


# Doing theology with children through multimodal narrativity

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Doing theology with children, in a systematic and focused way, is a new practice. This article contributes to this theological practice by examining its emergence, nature and mission and proposing multimodal narrativity as a practical theological methodology for doing such theology. The article argues, from a practical theological standpoint, that doing theology with children should be understood as a synodal event – a journeying together with children about their faith; as a way of seeing the mysteries of God through the eyes of the child and of encouraging a robust understanding of God and God's plan for humanity and the entire creation; and as a way of seeing the faces of children and hearing their voices, thereby accounting for their suffering and hope. Children themselves are sources and disruptors of hope. The use of multimodal narrativity creates space for these narratives and disruptions of hope and encourages children to theologise their experiences in the midst of their different communities.

**Keywords:** Theological methodology; Multimodal narrativity; Theology as synodia; Theologising with children; Children as sources of hope; Eulogising Jesus; Christ the eternal child.

## Introduction

The questions before us in this article are threefold: What does it mean to do theology with children? What is the nature and mission of such theologising and what methodology does one employ in this enterprise? Answering these questions is like the proverbial peeling of the onion; there are several layers. I address these questions from a practical theological standpoint, keeping in mind the complexity associated with the field. The layers thicken even more when we consider the rich and complex texture of the lives of the children with whom (and about whom) we theologise.

Practical theology is a dynamic and complex field of study. Practical theologians often differ among themselves about a range of issues from method to theological norms to the use of the human sciences or cognate fields of study they engage (eds. Cahalan & Mikoski 2014:1). Outside the field, people often think of practical theology as an applied science or as a way of applying theoretical and theological understanding to everyday experience.

In spite of the contested understandings, practical theologians share a number of core commitments that help to explain the field from their point of view. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2012:5), for instance, outlines four common understandings of practical theology in contemporary discussions: as an activity of believers seeking to sustain a life of reflective faith in the everyday, an approach to theology, a curricular area in theological education and as an academic discipline. In this article, I focus on three of these meanings. I emphasise the notion of practical theology as an activity of reflective faith – in this case of children's lives and their practices of hope in contemporary African society – on the view of practical theology as an approach to doing theology and on practical theology as an academic discipline. Together, these three meanings provide opportunities for examining the emergence, nature and mission of doing theology with children and delineating the specific methods and methodological perspectives proposed in this article. The discussion is divided into two major sections. The first section examines the emergence, nature and mission of doing theology with children; the second focuses on multimodal narrativity as a methodology for engaging children in theologising their experiences of hope.

**Note:** Doing Theology with Children: Exploring Emancipatory Methodologies, sub-edited by Stephan de Beer (University of Pretoria Centre for Contextual Ministry) and Hannelie Yates (North-West University).

## Emergence, nature and mission of doing theology with children

Doing theology *with* children involves recognising children in our midst, 'inviting their voices, concerns, dreams and struggles and learning to see the world and God through their eyes' (Weber & de Beer 2017:11).

The practice of *doing theology with children* is rooted in the disciplinary focus on the theology of childhood, a broader terminology used in this article to refer to both *theologies of childhood* and *child theologies*. Theologies of childhood critically examine different understandings of children and childhood and the responsibilities the church and society have towards children (Bunge 2007, 2016; Miller-McLemore 2003) as well as children's shared responsibilities with adults across religions (cf. ed. Bunge 2012). Pursuing such a goal has led to several discourses in the field, including an exploration and strengthening of biblical understanding of children and childhood (cf. eds. Bunge, Fretheim & Gaventa 2008), a critical examination of children and childhood in early Christianity and in medieval and modern times (cf. Bakke 2005; Horn & Martens 2009; Strange 1996; Wood 1994) as well as a re-imagination of children and childhood from a Christian perspective (Berryman 2009; ed. Bunge 2001; Miller-McLemore 2003) and in contemporary theological discourses across different religions (eds. Browning & Bunge 2011). Childhood theologies have also focused on the different understandings of children's spirituality and the need to listen to them on their spiritual journey (cf. Kantembe 2015; ed. Lawson 2012; ed. Ratcliff 2004; Stonehouse & May 2010). Contemporary practical theologians have also taken up the theme of childhood with a priority focus on securing the conditions for children's well-being in the family, church and society (cf. Couture 2000, 2007; Mercer 2005) and to ensure their rights and responsibilities as citizens (Marshall & Parvis 2004; eds. Wyller & Nayar 2007).

Child theologies, on the other hand, focus mainly on rethinking fundamental doctrines of the church. 'The goal is to reevaluate the Christian tradition and retrieve elements of it in order to strengthen the church's overall theology and practice' (Adawu 2016:19; see also Grobbelaar 2012; White 2010; Willmer & White 2013).

Efforts in this direction also include how the child influences the interaction between theology and the praxis of mission to better understand the mystery of God as well as the mission of the church has received from God (cf. Prevette 2012; eds. Prevette et al. 2014). Exploring the history and methodology of doing child theology, Grobbelaar (2016) rightly argues that the focus of child theology should be expanded to address the concrete realities and needs of children, as well as the ability of children to participate and contribute to the life of the church and society.

The different understandings of theology of childhood result from different approaches to doing theology, including the

pedagogical, epistemological and advocacy approaches to theology of childhood (Mtata 2015:229–257). A pedagogical approach highlights the education and formation of children in the Christian tradition. The emphasis is on finding effective ways of educating children in the faith. In this approach, children's own religious views constitute educational resources. Resources from children such as songs, drawings and views about God are collected, reworked and used to develop the literature for religious education and formation. Children's own imagination and views on different topics in Christian theology, such as on creation, grace and forgiveness (cf. eds. Richards & Privett 2009), serve as a rich input for the pedagogical approach. A proper understanding of the pedagogical approach rests on a 'robust theological anthropology that takes children into account' and could positively impact the church's practices and ministries (Bunge 2009:32–34).

The focus of the epistemological approach is to evaluate established teachings of the Christian faith in light of childhood. This approach positions children and childhood as hermeneutical lenses. It contends that when we see children as authentic persons and revisit theological categories from their perspectives, new insights emerge.

The basis for the epistemological approach, like the pedagogical approach, is theological anthropology (Adawu 2016:20–21; Mtata 2015). It 'points to the fact that concepts about God and many other theological categories are shaped to a large extent by our personhood constructions' (Mtata 2015:247). Grobbelaar (2016:loc 1570), however, argues for a 'changed epistemology', a way of theological knowing that 'requires us to accept children as agents of faith and as sources of revelation' and not just as hermeneutical lenses for theological understanding. Weber and de Beer (2017:2–3) also call for an 'epistemological shift' to allow children to be seen as collaborators in generating theological knowledge. We should quickly note that while arguing from our understanding of the human person can be helpful, it can also severely limit our theological discourse about God, and about how God has revealed himself and encountered humanity. In other words, theological anthropology itself must draw on our understanding of God and God's vision for humanity and for all of creation, a vision made manifest, above all, in Christ.

The advocacy approach to theology of childhood aims at transformative action. The subject of investigation in this approach is not childhood in general but the concrete experiences of children in context, including experiences of discrimination, marginalisation and neglect. The foundational blocks of the advocacy approach are solidarity and empowerment. It is a theological reflection in solidarity with children who themselves are involved in some form of advocacy, either through some form of action or by the very nature of their difficult circumstances. This means that even when children are silent, their suffering cries out to heaven and demands transformative response from the church and society (Adawu 2016:21; Mtata 2015:247–249).

These approaches are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are interdependent and complementary. Using them together as an integrated approach helps to bring the different perspectives together for a richer and robust theological understanding of children and childhood. The terminology 'theology of childhood' is used in the article to capture this integrated approach. The expanded terminology 'theology of children and childhood' can also be used to express the same integrated understanding. The integrated approach allows us to explore the mystery (Marty 2007), beauty (Balthasar 1991), completeness (Rahner 1971), sacramentality (Berryman 2009), vulnerability, suffering and hope (Bidwell & Batsky 2009; Herzog 2005; Jensen 2005; Newey 2012) of the child as one who stands before God with all of humanity and, as the rest of humanity, embodies and reveals the grace and glory of God. From an integrated theological standpoint, understanding how children stand before God with the rest of humanity requires us to properly define and embrace their place and vocation in relation to their communities without overlooking their need for support through transformative actions in the family, church and society (Adawu 2016:97–130; ed. Brennan 2008).

Additionally, an integrated approach to the theology of childhood paves the way for an equally integrated approach to doing theology with children. A number of recent publications are particularly insightful in connecting this discussion to the context of Africa. Examples are two edited volumes by Jan Grobbelaar and Gert Breed, both published in 2016: *Theologies of childhood and the children of Africa* and *Welcoming Africa's children: Theological and ministry perspectives*. Also, in 2016, *HTS Theological Studies* published a collection of articles as a special edition entitled, 'Disrupting theology: Doing theology with children in Africa'. These publications bring together diverse perspectives of scholars from Africa on doing theology with children, including the significance of considering Africa's children in doing theology and of exploring Africa's children's own viewpoints in such an enterprise. They also examine theoretical challenges in doing theology with children and provide theological perspectives for ministry with them. Furthermore, the authors provide opportunities for a critical assessment of the task, sources and significance of theologies of childhood (Bunge 2016) as well as the history and methodology for doing theology with children (Grobbelaar 2016). Specific attention is also given to suffering and well-being of children, including caring for orphans, vulnerable and refugee children (Chiroma 2016; Kritzinger & Mande 2016). The overall picture is an integrated approach to doing theology with children in African context. In sum, an integrated approach to doing theology with children finds effective ways of educating children in the faith; prioritises an epistemology that accepts children as agents of faith and as collaborators in the theological enterprise; and encourages taking transformative actions to improve the lives of children. In what follows, I highlight three features that both build on and expand our understanding of an integrated approach to doing theology with children. The features include doing theology with children as a synodal event, as seeing and

learning the mysteries of God, and as seeing the faces of the children with whom we theologise, thereby creating opportunities for transformative actions in support of their well-being. A critical examination of these features contributes to discussions on the nature and mission of doing theology with children.

### Doing theology with children as a synodal event

Firstly, to do theology with children is to journey with them in their effort to understand their faith in the God who encounters them and what this means for their lives. Doing theology with children is a synodal event, from the Greek *synodia* – meaning journeying in company or a company of travellers, a caravan, a large group of people travelling together. The term appears in Luke 2:44. The context is Luke's Infancy Narratives. In this account, Jesus and his parents follow their custom of going up to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. He was 12 years old. After the feast, as they were travelling back, Jesus remained in Jerusalem. However, his parents thought 'he was in the caravan' – *synodia*. They 'journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances' (Lk 2:44). Addressing this text to young people, Pope Francis (2019:29) comments on Jesus' opportunity to interact with a wider family. Because of the trust of his parents, Jesus can move about freely and learn to journey with others. Hence, the parents' assumption that he was in the caravan and most likely in the company of relatives and friends. Doing theology with children as *synodia* therefore allows children to travel in the company of others with whom they can explore their faith, including their family members, friends, faith communities, school communities and trained theologians.

*Synodia* also brings to mind the Christian community's long tradition of convening synods. A notable example is the Synod of Bishops in the Catholic Church. A Synod of Bishops is an instrument of church administration at the local and universal level. It is convened as a consultative event aimed at assisting the Pope in governing the universal church, particularly in the task entrusted to him to protect the church, increase faith and traditions, maintain and confirm church disciplines and to study the problems concerning the church's activities in the world. Understood this way, a synod can seem distant and far removed from the people. And quite often, that has been the case. Pope Francis, however, stresses the notion of synodality – of a church travelling together (Francis 2014). When prepared well, synods are able to involve all interested parties at all levels of the Christian community: individuals, small communities, parishes, Dioceses and national and international bodies (John Paul II 1995:23). In this way, synods become the point of convergence of a listening process – a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn (Francis 2015:3).

Francis demonstrates his commitment to this understanding of synod when, in October of 2016, he announced a Synod of Bishops on young people to be convened in Rome in

October 2018 under the theme: ‘Young people, the faith and vocational discernment’. The Holy See Press Office (2016) stated the aim of the synod as follows:

[T]o accompany the young on their existential journey to maturity so that, through a process of discernment, they discover their plan for life and realize it with joy, opening up to the encounter with God and with human beings, and actively participating in the edification of the Church and of society.

In calling for the synod, Pope Francis expressed the desire to involve young people in the synodal process, including the preparation, the actual event of the synod and in the implementation of its outcome. As part of the preparation for the synod, young people from around the world responded to questionnaires about matters of concern to them. They were also invited to a pre-synodal meeting in March 2018 to talk with one another and provide a document to be presented to the synod members. About 300 young people joined in the meeting in Rome and over 1500 more joined the conversation through social media and digital communication platforms. This allowed young people to express their ideas and visions about their lives, faith and the church.

Young people also attended the main event of the synod as witnesses and shared their views with all the participants.

After the synod, Francis issued an apostolic exhortation entitled ‘Christus vivit – Christ is alive’. He addresses his message directly to young people and, where needed, proposes some general considerations for the church’s discernment. His opening message is clear and powerful: ‘Christ is alive! He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world ... Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!’ (Francis 2019:1). He exhorts young people to not let themselves be robbed of hope nor let anyone ‘despise your youth’ (1 Tm 4:12). He invites them to see a God who loves them, to follow and embrace Christ who saves them, and to be open to the spirit who gives life. Francis also encourages young people to develop friendship with Christ and others, to be committed to their faith and visions and to be courageous missionaries. They should be people with roots, grounded in faith and in relationship with the elderly. Finally, he calls for ‘a pastoral care that is synodal’. While acknowledging that young people need help and guidance, he proposes that they be ‘left free to develop new approaches with creativity and a certain audacity’ (Francis 2019:203). He encourages young people ‘to use their insights, ingenuity and knowledge to address the issues and concerns of other young people in their own language’ (Francis 2019:203).

This was the Catholic Church’s first synod on young people. The target was youth between the ages of 16 and 29. However, the practice of theology as *synodia* – of journeying together – can be replicated with children below the age of 16 and in local communities all over the world. Such journeying together should not always be a consultative process for church administration. It should be, in most cases, an opportunity to theologise together and with each other.

## Doing theology with children as a way of seeing the mysteries of God

Secondly, to do theology with children is to see the mysteries of God through the eyes of the child. It involves seeing, listening, speaking and acting with children about the Christian tradition and its engagement with the world. A good example of such theologising is presented in Anne Richards and Peter Privett’s edited volume published in 2009 entitled, *Through the eyes of a child: new insights in theology from a child’s perspective*. The volume demonstrates how children, in the company of their theological interlocutors, wrestle with key theological questions, including the themes of creation, word, spirituality, grace, forgiveness, salvation, death, judgement, angels, hell and heaven. The discussions and activities presented in the volume portray children as ‘a model of spiritual simplicity that is both subversive and liberating’ (Pritchard 2009:vii). Children push the boundaries of theology and free us to not only accept its challenges but also to enjoy its fruits – a deeper appreciation of the mysteries of God and all that these entail and mean for humanity and all of creation.

Yust (2010:47–70) provides another significant example of doing theology with children as an activity of reflective faith. She proposes teaching children the art of theological reflection in order to counter young people’s understanding of God as ‘divine butler and therapist for humanity’ (Yust 2010:49). This means helping children to cultivate theological reflection skills and contemplative spiritual practices. It also encourages a robust understanding of God and God’s plan for humanity as well as theological anthropologies that place emphasis on the incarnational presence of God in the world. All this should be performed in conversation with the Christian tradition and contemporary culture. Finally, the reflective faith should help young people identify their own gifts and learn to use them to build up the body of Christ and to help create a more just society (Yust 2010:53–54).

The approach echoes what is described in some practical theological circles as ordinary theology (Ashley 2002; eds. Ashley & Francis 2013). The advantage of ordinary theology is that it prioritises the voices of persons who have received little or no academic theological training and who engage in learning about their faith (i.e. activity of reflective faith). Secondly, it places the learner at the centre of the task of theological interpretation.

Thirdly, although at the centre, the learner is not left alone, but is aided by grace and others in the community (*synodia*). Fourthly, the focus on learning creates opportunities for transformation, allowing learners to deepen their understanding about the Christian message and how it relates to their lives. This allows the learner also to see and listen to Christ in and through the church. However, one can also run into methodological and analytical problems. For instance, ordinary theology cannot just be described. It must be subject to the same careful analysis and critique in the same way academic theology is. The question an academic

theologian faces is whether tools used in academic theological analysis would be helpful in analysing ordinary theology.

### Doing theology with children as seeing the faces of children and hearing their voices

Practical theology is a theology with a face. To do theology with children is to see the faces of these children – to see their joy and pain, their suffering and hope and to hold these in creative tension. To do this successfully, we must acknowledge the structures and practices in society and in the church that subject children to untold suffering and pain. Dillen and Pollefeyt (2010:3–4) caution against any kind of dualistic approach that portrays society as the bad actor against children and Christianity as stepping in as the positive corrector of wrongs, and vice versa. Both Christianity and society have ‘ambiguous and multivalent’ history with regard to children. We love and celebrate children. Yet, we also exploit and endanger the lives of children. Sometimes, we even refuse to allow their birth, and we have reasons and laws and funding to back our decisions.

A few more examples further drive home the message. In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 200 schoolgirls in Chibok, Nigeria. There was much talk in the media about how we stood in solidarity with these children and their families, and pledges of doing everything we could to free them. Yet, it took the world 3 years to free about half of them. At the end of the third year, the rest of the girls were still in the hands of the terrorists. Surely, with all its diplomatic and military resources, could not the world have freed these girls in the shortest possible time? In August 2016, Omran Daqneesh became the face of the war in Syria. The 5-year-old boy caught the attention of the world after he was photographed sitting in the back of an ambulance covered in dust and blood. Omran and his sister and two brothers were fast asleep when their house came under fire during the bombardment of Aleppo. The ambivalence is also seen in the church. As church, we are committed to children’s well-being through education, health care and spiritual formation. But there have also been cases of abuse, including clergy sex abuse scandals in several faith communities. In the Catholic Church, for example, such scandals of sexual abuse of minors have resulted in moral and spiritual crisis and shaken the faith of many believers (cf. Barron 2019; ed. Scicluna, Zollmer & Ayotte 2012).

Doing theology with children must account for such ambiguities, so that our listening to children’s voices will go beyond *theological learning* to include ‘care for children, preventing child abuse and taking care of children who become victims of various forms of abuse or who are deprived of good living conditions’ (Dillen & Pollefeyt 2010:3–4). By developing a theology that sees the faces of children and hears their voices, we create opportunities for attending to their vulnerabilities and hopefulness, as well as the opportunities for children to theologise their own experiences. The next section continues the discussion on seeing the faces of children and hearing their voices

by drawing on multimodal narratives to explore African children’s meanings and practices of hope.

### Multimodal narrativity as methodology for theologising hope with children<sup>1</sup>

Children are sources and disruptors of Christian hope. In 1994 and 2009, two other synodal events, this time related specifically to Africa, described Africa as a continent of hope and the children on the continent as sources of hope for their families, the church and society. For instance, at the end of the 1994 Synod, the bishops of Africa sent a message of hope to ‘the Family of God in Africa’ and in the world, declaring, ‘Christ our Hope is alive; we shall live!’ (Bishops of Africa 1994:2). Fifteen years later, Benedict XVI called for the second synod for Africa ‘to give a new impulse, filled with evangelical hope and charity, to the Church of God on the African continent and the neighboring islands’ (Benedict XVI 2009:3). At the opening of the Synod, Benedict, noting Africa’s spiritual and cultural heritage, describes the continent as ‘spiritual “lungs” for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope’ (Benedict XVI 2009). He cautions, however, that lungs can become ill and that Africa must be wary of the ‘virus’ of ‘practical materialism’ and ‘religious fundamentalism’. In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, the Pope pays particular attention to children on the continent, describing them as ‘gift of God to humanity’ and as ‘a source of hope and renewed life’ (Benedict XVI 2011:65). We cannot take this description at face value. Christian hope is salvific: ‘In hope we are saved’ (Rm 8:24). Hope looks towards God and actively engages God’s offer of redemption and promises to transform the realities of human situation (Benedict XVI 2007:1–2). Christian hope also is solidaristic hope in a God who has called all persons to be present to him in history and to one another. It acknowledges and attends to the concrete social and historical circumstances of all persons, including our unspeakable sufferings, brokenness, pain, well-being and strength. Christian theology thus opens up a space for sufferings and hopes to be held in a creative tension (Metz 2007:23–30). Thus, when we refer to children as ‘source of hope’ (Benedict XVI 2011:65), we must ask the question as to how the realities of children’s own situation are being changed.

For how can they be ‘source of hope’ if they have no hope? It is in this sense that children disrupt our theology of hope. Their close association with hope compels us to address their sufferings and seek justice on their behalf. At the same time, their giftedness and resilience in the face of suffering encourage us to go deeper in our quest for hope. This is a journey we make with them, allowing ourselves to see through their eyes the workings of God that transform all of us. In short, children are not only sources of hope. They are also narrators of hope.

<sup>1</sup>Large portions of the discussions in this section are taken from my own dissertation (Adawu 2016:36–49).

Their narratives of hope are multimodal and disruptive. Their stories are embedded in their circumstances and expressed through their whole being and through multiple modes of communication.

Multimodal narrativity is particularly significant in doing theology with children. Narrativity is essential to the very structure and unfolding of our theological enterprise. Without the ability to tell stories, 'the experience of salvation is left mute' (Metz 2007:186–207). Narratives are also inherently embodied experiences. We tell our stories in space and time, drawing on different cultural tools. Some stories are better 'seen'; others are powerful by way of 'listening' or 'touching' or 'embracing' or 'smelling' or 'feeling', or a combination of these channels of human experiences. In short, our narratives are multimodal in nature. Multimodal narrativity therefore refers to the use of a range of semiotic resources to tell our stories, including the use of words (oral and written narratives), space, movement, facial expression and silence (performance narratives). Other narrative resources include images and other visual elements, soundtrack, music and an integration of a number of these elements (digital narratives) (Adawu 2016:36).

Encouraging children to draw on multiple modes to express their views offers them the opportunity to construct theological meanings that are not possible with the use of words alone. The multimodal methodology creates opportunities for children to see and listen to what is going on in their lives and communities and to articulate their understandings about what they see and hear. Dunlop (2008:1) describes this process as 'visualising hope'.

It places children at the intersection of culture, spirituality and the search for meaning. The methodology also allows the church and society to attend to children's experiences and voices, including 'their often hidden voices' (Dillen & Pollefeyt, 2010:4), honour children's contribution to the creation of a culture of hope and justice, and to act in support of children's rights and well-being (Adawu 2016:37).

### Faith community video project

The discussions here draw on existing narrative data. They include video recordings of children's participation in ritualising the passion of Christ. The data are obtained from a *Faith Community Video Project* carried out in southern Ghana and involved children from ages 4 to 15. In 2015, a Catholic faith community in southern Ghana began a project to videotape some of its major liturgical celebrations. The purpose of the project was to document these celebrations as institutional memory and to allow parishioners to reflect on the events at different times of the year. The first recording was that year's Good Friday celebration of the Lord's passion. A number of families and individuals in the community, as well as persons associated with the community, have obtained digital copies of the recordings. Portions of the recordings have also been posted on YouTube. I analyse

portions of the video that focus on children's participation in the Good Friday celebration.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis focuses more specifically on children's ritual of eulogising Jesus. My interest in these data stems from my closeness to the faith community. I ministered in the community for almost 4 years (November 2003 – August 2007). I worked with over 300 children and 8 facilitators of their children ministry programme. I quickly learned from my journey with these young people that Christian children are disciples too.

Encouraging them to talk about their faith experiences enabled us to see their world through their own eyes. The most important lesson, however, was the very presence of these children: their humanness, vulnerability, sicknesses, resilience and hope. Their faces and the specific encounters I had with them have stayed with me and continue to transform me (Adawu 2016).

The ritual of eulogising Jesus has a long tradition in the community's liturgical celebration of the passion of Christ on Good Friday, particularly the Veneration of the Cross, dating back to the mid-1970s. Since its inception into the faith community's Good Friday liturgy, the eulogising Jesus ritual has involved older women (adults) who gather around the crucifix that has been specially prepared for veneration. The women mourn Jesus through dirges, eulogies and other traditional songs of mourning. Many of them shed tears, expressing their sorrow at the tragedy that has befallen the Son of God and at the plight of humanity (Adawu 2016:38–39).

The ritual draws on Akan cultural and mourning practices. The Akan ethnic group is located in the tropical rainforest and savannahs of the southern part of Ghana in West Africa and a small section of the eastern frontier of La Cote D'Ivoire, and of Togo, Benin and Burkina Faso. A greater attention is focused on the Akans because they constitute the majority of the peoples in the present day Ghana. Generally, children are not expected to take part in Akan public ritual of mourning. It is mainly an adult practice. There are no specific rituals to help children manage their grief and overcome their pain when they lose a loved one, such as losing a parent, grandparent, a sibling or a friend. In fact, a child's death does not even receive the kind of attention and celebration that goes with the death of an adult. Normally, parents who lose their child are encouraged to shorten their period of public (and even private) mourning. The idea is to prepare them physically and emotionally to become pregnant again and so 'replace the child they have lost' (Snyper 2003:108). Clearly, the focus is not on the child, for he or she is quickly forgotten. The emphasis is on the physical, psychological and emotional health of the parents, who are expected to give birth again to sustain the growth of

<sup>2</sup>I received a letter of permission from the organisers of the project, the children and their parents to analyse the YouTube videos for research purposes. In the letter, the children, parents and the organisers expressed their full awareness that the 'research will be shared with the academic and general public for a greater understanding and appreciation of the lives of children in Africa'.

the matrilineage. It is almost as though the child is silenced both in life and in death (Adawu 2016:39–40).

Thus, the children's involvement in eulogising Jesus is a powerful statement on behalf of children in the community. Involving children in the ritual began in 2014, when children's ministry captured the community's attention. The children's participation is a significant modification to the ritual and a sign of the community's awareness and readiness to hear the voices of the children. In a cultural context where children are 'seen but not heard', involving children in the *Eulogizing Jesus* ritual creates opportunities for children to actively participate in the Good Friday liturgy and to be both seen and heard. Seven girls participated in the ritual that was video-recorded. Portions of the video are analysed for this work. The girls are between the ages of 4 and 12.

Like the Akan public mourning ritual, the girls' participation takes the form of a poetic performance in which their eulogies are conveyed in words, bodily movement, gestures, facial expressions and colour. The children's preparation for eulogising Jesus takes several weeks. During this time, the children work with the ministry teachers to compose their poems and learn appropriate ways to perform these thoughts. The children's ideas are prioritised, as these reveal their interpretation of the Christian message. Thus, the preparation and the actual performance of the eulogies on Good Friday reveal the children's interest and involvement in not only eulogising but also theologising the passion of Christ (Adawu 2016:40–41).

### Multimodal and theological analysis of video data

Videotaping a ritual documents specific events and renders them objects of theological analysis and reflection.

Video recordings make it possible to analyse rituals from multiple perspectives, with a special focus on the embodied nature of ritual practices. The methodological choices that a researcher makes regarding the analysis of these forms of data go a long way in shaping the kinds of meanings that are unearthed. For instance, transcribing the ritual performers' words alone will not be helpful if one wants to focus on embodied practices and knowledge. For this reason, I adopt a multimodal semiotic approach (Baldry & Thibault 2005:1–7) in transcribing and analysing the video. The meanings the children communicate through their performance and captured through the video recording are placed in critical dialogue with the Christian tradition. This approach encourages a critical theological conversation between the children's African cultural understandings and the scriptural, aesthetic and the several spiritual traditions of the Christian faith. However, the ultimate goal of the analysis is not only to understand the children's practices and their deeper meanings but also to view these practices and meanings as opportunities to attend to African children's theological voices and experiences of hope (Adawu 2016:41–42).

### Multimodal transcription of excerpts

Multimodal analysis begins with a multimodal transcription. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are examples of multimodal transcriptions of the Eulogising Jesus video data. The transcription shows the visual image, description of kinesic actions, as well as spoken words (Fante, a Ghanaian Akan dialect) and their translation into English.






Combining visual images, movements and words offers opportunities for meaning making that transcription of words alone cannot provide. The presenters' dressing, gestures, facial expressions and movement add layers of meaning to their words. For instance, one of the themes emerging from the presenters' eulogies is the acknowledgement of the horrendous nature of Jesus' death. In the Akan tradition, to die at such young age and at the hands of one's enemies is considered horrible and tragic. The presenters communicate this message by using the phrase '*Damirifa due*', which is translated, 'You have died a painful and horrible death. Rest in peace!' These words are spoken as the presenters bow their heads or gesture their bodies towards the crucifix prepared for veneration (see first presenter in Excerpt 1). Another example is circling one's hand around one's head, indicating the crown of thorns, as the second presenter does (Excerpt 2). Such actions bring immediate attention to the embodied meanings the presenters are communicating about Jesus' passion through their eulogies (Adawu 2016:43–44).

### The eulogising Jesus ritual and the Christian tradition: A critical conversation

#### Whose child is this?




At the heart of the first presenter's narrative is the image of Christ as an abandoned and suffering child. Not only does this child have no voice but he also has no one to speak on his behalf: 'Whose child is this that undergoes such great suffering? Who will speak on his behalf?' With these two questions, the presenter places deep theological questions before her audience with whom she journeys in faith. Does not everyone in the audience know whose son Christ is? Does not everyone in the audience profess the faith that Christ is the son of God? The presenter's purpose is not to question the relationship Christ has with the father; he is the eternal child of the father. But that fact of the relationship makes the presenter's questions even more pertinent. She sees a forsaken and defenceless child, with no one to speak for him. She does not name the father, thus keeping him completely out of the picture. Her questions then drive home the reality and depth of Jesus' suffering. Bodily, he suffers greatly – the flogging, the crowning with thorns, the carrying of the cross and the nailing to the cross.

Yet, greater still is his suffering as one forsaken by God. Jesus himself cries out in his anguish, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani; my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46).

Time in min and sec	Visual frame	Kinesic action	Playscript (spoken words – in fante)	Translation
1:30–1:35		Speaker 1 begins her eulogy. The gesture of her palm facing upward indicates that she is asking a question	<i>Woana ne ba na oridzj emja dem yi?</i>	Whose child is this that undergoes such great suffering?
1:36–1:40		She motions toward her mouth, indicating the need for speech. This is evident in her question about a spokesperson for the suffering child.	<i>ƙkamafo wo hen?</i>	Who will speak on his behalf? Who will plead his cause?
1:41–1:45		She turns her back to the Crucifix laid in state. Her gesture interprets Iscariot's betrayal turning his back on Christ.	<i>Iscariot eyi Owanwanyj no ama ...</i>	Iscariot has betrayed the Wonder worker, ...
1:46–1:50		She raises her index finger not toward the congregation but upward and moves it around as a way of counting the (imaginary) persons involved in mocking Jesus.	<i>... woama nyimpa nyinaa risi no atwetwe</i>	... who is now being mocked and reviled by many.
1:51–1:55		She bows her head as a sign of adoration and acknowledgment of the suffering of Christ	<i>Onyimyamfo Yesu Damirifa due, due, due</i>	Glorious Jesus, you have suffered a painful and horrible death. Rest in peace!

Source: Adawu, A., 2016, 'Witnessing to a just hope: A theology of the child in contemporary Africa', PhD dissertation, St. Thomas University, Miami Gardens, FL

FIGURE 1: Multimodal transcription of first presenter's eulogy.

Time in min and sec	Visual frame	Kinesic action	Playscript (spoken words)	Translation
2:35–2:40		Speaker 5 begins her eulogy. Her facial expression and her focused gaze corresponds to her words	<i>Me maa m'enyi do</i>	I lifted up my eyes.
2:41–2:45		She puts her hand on her head to direct the gaze of the congregation as to what she is talking about.	<i>Me hwɛɛ ne tir do</i>	I looked at his head.
2:46–2:50		She circles her hand around her head to indicate the crown of thorns.	<i>Na muhun de nsoekyew hɛ Nyimpa Ba no</i>	I looked at his head. Man crowned with thorns.

Source: Adawu, A., 2016, 'Witnessing to a just hope: A theology of the child in contemporary Africa', PhD dissertation, St. Thomas University, Miami Gardens, FL

FIGURE 2: Multimodal transcription of second presenter's eulogy.

Significantly, Jesus expresses his anguish and experience of abandonment as a question, as does the presenter. Quoting Psalm 22, a lament psalm, Jesus questions why God has forsaken him – God, who up to now, 'has always supported and heard him' (Brown 2008:Chap 1, Kindle). In this cry, Jesus

reveals both intimacy (you are my God) and abandonment (you have forsaken me). The bond between the father and the abandoned child is not severed, but it is precisely this eternal relationship, this intimacy that makes the abandonment real and unbearable: 'Only in the virtue of his filial intimacy with



the Father can Jesus suffer total abandonment by the Father and taste that suffering to the last drop' (Balthasar 2004:332–344). The father has truly forsaken him. The anger of God rages on, and there is 'no countering voice' (Macleod 2015).

The question – whose child is this – can be extended to millions of children who experience abandonment and rejection in the African context and in the world. Children displaced by war, unaccompanied migrant children, children who experience different forms of abuse, children who die from hunger and many more who undergo untold sufferings – these are children about whom we can continue to ask: 'Whose child is this that undergoes such great suffering?' This question continues to demand an answer from God and from people of this world, from all of us. The countless children whose childhood dreams have crumbled away through different forms of atrocities meted out to them demand a spirituality of a just hope, a commitment to attend to their sufferings and hold these up to the light of God's transformative love (Adawu 2016:42–43).

### Children, the passion and hope

The presenters' eulogising places them right in the thick of Jesus' passion, not simply as performers but more so as participants in, and witnesses of, Jesus' suffering. The second presenter, for instance, speaks and gestures about the crown of thorns: 'I lifted up my eyes. I looked at his head. And I saw the Son of Man crowned with thorns'. The use of gestures (circling hand around the head) and of action words and active voice (I lifted, I looked, I saw) makes her an active witness to the passion. The eulogy transports her (and her audience) unto the very scene of the Crucifixion (liturgically speaking), allowing her and her audience to see what transpires. It is an anamnesis, a memoria. Through her gestures and words, she leads her audience (the Christian assembly) into becoming 'a community of memory and narrative', people who know that their 'memories are related to a historically unique event, an event in which [they believe] that eschatological redemption and liberation of human beings has dawned' (Metz 2007:172).

Several elements of the Eulogizing Jesus ritual can be traced to the Akan traditional funeral celebrations, as discussed above. However, one can also discern a critical dialogue between the ritual and the role of children in Jesus' passion as depicted in the gospels. In Matthew's gospel, for instance, children's participation in Jesus' passion begins at his birth when, as an attempt to kill him, Herod orders the slaughter of male children who are 2 years old and under (Mt 2:6). The mourning that ensues is compared to a lament recorded in the prophecies of Jeremiah: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not' (Jr 31:15; Mt 2:18).

Thus, before Jesus takes up his cross and dies on Calvary, numerous children are massacred because of him.

These children precede him in death. Mourning Jesus should therefore call to mind the suffering and death of these

children, and by extension all children who have suffered and continue to suffer so many injustices, in the world and in history. With specific reference to Africa, mourning Jesus should also be an occasion (Benedict XVI 2009):

[T]o deplore and forcefully denounce the intolerable treatment to which so many children in Africa are subjected. The Church is Mother and could never abandon a single one of them. (p. 67)

Like Rachel, the church in Africa should remain inconsolable at the loss of every one of her children, but hopeful in her fight to save those who are left (Adawu 2016:44–45).

In this sense, then, encouraging children to participate in eulogising Jesus drives home a powerful message. By eulogising Jesus, these children mourn their own plight. Their situation can be compared to that of the women of Jerusalem whom Jesus tells to weep, not for him, but for themselves and their children (Lk 23:28). By seeing their plight in light of the passion of Christ, these children weep not in defeat and hopelessness, but with a kind of hope that keeps their suffering and resourcefulness in creative tension. This hope is made perfect, ultimately, in the Resurrection of Christ.

Matthew's gospel also reports another episode that connects children to the passion of Christ. The chief priests and the scribes hear children crying out in the temple, 'Hosanna to the Son of David'. On hearing this, the leaders become angry and say to Jesus, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus answers by saying, 'Yes; have you never read, "Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?"' (Mt 21:15–16). The proximity of the event of the children's praise to Matthew's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21:1–11) and the fact that the children sing the same song as those who accompany Jesus as he enters the city – Hosanna to the Son of David – situate the children within the events leading up to the passion. The scribes become angry at hearing the children sing. Shortly before this incident, Jesus' disciples had shown similar indignation towards the children who had been brought to him that he might bless them (Mt 19:13–15; see also Mk 10:13–16 and Lk 18:15–17). Clearly, something about children disturbs both groups (disciples on the one side, and scribes and chief priests on the other side), and in both instances, Jesus comes to the defence of the children. In the case of the chief priests and scribes, one can surmise that the leaders are indignant because of the content of the children's song – Hosanna to the Son of David, which has strong messianic connotations. This is probably why the chief priests and scribes ask Jesus, 'Do you hear what these are saying?' Jesus' response is even more shocking. Making reference to Psalm 8, Jesus indicates that what the children are doing is a fulfilment of the scriptures. A closer look at the text of Psalm 8 makes Jesus' point more poignant. Not only does the Lord find praise on the lips of children and infants, but also the kind of praise that the children offer becomes a defence and weapon 'to silence the enemy and the avenger' (Ps 8:2).

The children themselves remain undefeated. At the beginning of Jesus' life on earth, children are massacred because of him. At the end of his life on earth – as he journeys towards the

cross and resurrection – children show resilience through their praise. Herod cannot defeat them. The disciples cannot discourage them. Moreover, the chief priests and scribes cannot silence them. We note, however, that it takes someone to stand with and for the children. Jesus comes to their aid in the challenging circumstances. He points to their place in the reign of God and their right to be accepted, to be heard and to be protected. Children have resilient hope. However, without support, this hope may never flourish. The faith community highlighted in this article provides such support for children. Unlike the scribes and Jesus' disciples in Matthew's accounts, the faith community shows appreciation (rather than indignation) for the children's involvement in eulogising Jesus. Listening to what Jesus says about such acts of praise should encourage the children and the community to realise and make use of the transformative power of the children's presence and faith, as well as the hope they express through multimodal narratives (Adawu 2016:47–49).

## Conclusion

Doing theology with children, in a systematic and focused way, is a new practice. This article has examined the emergence, nature and mission of doing such theology and proposed multimodal narrativity as a practical theological methodology for engaging such enterprise. From a practical theological standpoint, I have argued that doing theology with children is a synodal event – a journeying together with children about their faith. It is also a way of seeing the mysteries of God through the eyes of the child and of encouraging a robust understanding of God and God's plan for humanity and entire creation. To do theology with children is also to see their faces and hear their voices, thereby accounting for their suffering and hope. Children themselves are sources of hope. But they are also disruptors of hope. To do theology with them means to create space for their narratives and disruptions of hope. To that effect, encouraging the use of multimodal narratives creates opportunities for children to theologise their own experiences, their aspirations, hopes, anxieties and challenges, as well as the way they see and reflect on the myriads of issues that beset their communities.

Using multimodal narrativity as practical theological methodology contributes significantly to the way we understand and do theology with the children. The use of the children's multimodal narratives allows the faith community to stand in solidarity with the children who participated in the Good Friday ritual of eulogising Jesus and to empower them to embrace their place and vocation in the midst of the faith community. Through their multimodal narratives, these children do not only stand before God with the rest of the community but also make God known in quite powerful, and even visceral ways, showing the depth of Christ's suffering and the hope of glory. By using multimodal narratives, the children also invite the community to stand with them at the foot of the cross, to join them in participating in the sufferings of Christ and to accompany and support

them (*synodia*) as they carry their own crosses in life towards a freedom that is both now and in the eternal future.

Finally, the use of multimodal narratives can create new opportunities for research in practical theology in general and theology of childhood in particular. For instance, doing a video research of children's multimodal narratives can be a great help to theologians who draw on aesthetic and embodied knowing in their work. The ideas examined here are by no means exhaustive. They, however, open the door for new questions and further explorations and development. Such ongoing conversation will be an important contribution to the practice of doing theology with children in the context of Africa and in the world.

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The author declares that no competing interest exists.

### Author contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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