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*Published in:*

Journal of Youth and Theology

Published: 01/01/2021

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Holmes, S., Sandsmark, A., Sonnenberg, P. M., & Weber, S. (2021). Reflections on Ministry amongst Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic. *Journal of Youth and Theology*, 20(1), 82-106. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-bja10019>

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# Reflections on Ministry amongst Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The role and function of children's ministry during the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic is explored, including a comparison of observations from four different contexts: Norway, South Africa, The Netherlands, The United Kingdom. Theological reflection examines the emerging ecclesiologies, form and adaptation of sacramental practices and pastoral care of families during this time of crisis. This investigation acknowledges awareness that there were significant restrictions and consequent challenges facing churches during this time, causing implications on children's ministry that were unprecedented and frustrating for the Church on a global scale. Observations and recommendations are presented to aid churches globally in ensuring that children's ministry during such times of crisis is child-centred, values the child as

part of the body of Christ, fosters intergenerational role modelling and solidarity, and helps rather than hinders children on their spiritual journey.

### Keywords

children's ministry – international perspectives – covid-19 – pandemic – crisis – church

## 1 Introduction

This paper examines the nature of children's ministry during the initial stages of the covid-19 global pandemic (March to August 2020), exploring how it was impacted through this time of crisis. The Barna Institute reported that during the pandemic 51% of American churches were providing digital resources for families and children at home, although 31% were not offering anything for children. Anecdotal reports indicate that this statistic may be similar around the globe. However, thus far there has been limited methodical and robust research into the impact of covid-19 on children's ministry. Research efforts to date appear to focus more on adult-serving ministry rather than children's. Whilst there was an abundance of advice, support and resources disseminated for children's ministry during this phase of the pandemic, evidence of research into the area is limited. This paper therefore seeks to provide methodically collected, analysed and interpreted information about this sector during the early pandemic.

The varied local church response to this unplanned and abrupt societal lockdown will be explored, seeking to describe and understand the contextual elements of children's ministry during this period of the pandemic. Comparison of four contextual perspectives will occur, namely Norway, South Africa, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom; selected due to their cultural, societal and historical variations. The role and function of children's ministry during the initial lockdown period and subsequent restrictions will be examined in the light of established theories and practices, highlighting international variations. Conclusions will highlight the theological implications and challenges of children's ministry during this time of crisis, alongside recommendations to aid churches globally to provide effective children's ministry throughout such seasons.

In Norway schools and most of society was closed on 13th March. The Church of Norway (CoN) subsequently cancelled all church services and events, with the exceptions of funerals, weddings and baptisms. Children began returning

to school, amidst strict regulations towards the end of April and early May. At the end of May children's leisure activities restarted, including many children's church programmes.

In the Netherlands schools and most of society was shut down on 15th March. Hardly any gatherings were allowed, with the exception of funerals and weddings, with a maximum of 30 people attending. In mid-May children began returning to school and sport activities. From June more children's activities restarted within strict regulations, including churches. Many churches cancelled community singing, in line with church guidelines.

South Africa started its complete (Level 5) lockdown on 26 March 2020, entailing closure of all schools, churches, community organizations and even industry. Schools gradually opened in May, were shut down due to unequal resources and then re-opened in June. Private (non-government) schools remained open since April. Places of worship were opened (with a 50-person limit) in July, although most continued online.

The UK was placed into strict lockdown conditions on 23rd March, including the physical closure of schools and places of worship. Whilst there was some partial easing of restrictions during July, schools and places of worship didn't reopen until early September, under strict restrictions and infection control measures. However, even then many churches considered it not possible to operate physical meeting of children's groups within the confines of the Covid-19 risk assessments and restrictions.

## 2 Theological Framework and Methodology

As practical theologians, we asked key questions about how churches approached ministry to children (0–12 years old) during this time. Ecclesial practices were explored to understand some of the theological approaches of churches and raise considerations for the way forward when ministering to children in times of crisis (Browning, 1991; Heitink, 1999 & Osmer, 2008). According to Osmer (2008) ministerial experiences serve as teachable moments through which important skills and knowledge are gained. The descriptive-empirical approach aims to gather information by asking the question “what is going on” within the contexts being researched. Four geographical contexts are used as case studies within this methodological paradigm. The case study approach allowed the collection and presentation of detailed information about the selected countries, looking intensely at them, drawing conclusions regarding these specific contexts (Smith, 2007:34 & Yin, 2009). Each case study captured a representative churchmanship or denominational spread, according to the

specific context. It is recognised that there will have been other models and approaches ministering amongst children during this time, such as intergenerational church. However, in order to permit comparison of the case study contexts, the limits of the study were restricted to the distinct entity of children's ministry. We agreed on specific themes which intersected with and complement each other in relation to how ministry amidst children and families has been practiced during this time. In this sense, we reflected on children's ministry through the lenses of liturgical, diaconial and pastoral care practices, and the implications of this on an emerging ecclesiology within this sector.

The paper is written by four female practical theologians who are academics, mothers and involved in local congregational ministry, which inevitably creates some bias in selecting a methodology and focus for investigation. As reflexive scholars, we are aware of how all four contexts share lived experiences of loss, trauma and ministerial creativity, connecting with the encouragement from Bennett, et al (2018) for practicing theologians to take their lived experiences seriously. We share concern for the voice and role children play within their homes and churches during this time of global crisis, and we share a call to challenging how academic theology approaches children ministry discourses, whilst acknowledging that each of us finds ourselves in specific historical, social and ecclesial contexts in which ministry to children requires deep theological reflection. The mutual debate made us more aware of our contextuality. Behind each perspective "...there is a real person within commitments, passions, concerns, biases and values" (Bennett, et al, 2003:13). Sensitivity to each local context was at the forefront of investigations, and hence all data was gathered within the framework of local research ethics scrutiny and the operational parameters and restrictions, given the covid-19 situation.

Figure 1 displays the research techniques utilised in each case study. The Norwegian study gathered data from media and newspapers, personal experience in local church, and interviews of four children's ministry workers from two Church of Norway (CoN) congregations. The CoN was selected because it is the majority church in Norway (71% of the population were members in 2019). It is key to note that Norway is one of the most secularized countries in the world, where the church attendance and affiliation is dropping fast (Repstad, 2020).

The Dutch study gathered data from church social media and newspapers, personal experience, and by explicitly asking two church leaders. (One from a Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN), and the other from a non-denominational church; both with active children's work.) Furthermore, participation in a covid-19 themed PCN webinar, and consultation with Missie Nederland (Evangelical Alliance) provided further information.

The South African study sourced information through social media messaging of children's workers about their children's ministry during this time,

Case Study Country	Research samples
Norway	Social media, newspapers, personal experience in local church, and three interviews of four children’s ministry workers from two Church of Norway congregations using Zoom and phone. They were selected by asking the Church Council of the Norwegian Church for appropriate representatives. The congregations were located in different parts of the country: one was rural and one was inner-city.
The Netherlands	Church social media and newspapers, personal experience, and by e-mail correspondence with two church leaders about their children’s ministry these days: One from a Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN), and the other from a non-denominational church; both with active children’s work. Furthermore, participation in a covid-19 themed PCN webinar, and consultation with Missie Nederland (Evangelical Alliance) provided further information.
South Africa	Social media messaging of children’s workers about their children’s ministry during this time, and participation in three online webinars. A Whatsapp questionnaire was sent to 25 Christian youth workers. Focused broadly on Christian churches and did not select a specific denomination or faith tradition, so that responses were received from evangelical, reformed and Pentecostal churches.
The United Kingdom	Participation in three online forums and webinars organized by para-church organizations (each attended by approx 150 delegates). In addition, five online focus groups (each attended by five participants) were carried out concerning the UK children’s ministry during lockdown. Participants were from the Church of England, United Reformed Church, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and New Wine networks. Also awareness of relevant social media groups and networks.

FIGURE 1 The sampling which occurred within each case study

and participation in three online webinars. The South African study focused broadly on Christian churches and did not select a specific denomination or faith tradition, so that responses were received from evangelical, reformed and Pentecostal churches.

The UK study gathered data through participation in online forums and webinars organized by para-church organizations. In addition, five focus

1 Thanks to Martine Versteeg of Missie Nederland for reflecting with me and commenting on my drafts.

groups were carried out concerning the UK children's ministry during lockdown. Participants were from the Church of England, United Reformed Church, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and New Wine networks.

### 3 Observations and Reflections of Ministerial Practice with Children

The themes chosen are based on the above-mentioned liturgical, diaconal and pastoral care practices adopted in children ministry, examining how they each relate to ministry and ecclesiology. These topics comprise the most prominent features emerging from our data. Reflections and comparisons are made of the church's role in the nature of ecclesiology amongst children in each setting (incorporating liturgical, pastoral and diaconal consideration), adaptations of sacramental practices amongst children (liturgical), and the nature of support for children and their families during this time (pastoral and diaconal).

#### 3.1 *Emerging Ecclesiology with Children*

The pandemic necessitated a shift in the nature of church for children due to physical closure of churches. Breed (2016: 276) argued that "the way the church thinks about children is reflected in the way they minister to them". The modalities and resources used by congregations during this time are therefore scrutinised, examining their appropriateness according to theoretical and theological perspectives. This facilitates understanding of the lived experiences of Christian families during lockdown, the role of the church and insight into emerging ecclesiologies; namely how the nature and characteristics of ministry adjusted and adapted to the pandemic conditions.

##### 3.1.1 Church Provision for Children

Within all four of the countries the primary focus of children's ministry during the early stages of the pandemic was provision of Sunday worship activities for children who attended their church pre-pandemic. This reflects a desire within churches to continue to welcome and affirm children despite the challenging pandemic circumstances (Matthew 18:1–5). In all four of the contexts a broad range of content was produced online, whilst some churches delivered physical resources, such as workbooks, devotions, activity sheets and craft materials. The online content was provided through pre-recorded and live opportunities, and sometimes a blend of the two. Whilst churches desired to meet the child's spiritual hunger through online means, it became clear that there were significant challenges associated with this. Analysing online opportunities prior to the pandemic, Hunt (2019) highlighted that despite young people engaging

a great deal with technology, they often feel emotionally and spiritually disconnected. Whilst his insight is regarding young people, our observations of children in the four countries indicate that the use of technological means with children is equally challenging and does not necessarily equate to connection with church. Some recent studies address 'church online', such as Cloete (2020) and Hutching (2017), who provide theological reflections, mainly about community formation. Cloete cites Campell's explanation that digital religion is 'a technological space where online and offline religion become mixed and blended spheres', which is in line with her understanding of online and offline communities as complementary and integrated (Cloete, p.264). Within Children's ministry we notice that aspects such as agency matter in reflecting on digital religion. Not all young children have access to online religion themselves and churches reported that online children's ministry is very difficult both in terms of participation and interaction. Nevertheless, there are also examples of children stimulating parents to watch with them. In general, though we observed that online children's ministry requires a creative offline presence to enable it to flourish.

Another challenge is that children's ministry programmes seek to enable a religious experience, rather than simply knowledge transfer (Court, 2013). This reflects the notion that there is greater value in a children's ministry which operates within a "hospitality paradigm" than an "educational paradigm" (Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 2013). Whilst contemporary models of education are much more experiential, it is true that there is a distinct difference between education and children's ministry. An approach which focuses more on hospitality ideals would support the more holistic view and experience of church. Whilst Fryar (2018) found that online courses may indeed have the capacity to foster spiritual growth, the courses he examined were flexible, interactive and personalisable. Adoption of such a flexible and interactive style may therefore be necessary in order to facilitate greater effectiveness of children's ministry in subsequent stages of the pandemic.

Many churches reported disappointment that some children had not engaged with online content, and sometimes assumed that the reason was a lack of interest in faith activities. However, Ratcliff and May (2004) highlighted that children have the capacity for connection with God from an early age, and it merely requires facilitating and supporting. Indeed, Berryman (2013) asserted that adults frequently overlook the "owned faith" that children have from the start, and require support to greater maturity through discipleship. Such support would therefore be more effective and engaging if it is personalised to the child, rather than generic since the personal relationships between



the Sunday School leaders and child are highly valuable and should be utilised as part of the discipleship experience (McMillon & Edwards, 2000; Kinnaman, 2011). Individual attention and relationships are crucial to help children discover their identity and uniqueness in Christ. The fact that much of the content provided during lockdown was generic, and not consistent with this notion may be detrimental to the spiritual health of the children involved. Indeed, Gough (2019) emphasised the need to form meaningful relationships in order that the 'Good News' may be shared most effectively. Yet this relational aspect of children's ministry was greatly challenging in each of the contexts due to local covid-19 restrictions.

### 3.1.2 Relational Connection

The restrictions in each case study resulted in isolation and disconnection of children from their faith community. Without more in-depth investigation the degree of impact that an absence of physical meeting has had on the child's sense of belonging, feelings of acceptance and togetherness is uncertain (Sharma, 2011). Nevertheless, anecdotal reports and observations revealed that the ethos of belonging was significantly affected through no longer physically assembling. This is in stark contrast to the sense of intimacy within the church family communicated by the Greek word 'koinonia' (Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 2013). Empirical observations prior to the pandemic highlighted that the ability to depend on church family produces higher levels of spiritual and emotional well-being (Freeze & DiTommaso, 2015; Ngenye, 2018). If this connection with church family is not possible, it may impact the child's long-term spiritual and emotional well-being (Eaude, 2009), and raises uncertainty of the function of church during such a situation. Within the four countries, the effectiveness of churches to achieve this authentic community interaction for their children was variable, and indeed usually very poor. The implications for this in the long-term are significant, in terms of both their child's spiritual well-being and their faith formation. It is proposed that further investigation is required regarding how the church can more effectively foster a sense of koinonia amongst children during times of crisis and physical disconnection.

Our empirical data revealed differing experiences of Christian families during this time, sometimes feeling that their child's faith was aided and supported during lockdown, and sometimes this was not the case. Jesus' command in Mark 10:13–16 to not hinder children, but to let them come to him, presents a great challenge when face to face gathering of churches is no longer possible. Whilst many UK families described an overriding feeling of missing physical

contact with their church community, some reported that online services were easier to access than physical church had been, indeed significant numbers stated that they were previously prevented from accessing physical Sunday School regularly for various reasons. Hence, the newly established online provision catered well for their needs. This demonstration of greater inclusivity provided through online provision is encouraging (Harris, 2015), however across the four contexts, there were varied levels of contact and engagement.

One church in Norway reported that initially it was the parents that were taking the initiative to access the online resources, but after a while the children started to ask their parents to watch the broadcast with them. In contrast, UK churches reported strong initial enthusiasm from families for online Sunday School provision but as lockdown progressed, this enthusiasm decreased and online participation often reduced. This decreasing engagement was also evident in the other countries. It was evidently due in part to fatigue of online platforms and methods within families but also reflected the fact that as lockdown measures lifted gradually, alternative activities became available for families to take part in. It may also indicate that due to the unplanned nature of the pandemic and consequent urgent response by churches, the form of children's ministry that was possible did not meet the needs of the children. Whilst acknowledging the enormous pressures upon churches during this time, Jesus' call to not hinder children in their spiritual walk encourages churches to examine their provision and consider whether it is helping or hindering children. Widespread disconnection of Christian children from church in each of the settings indicates that such reflection is required. Gough (2019) encouraged churches to adapt contextually and relationally in order to meet the spiritual needs of children in their own setting. This is therefore an ongoing challenge for the Church in the season ahead.

### 3.1.3 The Place of the Child in the Faith Community

A widespread approach in all four countries was to provide distinct online sessions for adults and children. There were exceptions to this, whereby churches included worship opportunities for adults and children alongside each other, often as part of the same service. However, in the settings where distinct opportunities were provided, the consequence was that intergenerational visibility was removed, and may have resulted in children feeling disconnected from the adult community, which may be detrimental for generational faith transmission (Bengtson, 2013). It also contrasts with the notion of the body of Christ; one body of many parts. Indeed, Breed (2016: 291) pleads that as the body of Christ, "all children in the congregation should be guided to continuously discover their gifts and to understand that God placed them in the congregation as

people who are needed, just like God created the human body with body parts that each has its own purpose.” There was not much evidence of this reported by participating churches, indicating that it was not at the forefront of thinking during this time. In fact, the reality was that in the majority of cases adults were producing and presenting the online offering, with little or no input from children. Whilst this largely reflects the challenges of the pandemic situation, often forcing churches to operate within parameters they would not usually prefer, there were also many exceptions to this in each of the countries. Some churches explained that content had been pre-recorded by children for inclusion in the adult service. Some provided options to enable families to approach this in their preferred way, whether separately or together. In one UK church the entire video was presented by children from the church, although this was an exceptional case. Similarly, one church in Norway explained that the children took turns to record the liturgy in their own home, for inclusion in subsequent sessions. In the Netherlands the online worship videos at one church included the creative art of children. Such inclusion of children demonstrates that they are truly valued within the body of Christ, and have a voice within their church. In this vein, rather than being treated as passive recipients, children are viewed as active partners in the community (Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 2013). It is valuable that this notion was evident in some settings, even during this time of crisis, rather than reverting to adult-led scenarios.

### 3.1.4 Faith in the Family Context

The balance between the responsibility of the nuclear family versus that of the faith community to nurture a child's faith is an ongoing theological discussion, and required revisiting during this pandemic context. Deuteronomy 6 conveys the need for Christian faith transmission to be interwoven into daily life, making it more practicable for parents to take on this responsibility. The responsibility of parents in this role is widely encouraged in order to ensure spiritual vibrancy in Christian households (Barna, 2019; Hill and Frost, 2018; Turner, 2014). However, often there is heavy reliance upon the church to fulfil this role (Mark, 2016). The physical closure of churches highlighted the ongoing debate about the juxtaposition of these two entities and the level of input that each should have on a child's faith journey (Barna, 2019). During lockdown, there was a lot more emphasis placed on parents and families to support their child's faith journey in each of the four countries. However, it is evident that many parents feel ill-equipped in this regard (Mark, 2016). Some churches expressed their desire to equip and support parents in this task throughout physical church closure. Investigation of the extent to which this happened indicated that it was limited and variable. Within the South African context,

some churches produced devotional tools to assist families in leading their children. In the UK and Dutch setting there was a sense of this, whereby many para-church organisations were generating and promoting copious resources to encourage and facilitate faith in the home context, reflecting a desire to promote and support faith in the family although this focus was not always replicated within the local church context. In Norway some churches reported an example of supporting family faith through pre-recorded online sessions. Dutch churches reported that liturgical elements from the local church or para-church organisations were adopted in some homes, although there were many families struggling with home liturgy and many did not access externally produced materials. Our observations indicated that churches focussed more on producing content to disciple children, so that parents were often encouraged to be agents of providing the content to the child, but it was much less common for churches to equip and empower parents to actively take responsibility for this aspect themselves (Guroian, 2001; Strohl, 2001; Thompson, 1996). In many cases, there was a sense that the child's faith development was "on hold" until churches could return to physical meeting, prompting many settings to place an urgency on restarting gatherings to serve this purpose. This raises questions about the role of the church as the pandemic continues, as to how they could more effectively equip and empower parents in this task. This would equate to a shift in viewing the child as a distinct entity, to viewing the family as a micro church (Turner, 2014).

### 3.2 *Adaptation of Sacramental Practices*

The practice of Eucharist in churches during the lockdown has been varied. This also relates to a spectrum of theological considerations. Some traditions postponed the Eucharist, in other churches the priest celebrates, and there were churches that advised people to take bread and wine in their homes, whilst others celebrated together with the small group present in churches. Participation of children in the eucharist did not get particular attention during this six-month period in any of the case study countries. In some churches there are age restrictions on partaking. And churches that decided to postpone Eucharist for the community postponed it for all, so youth does not get particular focus then. In some settings, families were encouraged to practice the Lord's Supper at home, but as said this does depend on theological considerations concerning this sacrament. We decided to focus on the sacrament of child baptism and child dedication because it prompted significant discussion during this time and directly relates youth ministry. Within the South African data, baptisms were not deemed to be the most urgent issue during these six months, and there were limited requests for baptism or dedication.

One reformed congregation noted that there were contingency plans in place should a minister need to visit a child born ill. Similarly, in the UK setting, infant baptism or baby dedication did not seem to be a priority within the majority of families and church contexts during this period, although as restrictions eased there was more interest. For almost five months, infant baptisms could not take place, except in exceptional circumstances due to the physical closure of places of worship. Some baby dedications did occur remotely or during online meetings, but the majority were simply postponed. In contrast with this, in Norway although most of society closed down initially, including church services and events, this excluded baptisms, which continued in some sense throughout all stages of the lockdown in Norway. This approach connects with the Church of Norway seeking to alter the downward trend of people being baptised and attending church prior to lockdown (Johansen 2020), meaning that it was deemed essential to continue offering baptism during the pandemic. Nevertheless, most congregations did see a decline in people asking for baptism initially although once lockdown measures relaxed, including allowing gathering for private parties and dinners, the churches had increased baptism requests, resulting in many churches holding up to four services every Sunday (with some even on Saturdays) to accommodate the requests. In the Netherlands there was hardly any baptism in March, April and May. In early May, the PCN adopted the use of a pole with a Jacobs shell to facilitate baptism, and most churches restarted baptisms once restrictions were eased in June, and even more in July. Most churches did not use the Jacobs shell, one of the reasons for this is that the government put ministers on the list of professionals that need physical contact for their profession. The baptism practice during the restrictions outlined above was surrounded by much debate. In each of the case study countries, there was little disagreement with the government guidelines, which were accepted as necessary to support wider efforts to limit virus spread. Nevertheless, there was discussion regarding the practical outworking of these parameters. Differing church traditions and theological voices explored its necessity for salvation. Furthermore, in other times of crisis or in the missionary field, baptism has sometimes had to wait, although some church leaders expressed that baptism is particularly crucial during times of crisis, as a sign of being touched by God. Its mark of initiation into the Church (1 Corinthians 12:13) was expressed as valuable by many churches, especially at a time when physical meeting of church is restricted. This aspect particularly focussed baptism practice in the CoN, as explained above. Whilst the official guidelines did not include much pastoral consideration of the impact for families of postponing baptism, such consideration was

evident at a local level, with many churches reporting regular contact with families who were awaiting baptism, seeking to provide both spiritual and practical support.

Once lockdown eased slightly and baptisms became possible, the restrictions on numbers attending caused issues, since particularly in the UK and Norway baptisms are celebrated in a momentous way, often akin to a wedding celebration (Johanese 2020). It is clear that baptisms are a very different experience if only the minister and nuclear family can be present. Whilst McKnight (2018) extolled the importance of family in a child's spiritual formation, he emphasised the role of the church in nurturing children into faith. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer (1963) argued that infant baptism without the church community is an abuse of the sacrament and betrays the child's spiritual welfare. Such a notion is however exceedingly challenging during covid-19 enforced restrictions, and requires the church to re-evaluate its role, regarding how the family may be supported spiritually and practically during times of social distancing.

### 3.3 *Caring for Children and their Families during Lockdown*

It was evident that children's ministry had been much broader than provision of discipleship content during the pandemic, necessitated by varied impacts on children and their families. The pandemic highlighted significant levels of poverty and inequality, particularly concerning education. Alongside this, churches became aware that children were experiencing loss in a variety of ways, such as bereavement, loss of socialisation and economic loss. Supporting children through bereavement was at the forefront of much pastoral care, although the sense of children's loss in these case study countries appeared to be much broader. Churches in each of the case study countries reported that these experiences of loss resulted in complex pastoral needs within children's congregations. Indeed, it was frequently expressed by ministry leaders in all of the countries that they found it challenging to know how they could best support children through these potential experiences of loss, particularly given the pandemic restrictions.

#### 3.3.1 Supporting Children in Experiences of Loss

At the commencement of lockdown, there was a surge of information and resources distributed by UK church and parachurch organisations to support children through times of grief, since it was anticipated that this would form the primary need. However, it became apparent that whilst this was a component of pandemic children's ministry, it was not an overriding need. Mercifully in the UK only relatively small numbers of children experienced the loss of

someone close due to the Covid-19 virus during this initial phase. However, in South Africa many children lost grandparents. Many of these deaths were related to hunger and poor health provisions.

The most visible and highly profiled aspect was loss of education due to widespread physical closure of schools. Schools were fully closed in The Netherlands and Norway for two months, in the UK for over five months, and in South Africa intermittently for three months. Sadly, due to the ill preparedness and lack of government support for schools, some children in South Africa had still not returned in September. The impact of these closures is thought to increase with increased length of closure. For example, it is projected that the closures may have put children a full school-year behind their usual learning progress (Müller and Goldenberg, 2020, p.12). This was compounded in some cases due to lack of access to online learning for some children. Furthermore, there was acute awareness within the UK that the impact of school closures on lower-income families was far higher. There were similar observations in the Netherlands, particularly amongst asylum seekers. However, although this was a widespread and prevalent issue in the three European case study countries, churches did not appear to play a significant part in bridging this gap of educational loss, since educational professionals took responsibility for this. In contrast, churches had more of a role in the South African context, where ministry leaders engaged in preparing physical school workbook packages and food packages for the poor families as their core form of ministry during this time.

Another key area of loss was that of socialisation opportunities with peers and access to the child's support network, whether that be extended family, family friends or professional services. The short-term impacts of this were reported as being feelings of isolation and loneliness. However, the longer-term implications are yet unknown. A strong desire was expressed by churches to play a role in overcoming this loss of socialisation for children, although the majority of churches reported frustration at the barriers presented by covid-19 restrictions. Many churches utilised phone calls or zoom calls to connect with families, although these modes were reportedly more effective with adults than children. As restrictions eased, face to face visits sometimes took places, although again these came with many restrictions and consequent challenges amongst children.

### 3.3.2 Economic Impacts

Churches in all contexts reported awareness that their congregation and local communities contained families with financial or relational problems,

connected with the investment of churches in Food Banks. The economic impacts of covid-19 were significant but were less within the European countries than South Africa due to the pre-existing context. Whilst there was significant economic downturn in these countries, the existence of a welfare system (of varying forms in different countries) contributed to the well-being of children and families facing hardship, although it did not completely eradicate poverty and the related impacts. The governmental support provided in The Netherlands and UK prevented immediate job losses, although in the longer-term this may yet occur. In the UK context, there was much awareness and consideration by the government, local authorities and churches regarding the economic disparity within the UK population, and the impact of this on children's health, well-being and education. Many churches focused substantial efforts on shopping for vulnerable members of their local community, cooking and delivering meals for those who were isolated and running food banks to provide produce for those in poverty.

In South Africa, the economic impacts were extreme and led to many losing their jobs in an environment with a pre-existing high level of unemployment. In turn, this resulted in loss of basic services like food and shelter for many families, compounded by lockdown restrictions prohibiting people from going out to find food. Prior to the pandemic, about 150,000 South Africa children were believed to be living in child-headed households, with many orphans and vulnerable children becoming the family's main breadwinners (Smit, 2016:9). This situation is then exacerbated by the fact that caregivers were lost, resulting in losing access to social grants, education and to whatever health care may have been available. Indeed, there are enormous challenges of poverty, inequality and unemployment, with devastating effects on children. Furthermore, there is the lasting legacy of 'a lost generation' resulting from apartheid and the need for the struggle, a generation without much education and training, without employment and adequate skills, largely without vision for the future (Smit, 2016:7). Many families faced stress as a result of poverty, which may result in emotionally distant, harsh and inconsistent parenting being more likely (Ward, Makusha & Bray, 2015). South African churches sought to develop outreach strategies to help poorer parents and children, such as soup kitchens for children once a week. The South African Council of Churches (SACC) put out a statement calling on churches to pay special attention to the needs of poor congregations, which mostly serve communities with no running water, and no easy access to sanitisers, in order to meet the requirements of these operational standards. This statement included churches supporting the education sector of which children are most at risk.



### 3.3.3 Identifying Individual Family Needs

Mercer (2015) highlighted the need for contextual strategies of care for traumatized children. Consequently, against the backdrop of these macro-level impacts, there was a wide range of experiences at micro (individual family) level. Ministry leaders in each country were acutely aware that families had lost their support structures as a result of lockdown restrictions and were frequently frustrated as they struggled to fill this void. Churches often reported awareness that sadly, some children were more vulnerable to domestic violence during this time. Such violent and unsafe living conditions were intensified as a result of not having the extended support network families usually had in the form of school teachers, social workers, children's ministry workers. Furthermore, church leaders were also working from a distance, so had less contact with families. "Rather than being welcomed in a safe, protecting and secure world, children find themselves defined as vulnerable, as defined by threat and fear" (Smit, 2016:26). This fear can become the norm for children from broken homes. Conversely, well-resourced and intact families experienced the lockdown as a time of rest, reconnection and family time. This polarisation of lived experience caused an incredible challenge for church pastoral care. Churches in all of the countries reported that supporting families within these dynamics was incredibly challenging. This was particularly heightened in the South African context, where the complexity of caring for children facing loss appeared to be a reality before their country's lockdown. As the pandemic continues, churches therefore need to explore ways of ministering to these fears and empowering children to live in the realities of suffering beyond their personal control.

### 3.3.4 Adult vs Child Focus

Our observations indicate that the role and voice of children differs depending on the context in which they find themselves. In the Netherlands and Norway, the dominant image of Covid-19 was that it was an adult problem, since the risk was reported to increase with age, particularly over seventy years old. The consequence was children's activities being available earlier than adult ones. This contrasts with the UK approach of opening up most other sectors of society before schools and children's leisure activities, meaning that children's socialisation was greatly affected for over five months. Despite constant news reports of children at less risk of contracting the Covid-19 virus, children's leisure activities and also children's reintegration into church has not been at the forefront of most conversations. In fact, most places of worship argue that it is for children's protection that these places do not open. More broadly, there has been much concern

voiced by both church and secular sectors about the mental health and emotional implications of lockdown on children, particularly in families where relationships are strained and abuse may be occurring behind closed doors. Varying resources from the South African government and international children's ministry resources have been focussed on supporting these families.

### 3.3.5 Pastoral Approaches

These varied experiences of loss were connected with a growing awareness that children were greatly impacted emotionally through what they had witnessed, heard about or experienced. Our analysis concluded that something changed in their child biographies during this time, and the role of churches in supporting children's navigation of these experiences is key. Yet, many churches reported feeling ill-equipped in pastorally supporting children through these experiences. Churches often included prayers of intercession for families during these hard times due to financial problems, difficult or broken relationships, and due to specific difficulties of some children, such as the challenge of dealing with the situation through the lens of autism. According to Louw (2008), children are often neglected pastoral care due to the mistaken idea that they are so adaptable that they do not have crises until their teens. He says that many ministers find it difficult to communicate with children and usually do not know what to say to children. Nash et al (2015) note that one way of overcoming this challenge is to care for the parents of the bereaved child. In this way the child's support system is prioritised realising that it plays an immense role within the child's lived experience. Despite children's greater dependency on adults meaning that they are more vulnerable to harm, both physically and psychologically (Mercer, 2015), Breed observed that children can easily be overlooked when ministering in a congregation (Breed, 2016, p.283). Our observations in each of the countries revealed that children were often overlooked during this phase, although there were inspiring exceptions to this. Many children and youth workers were very creative in ways of contacting the children and families who attended previously. Where they were overlooked, this was not necessarily due to lack of desire to meet the needs of children but frequently due to not knowing how this could occur within the confines of the situation. Where it was possible, informal support and encouragement occurred predominantly through phone calls, zoom calls, home visits and delivery of "goody bags", containing a range of activities and resources to aid the child's exploration of Bible content. Weekly Whatsapp messages and online children's ministry videos was the main focus for most churches in South

Africa. Strict Children Protection laws about contacting minors virtually were also considerations.

Whilst churches in all of the countries sought to minister amongst families in great need, this has been greatly restricted since they are only able to contact those who wish to be contacted, or were connected with the church previously. Indeed, many UK churches reported that they found outreach work to be greatly impeded by social distancing restrictions. In the other contexts this also rang true; that connections between families and churches were no longer tied to the local church, but families frequently accessed resources from further afield and churches often found that their content was viewed by families not necessarily in their locality. The repercussions of this longer term will be interesting to observe, particularly with the lens of pastoral care. There is strong awareness that the recovery of children after traumatic experiences depends upon support received from parents and their community (Gerber et al. 2014). Churches need to help children to find ways through this crisis spiritually. Breed highlighted that this prioritises the need for more ministerial training in many churches in order that children's workers are more equipped to offer pastoral care.

#### 4 Theological Challenges and Implications

Our observations and reflections revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic functioned as an x-ray of church life, in that it emphasized fears and issues that were already in existence but became intensified during this season. Many theological issues surrounding children's ministry have been debated often in recent years, but the phenomenon of the pandemic restrictions and implications caused us to again ask some of these established questions through this lens of ministering in a crisis season such as this. When considering the role of the church at this time, it is clear that this role must take considerable note of the church's context and specific needs of their children and families. Within this framework, we would argue that congregations must examine whether their ministry structures and principles serve children appropriately and effectively (Strommen & Hardel 2000), in order that they help rather than hinder them on their faith journey. During times of such trauma and change, churches need to be open-minded and take a wider view of faith formation (Berryman, 2013).

Within some ecclesiological frameworks, liturgical rituals such as baptism and the eucharist require a minister and in such cases the church is required to be a physical presence. Outside of these essential functions, the role of family

in fostering faith became fundamental for the time when the church could not physically meet. In addition to fostering a sense of welcome and hospitality (Coetsee and Grobbelaar, 2013), physical church attendance is also beneficial since it allows the child to witness first-hand the intergenerational interactions and the essence of the family of God (John 1:12–13) within their faith community. Indeed, Marler and Hadaway (2014, p.32) emphasised the value of adults modelling for and with children both participation in Christian education and worship. Hence, when this became impossible within the faith community due to lockdown, it had the potential to occur within the ‘micro-church’ of the family home. Furthermore, Beckwith (2010) highlighted the valuable experience of children being part of the collective story of the formation and development of their faith community, and Berryman (2013) argued that Christian education must not be reduced to memory and reason, entailing transfer and memorising of facts and Bible stories, but support of development of a much broader spirituality which comes from being involved in the whole church. There was evidence that some of these traits were being increasingly practiced within family homes during lockdown. To this end, it is key to reflect on how families could be further supported in fostering their child’s spiritual development during crisis times when the physical church is less available.

There has been much discussion about the role of physical church versus online children’s ministry. On the one hand, the longing of people to physically return to worship in the church has been evident, although this has also been criticized by some, since it seems to prioritize physical church above online church. Yet this longing for physical presence seems to be quite natural. Indeed, children develop through interaction with their environment, and rituals are important as part of this alongside sensory experiences. It is known that space has a major influence on this, and because children’s spiritual development is strongly related to sensory dynamics, it could be argued that it is important that they can go to church and participate in associated rituals. This importance of sensory dynamics, experiences of space, juxtapositions of words and things and objects (Lathrop 1993) also have consequences for celebrating at home. These dynamics and juxtapositions do not work equally well in every living room and family situation. Precisely because of the spiritual development of children, they should be given generous access to the church space and its rituals in the coming months.

When evaluating the role of the church prior to the pandemic, most churches would aspire to run some form of Sunday School programme and children’s worship. Indeed, Marler and Hadaway (2014, p.31) highlighted the importance of Sunday Schools as an assimilation tool, since research has shown that when a denomination loses its children, it loses successive generational sources of

loyalty and investment. This reflects the findings of Crockett and Voas (2006), who found that in Great Britain every generation is seen to be less religious than the one before. In fact, the decline of Sunday School appeared to signal a reduction in denominational membership (Rosman, 2007). The impact of changes in Sunday Schools during the covid-19 pandemic are therefore of great significance for future generations of churches worldwide. However, observations in these case study countries indicate that children's ministry has not been prioritised as highly as adult focused ministry, and has often been overlooked during this time of crisis. This lack of child-focused ministry raises theological questions about the place of the child. Even when the church engages children theologically, it is often from within the narrow enclaves of sheltered church life, excluding the vast realities these children face (Weber & DeBeer, 2016). Furthermore, the online provisions have often not met the spiritual needs of children, resulting in many children having little or no contact with church for six months or more. The long-term consequences of this are profound. Even more so because despite eased restrictions in places, there appears to be hesitancy in returning to forms of physical meeting of children in some settings. Alongside this, there are concerns about subsequent "waves" of the pandemic and how long the pandemic associated restrictions will be in force, meaning that children's ministry may be impacted for a long time. Whilst being ever mindful that churches globally are under significant pressures during the pandemic, we would propose that more attention and consideration is given to ensure the viability of future generations of the church.

The challenges of the relational element of ministry within an online framework seems universal across the four countries. The essence of the Christian faith is that God came to us and Jesus rescues people. Yet due to this pandemic and social distancing, it is not possible for the church to physically gather to embody and physically represent this as would normally be the case. This lack of relational connection is a significant issue, creating barriers of fellowship, belonging, the child feeling part of the church community, and the availability of intergenerational role models. Nevertheless, we have seen encouraging signs of cross-generational solidarity evident in churches across the case study countries. In this way, younger generations have taken covid-19 precautions and restrictions seriously in order to protect older generations. Likewise, older generations have sometimes sought to ensure that the child is in the midst and that their faith is not hindered. Such demonstrations of solidarity should be widely encouraged within the church globally, alongside acute awareness that the methods and modes that are effective for adults are often ineffective amongst children. This presents challenges since it has also been seen as beneficial to provide worship opportunities for adults and

children together, rather than always separately. Connecting with this, there is a need to encourage a balanced and collaborative approach, whereby children do need adult support and input to utilise technology and online provision, but also they must be allowed to be agents in their own spiritual life in a personalised manner. The voice of the child must be listened to as churches reflect and evaluate their ongoing ministry models as the pandemic prolongs. Matthew 18:1–5 communicates the value of placing the child centrally, so it is important to examine whether this was occurring within churches during this time of crisis, or whether the lack of physical meeting is a barrier to this notion.

## 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper sought to explore the varied local church responses to children's ministry during the initial six-month period of the covid-19 pandemic. It is clear that the responses were contextually driven, although it was evident that there were many fundamental and universal truths and practices displayed during this time of crisis. The investigations occurred through several lenses, yet one normative perspective was important in all of these approaches; namely the place of the child. We argue that it is essential to use the lens of a child when developing a strategy for ministry during such seasons, enabling the ministry approaches to genuinely meet the children's needs, rather than hindering them spiritually. Alongside this, we have highlighted the need to take seriously the long-term impact of little or no physical meeting for children in church during this time. Church closures have resulted in children missing out on contact with peers and children's leaders and other secure adults, intergenerational models of faith, opportunities to belong and serve as part of the body of Christ, and partaking in rituals.

Moving forward, theological discourses should invite children's own voices and convictions more fully. We therefore advocate for churches prioritising children's ministry at this time since the repercussions of overlooking future generations of the church are significant. To this end, our recommendation is that creativity, flexibility and child-centredness are paramount within children's ministry as it evolves in subsequent seasons, so that new opportunities and ecclesial models may emerge rather than being restricted to established and entrenched norms. Times of crisis, such as the covid-19 pandemic result in possibilities becoming available which never would have been previously. Open-minded and creative thinking allows children's ministers to capture these and tailor them for their setting.

This encompasses a broader view of the child, so that their spirituality is not approached in isolation, but in conjunction with their family and other influences. Indeed, in such times the family has the capacity to operate as a micro church, therefore the Church should seek to equip and empower parents in supporting their child's faith.

Alongside this, solidarity is paramount: between children; parents and their children; adults and children in a faith community; church with their local communities and para-churches. Ultimately the church is a global entity, reliant upon God's grace and we must therefore be ever mindful of our shared vision to see children walking with Jesus. The strong Biblical notion of solidarity is needed to support one another in achieving this.

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