the performers.

*Sound* is probably an area that needs clarification in order to make sense in relation to liturgy and performance. The concept is very broad: sound manifests itself in a variety of forms. In liturgy, music is probably one of the most recognizable manifestations in which people experience sound. Nevertheless, I have chosen to focus on sound, instead of music. With this choice I have taken recent developments in many of the disciplines that investigate music (e.g. the philosophy of music, the psychology of music and musical studies) into account: the familiar boundaries of the concept of music and its definitions are blurring.

During the last decades, descriptions of music have gone from fixed to open specifications of musical features: pieces of music are considered to have certain qualities. Scholars from various disciplines found a common view of music insofar as music is described in terms of sound or, to be precise, ‘humanly organized sound’ (Blacking, 1973, pp. 3-31). Music from an anthropological view can be defined as ‘meaningfully patterned sound that is analytically distinguishable from language, though the two are closely interrelated’ (Barfield, 1997, pp. 333). The blurring of boundaries becomes clear in the philosophy of music, where viewpoints have moved away from music as ‘tonal organization’ to ‘sound organization’, from ‘sound organization’ to ‘noise organization’, from ‘noise’ to ‘temporal’ and from ‘temporal’ to ‘spatial organization’ (Grove, 2001/19, p. 621). The psychological study of music – which investigates individual human musical thought and behaviour – also focusses on ‘sound’: activities concerning the perception and cognition of music relate to aspects such as the sensation of sound, as well as listening, performing, creating, memorizing, analyzing, learning and teaching (Grove 2001/20, p. 527). Musicology has been widening its scope considerably, now including the study of music as sound among its subjects. The discipline shows

a trend of increasing inclusiveness ... in which all conceivable sound from the most central (such as Beethoven) to the most peripheral (elevated speech, sounds of whales, birdsong, industrial noise, background sounds for mass media advertising, etcetera) are all appropriate subjects for musicological study. (Grove 2001/17, p. 431)

Obviously, there is more to study than merely pieces of music.

It is thus clear that, in the course of time, traditional definitions have given way to broader descriptions of the concept of music.

These three areas, which are mutually related, determine my field of research. I have elaborated on each of them because they influence my focus on the subject. Since I do not enter the field with a blank mind, it is crucial to clarify beforehand the theoretical framework from which I am starting. It influences my observations in the field.

### 3. Relevance and Methodological Considerations

The field of liturgical studies has a very long tradition of research on music, which has generally been based on the traditional concept of liturgical music (or church music) with its focus on genres, repertoires, and styles. This tradition was in line with the broader Protestant practice of liturgical studies, which has a long-standing tradition of examining liturgies as bodies of texts and language only, without paying attention to the ritual and cultural perspectives and to the way people deal with contemporary ritual offerings.<sup>1</sup>

I will leave this traditional practice aside, because the combination of a cultural-anthropological approach to liturgy and the up-to-date definition of music as humanly organized sound provide a way to new perspectives and insights on the ritual, cultural, and performance aspects of the sound of liturgy. My focus on the complete sonic process of liturgy includes the traditional concept of music but goes beyond that and comprises all sound (e.g. speech and handclapping). This approach takes into account the fact that music and speech are closely interwoven in liturgy. This has become particularly obvious with the arrival of so many immigrant churches that celebrate worship in a way that is very different from the celebration in the mainline congregations of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

Obviously, this new approach requires new research methods. The investigation of the sound of liturgy cannot be done successfully from the perspective of theoretical research alone: the research should at least include an empirical part in the form of participant observation and sound recording. I therefore took this principle to heart and observed (and by participating also performed) and recorded sound in the Sunday worship services of the Wesley Methodist Church in Amsterdam. These methods enabled me to observe and describe the actual sound of liturgy.

### 4. Description of a Worship Service

This is the description of the worship service on Sunday, October 22, 2006 in the Amsterdam Wesley Methodist Church. This Ghanaian congregation gathers on weekdays in a car park in Amsterdam Zuidoost, a district where about 95% of the church members live, but the space there is too limited for worship. Therefore, the community rents a church building from a local Protestant congregation in the eastern part of Amsterdam for their Sunday services. This church, called 'De Bron' (in English: 'The well'), is an impressive brick building that dates from the end of the 1930s.

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<sup>1</sup> In his inaugural address at the University of Amsterdam in 2000, Dr. Marcel Barnard called for an *aggiornamento* of the practice of liturgical studies (Barnard, 2000).

On October 22 I attended the worship service of this community for the fourth time. I arrived at the church around 12:25 p.m., some fifteen minutes before the service began. In the distance I could see a few Ghanaians coming. I entered the church and went into the room where the service would take place. There were about twenty to twenty-five people present at that time, but I knew from previous visits that more people would arrive within the next thirty minutes. A CD with African music was playing, with the volume fairly loud.

The room was quite large, with two aisles on each side, both separated from the centre aisle by five concrete pillars. Wooden benches were placed alongside the wall. Carpets the colour of sand covered the floor in the aisles; the centre aisle had a light-coloured wooden floor on which wooden chairs had been placed. At the back of the room were three tables, where the head of the church and the secretary have their small office, and papers, a small cashbox, and a washing-up bowl that would be used for the collection had been placed on these tables. The head of the church and the secretary were sitting behind the desk so they could take in everything at a glance. Seven or eight empty buggies were parked in a corner.

In the centre aisle, the chairs were placed in two sections, with an aisle in between. At the front of the church there was a podium, on which an altar table and a lectern were placed. During the service, the lectern was used and the communion table was just a place for the preachers to lay their papers on and which the minister sat behind. Two microphones on stands had been set up for the service. To the left of the communion table was a black grand piano, which remained closed during the worship service. Instruments and some ten plain black chairs for the choir had been placed in the left aisle. The instruments included an electronic keyboard, a drum set (consisting of a bass drum, 8-inch and 12-inch toms, a snare drum, a hi-hat and a crash cymbal), a pair of congas (tall, narrow, single-headed Cuban drums of African origin) as well as an electric guitar with a large amplifier, a large maracas with shells and no handle and a talking drum with a curved beater. There was also a table with a large mixing desk where the volume of the microphones was regulated.

I took a seat in one of the front rows, close to the band, the singing band and the church choir. They had not yet taken their seats. Ushers walked around handing out sheets that had the liturgy of this worship service printed on them. There was to be a special service today: the congregation would have its 'annual harvest thanksgiving service'. This explains why people were dressed traditionally and festively – more so than usual: several women were wearing colourful African dresses, with cloths draped around their heads like hats; men were dressed in either traditional clothes or three-piece suits.

Some thirty to forty people were now seated, while others were still walking around and chatting while waiting for the service to start. The members of the Wesley Methodist Church Choir and of the singing band, the minister of the church, Reverend Isaac Amoah, and one of the main lay preachers, lined up in twos halfway up the aisle for the procession. The choristers were wearing black robes and white surplices; the members of the singing band were dressed in pink (with a text stating that they were members of the National Union of Methodist Singing Bands printed on the clothes). The female members also wore white scarves on their heads, the minister wore a black robe with a green stole, and the lay preacher wore a three-piece suit.

A male chorister spoke in a modest voice: 'We begin this service in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. We sing MHB 671, CAN 223.' This was a song taken from the Methodist Hymn Book (which has been partly translated into Akan in a volume abbreviated as CAN). The organist – on the electronic keyboard rather than on the pipe organ situated high up at the back of the church – tried out several chords to introduce the melody of the song, struck some wrong keys but found the right chords in the end. The people that formed the procession started singing the first stanza of the song 'Sing Alleluia forth in duteous praise / O citizens of heaven, and sweetly raise / An endless Alleluia!' The procession followed the four-four metre by counting and walking in twos: taking a step on each first and third note. Consequently, they all kept perfect time and the same pace as well. Thus they proceeded neatly and approached their

seats. The organist accompanied their singing by heart (this might explain the wrong chords). During this first stanza, the people rose ‘on their feet’ one after the other, and when the choir was finished, the congregation began to sing (to my amazement) once again all six stanzas of the song. At least some members of the congregation did: others sang in Akan, the language spoken by the majority in Ghana. I was even more amazed when I discovered my neighbour singing the first verse six times!

When everybody took their seats, the church choir sang the introit, also taken from the Methodist Hymn Book. The congregation did not join in. After this, the minister briefly welcomed everyone in Akan and English. Then he and the congregation read the sentences and responses from the printed liturgy responsively.<sup>2</sup> From what I heard, I suspected that the people were not too familiar with these texts. But they sounded very ‘Protestant’, in the sense that they all spoke aloud, slowly and haltingly; they did not follow the rhythm of the text but recited these texts consciously and in a devoted way.

Then all sang the opening hymn, also taken from the Methodist Hymn Book: ‘Yes God is good – in earth and sky / From ocean depths and spreading wood / Ten thousand voices seem to cry: / God made us all, and God is good.’ Immediately after the second verse, the local preacher spoke suddenly into one of the microphones: ‘The last stanza!’ and all sang that stanza without skipping a beat. After three commandments, which were read responsively with a call for mercy, there was a time for ‘confession and assurance of pardon’. Although the printed liturgy said ‘Let us in silence confess our sins to God ...’, the minister left out the words ‘in silence’ in his call for confession. He started to confess his own sins aloud (which all could hear very well, because he was wearing a microphone), and so did all the others. Everybody was confessing out loud individually until the minister stopped speaking; then the people became silent. After that, the minister gave them the assurance of pardon. So far, the order of liturgy was clearly recognizable as a Methodist service.

Then a time of prayer began (‘Prayers of thanksgiving, intercession and petition’). There was an extensive call for prayer by the minister – who started in a normal speaking tempo and volume that gradually became more intense – moving almost imperceptibly into the prayer itself. This was partly because English and Akan alternated with each other quickly and effortlessly, partly because people started to pray out loud themselves immediately and already started to do so during the call for prayer. The minister prayed *ad lib* – as did everybody else – during these services.<sup>3</sup> The minister’s prayer gradually became louder (even increasing to a shout), more intense, more rhythmic and with a greater variation in tone. When the minister used words in repetition, the rhythm of his speech changed: from a normal speaking rhythm in ‘... so that our hearts may be right within Jesus ...’ to a different length pattern ‘... Lord, put us right! Lord, put us right! Lord, put us right!’ (rhythm: one quarter note, two quavers, one quarter note, in a three-four meter). Such changes in rhythm occurred for some ten to fifteen minutes. During this time, there was a constant flow of prayers that now became more intense and louder and then quieter again. The minister walked back and forth in the open space in front of the communion table; he moved his hands simultaneously upwards and downwards, so as to reinforce his prayers physically. People sat or stood, some folded their hands in prayer, but most raised one or both hands into the air, with outstretched or bowed arms. They often moved their hands backwards and forwards in order to give physical emphasis to their prayers. Some choristers stood with their face turned away towards the wall in the aisle or in the corner. Some had sunk to their knees and leaned with their elbows on their seats while they prayed.

Suddenly, in the flow of the excited and up-tempo prayer ‘*Spirit of the living God, take us, fully control our minds, our whole being, so that we will live the liberty, that come by your spirit into our mids!*’ and (I assume) the Akan translation of that, the minister shouted very loudly: ‘Move it

<sup>2</sup> These consisted of an extensive Trinitarian formula and the traditional doxology.

<sup>3</sup> In the four worship services that I attended during this project, I never saw anyone using set texts for prayer (except for the sentences and responses that I have mentioned above).

brother, breathe life in our spirit Lord, breathe life!’ I did not expect this, so it startled me. I was not sure whether he was speaking in tongues or ‘just’ praying very enthusiastically, but his tone suggested obviously that he was emotionally involved. After this, he fell back into the excited and up-tempo prayer of before. This time of prayer was then rounded off by an Amen that was stated three times responsively as follows:

Minister: *A-men!*     All: *A-men!*

After this, two lessons were read; the first in English by a female chorister and the second one in Akan by another female member of the congregation. Both lessons were concluded with ‘This is the Word of God.’ All answered with conviction: ‘Amen!’ and then repeated the ‘affirmation of faith’ in Akan. This was the Apostles’ Creed, which was said collectively rather slowly and without much difference in tone (timbre). This sounded somewhat obligatory and differed quite a bit from the way in which they prayed. The creed was also closed with a threefold Amen – which was expressed more loudly and more convincingly – in the way I have described above. But after the third Amen, the service continued:

Minister: *Jesus Christ,*

All: *the same yesterday, today and for ever more! A-men!*

(While all were saying this, the minister stressed this triple pattern physically by stretching out his hand to the left, the middle and the right)

Minister: *Alleluia!*

All: *A-men.*

Now the most animated part of the service began. The minister invited the Praise and Worship team ‘to lead us to bring our offerings and praise unto the Lord’. This specific Praise and Worship part of the service was clearly the richest and most diverse part when it came to sounds, rhythms, movements, gestures, postures. This is where the people live it up, where their own West African culture becomes most visible, audible and tangible.

At this point everybody stood up and started shaking hands, welcoming other people in the name of the Lord. This was a time of movement. The drummer started to drum a rhythm on the congas and was joined by the other drummer. The sound engineer opened up the loudspeakers even more (I now know why they are called *loud-speakers*). Two men and two women of the Praise and Worship team ascended the podium, and said something in Akan. Meanwhile, the guitarist started to play the melody of the first song, of which the chorus was: ‘We are together with him, come praise the Lord.’ Everyone who knew this song joined in in singing. To me, the melody sounded Western (it could have been an American pop song), and I took it to be gospel music. The form did not display any alternation (which I know is a feature of African music). However, the accompaniment on the congas made it somewhat African. This song lasted for only a few minutes.

The band took more than ten minutes for the second song, which was sung alternatively in English (chorus) and Akan (verses). This one was more upbeat, its melody more African (it did not sound logical to a European like me), its rhythmic pattern more layered, its tones more various. The one playing the congas was drumming as if his life depended on it. He used two hands – both flat and as cups – his left hand always on the left conga, and his right hand alternatively on the left and right conga. The singing band and other church members (mainly women) moved to the open space before the communion table to dance. They danced in a circle, each one following the other – in his or her own way – but still together and all in the same chain. The way they danced made me think of the call-and-response form of African music: when one woman suddenly leans backwards and the woman behind her does as well. They move back at the same time: no two persons bump into one another; even though they dance spontaneously, they dance together.



Most people who were dancing in front of the communion table and others who were still standing in front of their seats were singing and waving white handkerchiefs. Some women who were dancing were shaking tambourines. There were several people walking around, chatting with others. The minister, who stood on the left side of the podium, waved both hands, as if he was waving good-bye to someone. My neighbour told me that this was a way of giving honour to God. It became very clear that everyone was in their element. They clapped and looked and sounded happy.

The third song was truly African; it was in Akan, performed midway between speaking and singing; it had many glissandos. Its character was more modest and reflective: it was less up-beat and the accompaniment was quieter. It lasted for several minutes, and then the minister started to pray (in Akan). His prayer was almost as loud as the music that was playing and was characterized by honour and praise. The guitarist and organist accompanied his speech with some long tones and chords; the congregation – including the choir, singing band and other band members – started to honour and praise God out loud, following the minister. They waved their hands or handkerchiefs, sometimes sounds stood out, as when people exclaimed ‘Alleluia!’ or ‘Thank you Jesus!’ The minister ended the prayer alone by uttering some intentions after each of which the people indicated their assent by exclaiming ‘Amen!’

The Praise and Worship part was, as usual, closed by the family song that was sung twice (in two-part harmony), while small groups of six or seven people standing close to one another held hands: ‘We are heirs of the Father, we are joined with the Son, we are children of the Kingdom, we are family, we are one!’ During these last three words, the groups either raised their held hands or threw their arms around one another. Then the minister told the people to ‘pass on the shalom to your brother and sister’. They did so, and almost everyone did it wholeheartedly.

The singing band sang a multipart anthem in Akan, accompanied only by congas and the maracas (a percussion instrument). Meanwhile, the congregation was chatting, as I did with my neighbour: he told me that the band was singing a song belonging to the Ebibindwom – the traditional Methodist lyrics of the Fanti clan. When they finished, the people applauded.

The service continued with the singing of a song that is in the CAN hymn book but not in the MHB. It was in Akan and consisted of four verses and a chorus. The song was not too familiar apparently, since the people hardly sang the verses but compensated for this by singing the chorus exuberantly. The organist kept the tempo up by many punctuated rhythms. He also struck many wrong notes, but this was drowned out by the sound of the drummers. Besides it did not seem to make any difference. Again, the minister uttered a prayer that ended with the threefold *Amen!*

Then the sermon began. The minister began by repeating some verses from the first lesson (in my opinion, these verses could represent the theology of this community’s worship): ‘If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God. If we are in our right mind, it is for you.’ (2 Cor.5:13-21). I could hardly follow it, since most of it was in Akan. But I was struck again by something I had noticed before: some sound elements in the sermon were clearly different from those in the prayers and the music: the people laughed. The sermon was a place for humour, a place where the gospel was proclaimed and morality supported by means of anecdotes. The people responded with great laughter more than once during the course of the sermon. They uttered other loud exclamations that showed approval (‘Hmm!’ ‘Amen!’ ‘Yes!’), and the minister used interaction (e.g. the above-mentioned call-and-response form) to keep the people’s attention:

Minister: Are you with me? All: Yes!

Minister: O Alleluia! All: Amen!

Minister: Alleluia! All: Amen!

And at other times:

Minister: Hello! All: Hi!

The sermon ended with the same extensive formula that followed the Apostle's Creed (threefold 'Amen' followed by 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday', and so on).

Announcements followed and then people who were 'fellowshipping' that day for the very first time were kindly requested to 'be on your feet and introduce yourself, so that we know you, and know your name and welcome you especially'. This is a custom in this congregation and new people are always welcomed warmly with applause.

The offertory by the singing band followed. It was a joyful African song, accompanied (loudly) by organ, guitar, drum, congas, talking drum, and wood blocks. What came across was the rhythm, more than any melody or harmony. After this offertory, the first part of the service was finished.

The second part of this annual harvest celebration consisted of a special collection (the people had been saving money in envelopes during the past months), followed by a lively auction of food (yams, sweet peppers, cucumbers, olive oil, candies), candles, glasses of blessed water and so on. This was meant to collect money that, in the end, would enable the congregation to acquire its own church building in Amsterdam Zuidooost. This auction took place within the framework of the worship service, but its character was very different from the normal celebration. For this reason, I will not elaborate extensively on this part but only reproduce the (liturgical) order that the printed liturgy mentioned: Songs ministration (by the Methodist Youth Fellowship), introduction of co-chairpersons and supporters, song ministration (by a female member of the congregation), chairperson's response, presentation of envelopes by members – according to classes (songs by the singing band), songs ministration (by a male member of the congregation), appeal for funds (by one of the main lay preachers, who would be assisted by two other members of the congregation), songs ministration (by one of the sisters and the Praise and Worship team), chairperson's closing remarks, vote of thanks, dedication of offering, hymn (MHB10: 'Now Thank We All our God', with the 17<sup>th</sup>-century melody by Johann Crüger).

The service was closed, as usual, by a benediction and dismissal by the officiating preacher and a recessional hymn (at that time it was MHB 672: 'Saviour, blessed Saviour, listen while we sing; hearts and voices raising praises to our King'). During the prelude by the organist, the choir, singing band, minister and lay preacher again line up in twos halfway up the aisle. They began the recession, which occurred just like the procession except in the opposite direction. As long as they were in the room, the congregation sang along. But as soon as they entered the vestry, the sound died down. Everybody started talking and packing their things, ushers started clearing up; children – who had returned from the Sunday school that had taken place in the adjacent rooms – were looking for their parents and/or were running around; families were leaving the church building.

It is 4:50 p.m., the service ended four hours after it started. As I left the church, I felt elated. My ears were burning, however – as was usual after attending a worship service in this church. I was sure that I would feel the sound of this liturgy in my body for the next few days.

## **5. Sound Categories and Physical Performance**

When I try to characterize the sound of liturgy on the basis of participant observation and recording of sound, the first words that come to mind are enthusiasm, spontaneity, improvisation, dedication, rhythms, expressivity, informality, and messiness. On the basis of the description above, the sound of this worship service can be classified into four sound categories: the sound of prayer, the sound of singing, the sound of preaching, and the sound of response. I

will briefly discuss these categories and indicate how physical performance plays a part in these sounds.

### *The Sound of Prayer*

From the description above, I conclude that the sounds of the worship services in this church are nestled in a recurring pattern of the sound of prayer. From beginning to end, the sound of free, spontaneous and improvised prayer is interspersed throughout the other liturgical sounds. This sound of praying consists generally of a call to prayer (by the officiating preacher), which moves smoothly into actual individual prayers, said aloud by almost all present and which die out when the preacher becomes silent for a moment and then resumes. Sometimes, it is accompanied by instrumental tones and chords. The sound of praying is patterned by a fluctuation in loudness and intensity of the prayers. I experienced this sound during the service in various ways: sometimes soft and kind (at the beginning of each prayer), sometimes compulsory, especially when the preacher spoke excitedly and loud (almost shouting) and at a high tempo. In spite of these fluctuations, the repetitive element of the sound of praying carried me along and made me experience the entire liturgical event as one continuous flow. The fact that the overall sound of liturgy is embedded in the recurrence of prayer obviously influenced my sense of time when I was there: when I left the church it did not feel like I had been celebrating liturgy for hours on end.

The sound of praying in this worship service was accompanied by numerous movements, which consisted mostly of gestures with hands and arms: moving upwards and downwards, backwards and forwards. The people – sometimes very vehemently – stressed and/or reinforced their prayers thus. Without a doubt, people in this church use their bodies to perform their prayers.

### *The Sound of Singing*

Another category of sound is the sound of singing.<sup>4</sup> The most obvious feature of the sound of music in this liturgy is that it is performed loudly, even very loudly. In general, all singing – whether it is the choir, singing band or the whole congregation that is singing – is performed mezzo-forte to forte. One exception is the Praise and Worship team: they are the only singing group that uses microphones and, in combination with the amplified sound of the musical instruments, the sound of their singing is ranged between fortissimo and fortississimo. These are dynamics that make my ears burn. Few people seem to worry about keeping the pitch.<sup>5</sup> Apparently, no one cares: what seems to be more important is rhythm, and singing in a convincing, wholehearted, and enthusiastic way.

It is striking that everyone – except the church choir, which sings the hymns in multipart harmony – performs all music during the service without notes. The Methodist Hymns that are sung are taken from the Methodist Hymn Book (which most of the people who are present actually use), which contains only lyrics. Only the church choir has a choir version of the Methodist Hymn Book, where the music is notated in the Tonic Sol-Fa system. The musicians play by heart in any case. When people sing by heart (as is the case with the Praise and Worship songs and *Ebibindwom*), their hands are free. This enables them to move freely through the room, to clap their hands, to wave handkerchiefs, to sway, to dance, etc.

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<sup>4</sup> I am distinguishing songs from other sounds on the basis of their fixed melodic lines and their matching texts. I have deliberately not labelled this category as ‘the sound of music’ in order to avoid a relapse into the traditional concept of music that excludes spoken sounds of liturgy. I place the sound of singing on a par with the sound of preaching and praying and other sounds. This is also in line with the fact that African music is rooted in and derived from language: African sound should be understood as a spoken language, in particular with regard to its tonal and rhythmic contours and its metalinguistic function (Agawu, 1995, p. 31).

<sup>5</sup> I have noticed that many Ghanaians sing with their chest voice. They do this also with higher notes. The only way to reach high notes with one’s chest voice is to sing very loudly, but it is then more difficult to adjust the pitch.

Interestingly enough, body movements vary from song to song. When songs from the Methodist tradition are sung, all stand still and sing, without making any physical movements. Only during the procession and recession does the choir walk, but then it moves quite formally. This contrasts sharply with the movement of the people during Praise and Worship and traditional African songs: then they become animated, they move freely and dance in gay abandon. I have already indicated that, in my view, their West African culture becomes most visible, audible and tangible here. Apparently, this is not the case with liturgical elements that originate in the British Methodist culture. The crucial difference, I would say, is rhythm: contrary to the complex and multilayered rhythmic patterns of many African songs and relatively free rhythmic accompaniment of American gospel, most British hymns are characterized by four-four metre with quarter notes and half notes, and the absence of dotted rhythms.<sup>6</sup> This makes only stiff and formal movements appealing – cf. the way choir walked during the procession. Thus, the movements that accompany the sound of singing are obviously related to cultural background.

### *The Sound of Preaching*

The sound of preaching is interesting, because it is the only place where the congregation laughs collectively. As I have indicated above, the sermon is a place for humour. The way the sermon is performed makes me think of a theatre where people have come to see the cabaret performer. They sit still and watch and listen and sometimes laugh, while the performer walks back and forth and gives his undivided attention to the audience.<sup>7</sup> The message of the preacher is a serious one: it is the gospel that is being proclaimed, including all its moral implications for the church members' lives. He brings this message passionately, speaking out loud, sometimes using jokes and funny anecdotes. The congregation sits still, many people are leaning backward while taking in this message; their postures are informal and relaxed, they are clearly expecting the jokes to come. But they are always attentive (the preacher sometimes checks if they are simply by asking them), considering the fact that many people regularly affirm his message and statements with spontaneous exclamations (cf. the category below). It did not occur in the celebration described in this article, but in other services I attended in this church someone would sometimes stand up suddenly and start to sing an African song. I was told that they do so to affirm what the preacher just said. This spontaneous singing also caused affirmations by other church members, either by means of joining this person in singing or through exclamations.

### *The Sound of Response*

There is one more type of sound that I would like to categorize separately: the sound of response. This kind of sound can be heard throughout the worship service from beginning to end. It may take the shape of exclamations and interjections ('Yes!' 'Amen!' 'Alleluia!' 'Uh huh!') but also that of handclapping and other non-verbal responses. The sound of response is interspersed with the sounds I have grouped in other categories: during the praying and (as I indicated above) the preaching, and also – but to a lesser degree – during the singing people interject all kinds of interactions. These interpolations are uttered in different ways: one can distinguish between regular speech, emphatic speech and emphatic, stressed speech with a high level of emotional content, and non-verbal interspersions (this distinction is based partly on McGann, 2004, p. 281). They are performed by individual community members or by several

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<sup>6</sup> This is due to the fact that most of these hymns date from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the time in which the making of church music in Europe became the responsibility of amateurs instead of professional musicians. For this reason, complex rhythmic patterns disappeared in that period. As far as the brothers John and Charles Wesley were concerned, they preferred, with respect to their hymns, the gallant musical styles of their time, which was characterized by sober, rather miserable melodic schemes in boring harmonic structures (Valkestijn, 2001, 148-49).

<sup>7</sup> Gerard Lukken (1996, 134-66) has elaborated extensively on the similarities and differences between liturgy and theatre.

persons simultaneously or in sequence. The sound of verbal response is not always accompanied by gestures but can be joined by body motions, such as clapping hands or dancing.

## 6. Conclusion

Now that I have analyzed the sound of the liturgy of the Wesley Methodist Church, I will return to the research question:

*How is sound performed in the liturgy of the Wesley Methodist Church in Amsterdam and how does this relate to the incarnational character of liturgy?*

Before answering this question, I must mention that at this point the answer can only be tentative; further investigation of the sound of worship and its performance in this congregation will definitively yield more and other insights, simply because it will enable the researcher to discern more and other patterns of sound and of action.<sup>8</sup> It would also be very interesting to ask the performers what the sound of their worship and its performance mean to them, especially in relation to their perception of their faith (which is part of their physical encoding). That would contribute to a more extensive account of the relation of sound to liturgy's incarnational character.

Nevertheless, on the basis of the analysis in the preceding section, I can conclude that in this church sound is emphatically performed bodily: sound and body motion are closely intertwined during the flow of the entire liturgical event. Although different sounds are performed in different ways, they always go hand in hand with clear body motion. This plain physical performance of liturgy is typical of the African (Ghanaian) culture. Their liturgy obviously reflects their physical encodings. Thus, the liturgy, as performed by this congregation, is incarnational: the Ghanaian culture is embodied in their way of celebrating liturgy. This is how they praise and honour the Lord, how they confess their sins, how they bring their worries, disappointments, and fears before God: animatedly, actively, enthusiastically, spontaneously, rhythmically, and above all: physically.

However, the sound performance of the celebrants, which reflects their cultural background, is not the only thing that determines the incarnational aspect of liturgy: it is not fully and only dependent on human actions (the incarnational aspect of liturgy would in that case be reduced to the extent to which liturgy is embedded in a specific culture). Liturgy is also incarnational because there is something that precedes its human performance:<sup>9</sup> the Word that dwells with these people, that tabernacles with them, in the way they are physically encoded. It is because of the Word that pitches its tent in liturgy, every time it is performed, that these people celebrate their answer. They do so, by expressing their dedication to this Word physically. Thus, one could say that they enflesh Psalm 150 in their own way: this congregation truly makes a joyful noise unto the Lord!

[mogelijke illustratie:]

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<sup>8</sup> Further research on this aspect will be done in a Ph.D. study that I will do at the Protestant Theological University of the Netherlands under the supervision of Marcel Barnard.

<sup>9</sup> M. Barnard has elaborated on the concept of incarnation; cf. his contribution to this volume on pp.....



*Dancing in step with one another / [in unison?] during the Praise and Worship time. The minister is waving in order to honour God.*  
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