Keeping It Age-Appropriate: Preachers' Negotiation of Timespaces in Their Practice of Preaching for Children

Linn Sæbø Rystad
Associate Professor in Practical Theology
MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society

Abstract: In this article, I study preachers' practice of preaching to children. Using Theodore Schatzki's concept of "timespace," I analyse how four timespaces – school, age-appropriation, "ordinary" preaching, and the Bible – are configured in the practice of preaching to children. I also explore what normative assumptions preachers have concerning preaching to children and how these contribute to the configuration of the practice. Finally, I discuss why the timespace of age-appropriation seems to dominate every negotiation in preachers' practice of preaching to children, and I suggest that recent homiletical research makes essential contributions that preachers engaging in preaching for children should consider.

1. Introduction

The turn toward a focus on listeners in the field of homiletics shifted the perspective from preachers and their manuscripts to listeners' responses. This was a necessary change of attitude and has stimulated much valuable research.[1] However, in this article, I examine preachers' utterances and actions concerning their practice of preaching for children[2] by employing the concept of timespace. According to Theodore Schatzki, this concept can be used to explore the dimensionality of practices and how dimensionality configures practices.[3]

The article aims to explore which timespaces are produced in the preacher's practice of preaching for children, how they interweave, and how they configure the preachers' preaching practice. An additional aim of this article is addressing the normative assumptions in the practice.

The main research question in this article is as follows: *How do timespaces configure preachers' practice of preaching for children?* To answer this, I developed three research sub-questions:

- Which timespaces do the preachers produce in their practice of preaching for children?
- How do these timespaces interweave?
- Which normative assumptions do preachers express and enact, and how do these normative assumptions contribute to configuring their practice of preaching for children?

I employ empirical material from preaching events conducted in Christian education events in the Church of Norway. As these Christian education events and the reform preceding them are

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[1] Among others, see John S. McClure, *Listening to Listeners:Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2004); Theo Pleizier, *Religious Involvement in Hearing Sermons:A Grounded Theory Study in Empirical Theology and Homiletics* (Delft: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2010); David Rietveld, "A Survey of the Phenomenological Research of Listening to Preaching," *Homiletic* 38, no. 2 (2013); Marianne Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

[2] I use the term preaching for children to show that the emphasis of the article is on preaching in a setting where children are the primary listeners. I have chosen this over the often-used term 'preaching to children' as the use of directional prepositions, such as 'to', strongly suggest that preaching involves a transfer of meaning from the preacher to the listeners. Moreover, it is too cumbersome to refer to 'preaching in worship services where a Christian Education event is embedded' or 'preaching with children as primary listeners'; thus, I use the term preaching for children.

[3] Theodore R. Schatzki, *The Timespace of Human Activity:On Performance, Society, and History as Indeterminate Teleological Events*, Toposophia (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 60.

distinctively Norwegian, I offer a short introduction to Christian education in the Church of Norway below.

2. Christian Education Reform in the Church of Norway

The Church of Norway is a Lutheran majority church that was the state church of Norway until 2017.[4] Whereas 71% of the Norwegian population are members of the Church of Norway,[5] only a small percentage attend church monthly. The Norwegian government launched an extensive Christian education reform in the Church of Norway approximately twenty years ago[6] that significantly influenced ministry to children and young people in the Church of Norway, including funding many new positions for Christian educators and considerable research on the reform itself.

The 2010 curriculum for Christian education in the Church of Norway' *Gud gir – Vi dele*r' [God gives – We share] is a result of this reform. Its goal is to offer every baptised child in the Church of Norway one Christian education event annually from the ages 0–18 years. Also, every congregation in the Church of Norway is required to design a local Christian education plan based on the national plan. In the national plan, it is recommended that every Christian education event end with a worship service. These worship services are often called Gudstjeneste for store og små, or Familiegudstjeneste [Worship services for Old and Young or Family worship service]. While such worship services are aimed at being more "child friendly" than regular worship services, the main structure of the liturgy is mostly not changed. What is often changed is that the psalms can be children's songs, the prayers might have a simpler language, and not least, the preaching event is almost always shorter and usually includes dramatization of bible texts and employs objects and visual elements as part of the preaching event.[7] However, these worship services are still *the* worship service available, there are no additional services for youth, adults or elderly. The goal is to gather the whole congregation.

The two Christian education events that I have studied are Tårnagent-helg [Tower Agents] and Lys Våken [Wide Awake]. During a Tower Agent event the children, aged 7-9, are detectives exploring the church. They do so by performing tasks all over the church, with the highlight being a trip in the church tower to see the bells (and views).[8] Wide Awake is a celebration of the Church New Year, taking place on the eve before the first Sunday of Advent. The children, aged 10-12, sleep over at church, often sleeping in the Church nave.

Figure 1 shows a model event structure from one of the congregations studied, St Nicholas in the North.[9]

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[4] "Tro og livssyn,"(Faith and Views of Life) white paper, the Norwegian Government, accessed April 3, 2020, https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/tro-og-livssyn/den-norske-kirke/innsiktsartik.ler/fra-statskirke-til-stat-og-kirke/fra-tidslinjen-historikk-om-forholdet-stat-og-kirke/id2426318/.

[5] "Den norske kirke – Medlemsstatisikk," (Church of Norway – membership statistics) the Church of Norway, accessed April 3, 2020, https://kirken.no/nb-NO/om-kirken/bakgrunn/om-kirkestatistikk/medlemsstatistikk/.

[6] "Stortingsmelding – Trusopplæring i ei ny tid," (White paper – Christian education in a new era) white paper, the Norwegian Government, accessed April 3, 2020, https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-7-2002-2003-/id196490/sec1.

[7] Linn Sæbø Rystad, "Overestimated and Underestimated: A Case Study of the Practice of Preaching for Children with an Emphasis on Children's Role as Listeners" (MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, 2021).

[8] This of course only applies to churches who have a tower.

[9] For research ethical reasons, all names and place names are anonymized. However, I have found it possible to indicate the geographical location of the churches without compromising the anonymity.
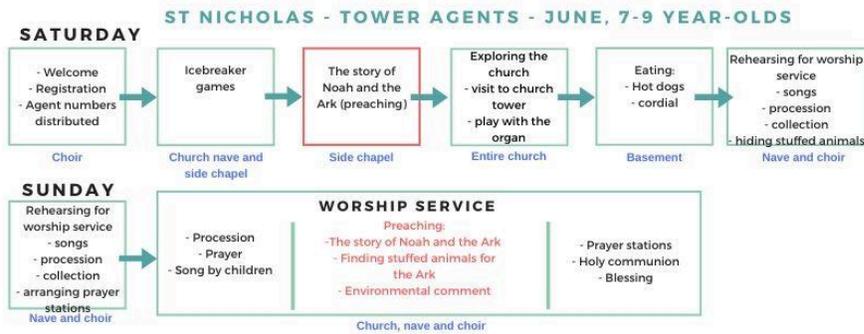
Figure 1

Although the congregations hold different Christian education events, those included in the empirical material were usually organised similarly to this model. The events typically last only a day or two.

3. Methods

This study was part of the larger research project *Forkynnelse for små og store* ['Preaching for Young and Old' or 'FoSS']. The empirical material consists of interviews with thirteen preachers from six congregations, participant observations of worship services, field notes and video recordings of the worship services. The study is designed as an instrumental case study where the aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, in this case, preaching for children.[10]

I conducted participant observation, field notes, video recordings and interviews at four congregations, St Nicholas in the North, St Mary in the Middle, St Sophia in the South, and St Emmanuel in the East of Norway; colleagues from FoSS gathered the field notes, video recordings and interviews from St John and St Michael (both located in the Western part of Norway). The interviews with the preachers were conducted individually using a semi-structured approach.[11] Additionally, having video recordings of the worship services allowed studying the preachers' actions and utterances in detail.[12] The interviewed preachers were all interviewed after the events concluded. Another characteristic trait of the worship services concluding the Christian education event is that preaching is not reserved for the pastor, hence, a volunteer can preach on such Sundays.[13] All adults who participated in preaching events throughout the Christian education events were classified as preachers. Most interviewees served as pastors and catechists; however, the interviewees included two volunteers who were teachers by profession.

4. Review of literature on the topic of children and preaching

Peer-reviewed research on preaching for children is scarce; I located only three peer-reviewed articles on the subject, all on Children's sermons.[14] A large body of literature exists,

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[10] Sarah Crowe et al., "The Case Study Approach," *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 11, no. 1 (2011); Robert E. Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995).

[11] Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale, *Interviews : Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 3rd ed. ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2015). Except the interview from St Michael that, for pragmatic reasons, was a group interview. Included in the term preacher are pastors, catechists, church educationers and volunteers.

[12] Christian Heath, "Embodied Action: Video and the Analysis of Social Interaction," in *Qualitative Reserach - Issues of Theory, Method and Practice*, ed. David Silverman (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), 252.

[13] This is also possible in regular worship services in the Church of Norway but it is extremely seldom done.

[14] James A Carr, "The Children's Sermon: An Act of Worship for the Community of Faith," *Perkins Journal*, no. Spring (1983); James Nieman, "Three Thuds, Four D's, and a Rubik's Cube of Children's Sermons," *Currents in*

however, on 'how to preach (effectively) to children'. Such contributions are often written from the perspective of Christian education, not homiletics,[15] and almost without exception include lists of 'best practice'.[16]

The books and articles reviewed were published before the empirical turn in practical theology and therefore precede crucial contributions in homiletics in recent decades, such as dialogical, carnivalistic, empirical, Other-Wise and conversational approaches.[17] While roundtable preaching and congregational exegesis[18] emerged pre-2000, these theories are not present in the books and articles on preaching for children.[19]

It is the three peer-reviewed articles on preaching for children that mostly approach homiletics as an academic field. These articles do not argue against preaching for children; their main concern is the content of such preaching.[20] Their authors fear that children are not hearing 'the gospel' and that preachers are not taking Children's sermons seriously enough.[21] In other words, these homiletical contributions argue that preachers' approaches to preaching for children should be more *similar* to adult sermons than *different* and advocate employing homiletical and hermeneutical tools when engaging in preaching for children.

However, the non-peer-reviewed contributions argue that preaching for children needs adaptation to the target audience, meaning preachers should approach preaching for children *differently*.[22] Employing theories similar to the above, the authors claim that children need shorter sermons and more straightforward language, and they encourage using visual and material objects.

5. Theory – Practice and timespace

Theology and Mission 22, no. 4 (1995); Wilbert M. Van Dyk, "Preach the Word! To Children," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32, no. 2 (1997). I am aware of the difference between children's sermons and worship services such as the ones I studied; however, I believe findings from research on preaching for children in such worship services and Children's Sermons can be mutually relevant.

[15] See, for instance, Sara Covin Juengst, *Sharing Faith with Children: Rethinking the Children's Sermon* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

[16] Ann M. Garrido, "Preaching among Children," *Liturgical Ministry* 15, no. Winter (2006); O. Suthern Sims Jr, *Creating and Leading Children's Sermons* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 1999); Richard Robert Osmer, "Teaching the Catechism in the Children's Sermon: A New Possibility for Biblical and Theological Literacy," *Journal for Preachers* 4, no. 22 (1999).

[17] Charles L. and Cilliers Campbell, Johan H, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press CY, 2012); Marianne Gaarden and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, "Listeners as Authors in Preaching - Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives," *Homiletic* 38, no. 1 (2013); Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen, *The Sermon without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015); John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching : A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001); Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, *Dialogical Preaching : Bakhtin, Otherness and Homiletics*, vol. vol. 74 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Sivert Angel, "Talerens Troverdighet I Prekener for Konfirmanter," in *Gudstjenester Med Konfirmanter*, ed. Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen (Oslo: IKO-forlaget, 2017).

[18] Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word : Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, Fortress Resources for Preaching (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

[19] Except Nieman, who argues for understanding children as active listeners. Nieman, "Three Thuds, Four D's, and a Rubik's Cube of Children's Sermons."

[20] Ibid.; Van Dyk, "Preach the Word! To Children."

[21] Ibid., "Preach the Word! To Children," 438-39.

[22] Garrido, "Preaching among Children."; Anna Carter Florence, "A Prodigal Preaching Story and Bored-to-Death Youth," *Theology Today* 64, no. 2 (2007); Jr, *Creating and Leading Children's Sermons*.

In the field of homiletics, many scholars agree that preaching is a practice; however, what this entails for preaching is seldom discussed.[23] Practice theory, however, provides a way to discuss and research what is done and said in the practice of preaching. The theoretical foundation for the concept of 'practice' used in this article is Theodore Schatzki's definition: "a set of doings and sayings that is organized by a pool of understandings, rules, and something I call a 'teleoaffective structure'."[24]

In this article, I understand preaching as a practice in a Schatzkian manner, attempting to understand why preachers 'do what they do'[25] by analytically employing the concept of timespace and analysing the preachers' normative assumptions.

5.1 Timespace

Timespaces can be described as the dimensionalities of practices and, thus, can be used to analyse how practices are stretched out in time and space and how this configures practices. Schatzki defines timespace as 'acting towards ends departing from what motivates at arrays of places and paths anchored at entities'.[26]

However, timespace is something other than 'objective time and space'.[27] Whereas objective time is usually conceptualised as a succession as seen in our clocks and calendars, objective space is usually employed to refer to 'real' space, like a building.[28] Additionally, timespace is also not subjective time or space or time and space as experienced time and space. Fundamental to the concept of timespace is the notion that past, present and future occur at once. This simultaneousness means that the practice of preaching is not a present practice succeeding the past and followed by the future. Instead, in the practice of preaching, the past, present and future exist together at once.[29]

Although timespaces incorporate past, present and future, Schatzki argues that timespaces and practices are always indeterminate.[30] Normativity is produced in practices and upheld or not by how the practitioners act in practices. However, Schatzki points out that norms and customs can override teleology and, as a result, pre-empt the future. Thus, rather than the practitioners, norms and customs of a practice can specify what 'makes sense for people to do'.[31]

Moreover, interwoven timespaces can be coordinated and harmonised but can also conflict. Coordination occurs when variants of common or shared pasts, presents or futures are

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[23] See, for instance, Paul Scott Wilson, *The Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995); Nancy Lammers Gross, Women's Voices and the Practice of Preaching, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017). An exception is Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

[24] Theodore R. Schatzki, "Practice Mind-Ed Orders," in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, ed. Karin Knorr Cetina (New York: Routledge, 2001), 50.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Schatzki, *The Timespace of Human Activity: On Performance, Society, and History as Indeterminate Teleological Events*, 60. (Quote reflects publication cited.)

[27] Theodore R. Schatzki, "Timespace and the Organization of Social Life," in *Time, Consumption and Everyday Life : Practice, Materiality and Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Shove, Frank Trentmann, and Richard R. Wilk (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 1.

[28] Schatzki, *The Timespace of Human Activity: On Performance, Society, and History as Indeterminate Teleological Events*, 1-64.

[29] Ibid., 49.

[30] Ibid., 175.

[31] Ibid., 145.

coordinated in human action.[32] Harmonisation occurs when actions fit smoothly and adjust to each other.[33] When timespaces are harmonised, their adjustment has no result except for the absence of conflict. Conflict within timespaces can arise; however, this analysis concentrates on the conflict between incompatible timespaces, when people act in spatialities that are partly shared and conflicted or follow futures that are incompatible or fuelled by contrary pasts.[34]

5.2 Operationalising timespace

While Schatzki's account of timespaces is highly theoretical, he wants his theories to be operationalised and used in empirical research.[35] Even though Schatzki mainly uses the concepts of coordination, harmonisation, and conflict to describe individual action, I use the same concepts to analyse the relationship among different timespaces in a practice, not necessarily tied to individual action.

Additionally, Schatzki never isolates or names specific timespaces, which this article does. To operationalise the concept of timespace in the practice of preaching for children, I first sorted the empirical material into categories of motivations/ideals (past), what the preachers do and say in the preaching events (present) and teleos/ends (future). This sorting was done for analytical purposes only, keeping in mind that in timespaces, past, present, and future occur simultaneously.

6. Analysis – Coordinated, conflicting, and harmonizing timespaces

From the initial analysis, four timespaces emerged as essential for the organisation of the practice of preaching for children: (1) school, (2) age-appropriateness, (3) the Bible and (4) 'ordinary preaching' (as opposed to preaching for children). To more closely analyse how these timespaces configure practice, I used the last two research sub-questions: examining whether the identified timespaces are negotiated in coordination, conflict, or harmonization with each other, which normative assumptions were upheld or produced in the preachers' practice of preaching for children, and how these configured the practice.

6.1 The timespace of school – Coordination and conflict

In the Christian education events, a typical material arrangement of a room is one where the children are seated in chairs and addressed by an adult standing in front of them. This adult is talking to them, preaching or teaching.[36] When this happens, the children need to raise their hands if they want to speak. Therefore, the material arrangement of the space is similar to that of a school. Also, just as in a school, Christian education events are designed to teach something to those who attend.

At St Nicholas, Nicole, the catechist, reflects on the relationship between school curriculum and preaching.

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[32] Schatzki, "Timespace" 42.

[33] Schatzki, "Timespace and the Organization of Social Life." 44.

[34] Ibid., 42–44.

[35] Schatzki, *The Timespace of Human Activity: On Performance, Society, and History as Indeterminate Teleological Events*, xvii.

[36] In this article, I refer to teaching in the vernacular meaning of the word and do not engage in discussions on learning and learning theories. Most of the preachers seem to use the term 'teaching' to mean conveying information about something they know to someone who does not know it. The exception is one of the volunteers from St Emmanuel who discusses Gardner's educational theories in the interview. Howard Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons in Theory and Practice* (USA: Basic Books, 1993).

Nicole: What I have experienced these last years is that this is the only Bible story I know that the children have heard before [. . .] the only story I am absolutely sure that they know is the Noah story.
Interviewer: Because they teach it at school? And in kindergarten?
Nicole: Yes, so that one. [. . .] Well, so that is the one that I know that they have heard. [. . .] So, one of the children said: 'We have just had this at school', and then I thought, 'Of course, they're in third grade, so they are the right age for this story'. [. . .] But I thought [. . .] oi, have I thought enough about this, that they already know the story? Because I like to, well, present it a little differently, so that it is the same story, but this time we can see something new in it.

In referring to the school year and the age of the children invited to Christian education events, Nicole reaches out of her place and time to organise her preaching. She uses her experience with the school and its curriculum to choose which Bible stories she employs in preaching events and does so in coordination with the curriculum at school. Nicole thus draws on the children's past experiences with the text. She hopes that, by using the same stories and telling them in different ways, adapted to the age of the children, this will promote her aim of communicating and passing on the joy she had while reading Bible stories as a child. Hence, Nicole also stretches her preaching practice into her past.

Moreover, she employs theories of child development, broadly understood. In her reasoning, the children are 'the right age' for the story. In doing so, Nicole adapts her preaching accordingly, bringing these experiences and theories into the practice of preaching. Hence, she organises the preaching event in *coordination* with the school curriculum and the timespace of age-appropriateness.

Comparatively, Eva, a volunteer from St Emmanuel, uses the timespace of school to configure her preaching and her concept of 'good' preaching.

Interviewer: One of the children asked you, 'What is prayer?'
Eva: Yes!
Interviewer: So, you cannot assume that they know what prayer is?
Eva: They know very little, and then I think: they have had almost five years of KRLE [knowledge of Christianity, religion, philosophies of life and ethics] education, but [. . .] eh [. . .] that is another business! Here, I am, going off on another subject […] Yes, but I really question this. We are not to preach at school, that's fine, but we really need to question [. . .] have they really learned enough? Have they learned what's in the curriculum? Have they been taught it? Maybe that is the most pressing question, have they actually been taught what's in the curriculum? But, well [. . .] that is not what you're writing about.

Eva does not object to the curriculum or the ban against teachers preaching in public school; instead, she questions whether the children are taught what is in the religion curriculum at school.[37] Thus, Eva's past experience with and knowledge of school configures how she believes preaching should be performed.

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[37] "Læreplanverket – fagplaner," (Curriculum) The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, accessed April 3, 2020, https://www.udir.no/kl06/RLE0023.

Eva: And like, I feel that [. . .] Edward, the way he does it [. . .] it's not like 'sugar-coated Christianity'. Because I feel like that's often the case [. . .] in Confirmation training, and not to talk about the baptism school for the 6-year-olds. There, it's sugar-coated that we should be good people and friendly to each other and such. They come here for this baptism school and will only attend it a couple of times, and they use a lot of time to talk about how we need to be kind to each other. […]I don't think it is the right use of time! When they are there for such a short time, we need to talk about what really matters to us! We need to [. . .]
Interviewer: Do you mean like talk so that they know they are at church and not kindergarten?
Eva: Yes! Because of that thing of being nice to each other and not bully others [. . .] maybe they've heard it enough times already?
Interviewer: Hehe [. . .] so you're like 'never mind that'?
Eva: That we use the time [. . .] to preach, to say it plainly. And Edward, he does that all the time.

However, Eva not only criticises teaching in the Norwegian public school but also argues that the church fails to preach about 'what really matters' to children. Eva praises the Wide Awake event and the leaders there for not 'sugar-coating' their preaching, something she believes is happening in other church activities. Thus, she implies that children attending other Christian education events are not subjected to 'good' teaching or preaching. Therefore, the place, or objective space, of teaching and preaching is not the defining factor for Eva; it is the quality. Hence, she creates a dichotomy between 'bad' preaching and preaching about 'what really matters'. In doing so, she combines teaching at school with some preaching in church within the timespace of school.

Eva seems to hope that if the children are exclusively exposed to preaching about 'what really matters', this preaching will also matter to them. At the same time, teaching in school should 'actually teach' the curriculum and hence provide the children with sufficient knowledge about Christian faith and practices.

Thus, both Nicole and Eva's negotiations show that the space they produce is not restricted to the Church building. Curriculums, stories and materiality shape a space that is stretched out beyond the Church itself. The same happens with time: the preacher and the children are there in the present, but activities and experiences from the past are also there. Nicole and Eva's past experiences and emotions about school are brought into the present. At the same time, the activity is also directed toward the future: toward the following educational years for the children in school, in other Christian education events and Church more generally.

6.2 The conflicting timespaces of 'ordinary' preaching and age-appropriateness

A central normative assumption the preachers hold is that preaching for children is different from ordinary preaching. In their enactment and discussion of preaching for children, the preachers argue that such preaching should be targeted at the children, provide an opportunity for direct involvement (drama or answering questions), have accessible language, include something visual and concrete and be short and that the preacher should not use the pulpit.

Hence, they produce what I call the timespace of age-appropriateness. In producing this timespace, the preachers draw on past experience, different child developmental theories, the curriculum of the Christian education reform and a future goal of making church relevant for the children and produce a common way of practising preaching for children across the congregations.

Comparatively, the preachers produce ordinary preaching as a timespace which takes place in the worship service in the church nave, with the preacher standing in the pulpit and addressing an attentive adult audience sitting in the pews. In ordinary preaching, it is not as vital to preach age-appropriately or provide opportunities for the audience to be directly involved. The preachers use the timespace of ordinary preaching as a neutral point of departure, from which they adjust their practice of preaching for children. Thus, the preachers demonstrate that the timespace of ordinary preaching permeates the preachers' configuration of their practice of preaching for children.

Mark, a pastor, and Marlon, a church educator from St. Mary, address age-appropriateness in preaching for children:

Marlon: Well, I am mostly used to preaching to the children's choir, and they are between five and ten, and then you often have to use some concrete things.

Interviewer: You need to bring something concrete into it?

Marlon: Yes, more than words, and drama, like, so they can be involved.

Mark: It is obvious that the visual is an essential part [. . .] and that people are allowed to participate in what happens so that they feel like it's theirs like they also own it.

Here, Marlon brings in his past experiences from preaching to the children's choir, where he has experienced that he needs to have 'some concrete things'. The reason he gives is that using concrete things or drama in the preaching event helps the children be involved. Mark also points out that involvement is vital. Hence, they both agree that preaching for children needs to employ age-appropriate methods. Neither Marlon nor Mark said why this is so 'obvious'. Thus, although it is unlikely that the preachers have read the literature surveyed in this article, they adopt and uphold a normativity remarkably similar to the normativity described there.

In Christian education and developmental psychology, different stage theories of development have been influential in much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[38] A standard critique, especially of early stage developmental theories, is that they can be interpreted as portraying children as becoming increasingly religious as they age and move from thinking concretely about religion to thinking abstractly.[39] Chris Boyatzis, in his critique of such developmental theories, argues that there has been a tendency to make such theories about child development into the truth about children;[40] instead of using the theories as possible explanations, people believe that children *are* how the theories describe them. Such an inference

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[38] Chris Boyatzis, "Agency, Voice, and Maturity in Children's Religious and Spiritual Development," in *The Study of Children in Religions: A Methods Handbook*, ed. Susan B. Ridgely (New York; London: New York; London: NYU Press, 2011). 25.

[39] See for instance: James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).; ibid. Jennifer Beste, "Children Speak: Catholic Second Graders' Agency and Experiences in the Sacrament of Reconciliation," *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 3 (2011). Ridgley argues that although the science in the field of developmental psychology might have moved on from these early stage theories of development, they are still in use in churches and educational institutions. Susan B. Ridgely, "Introduction," in *The Study of Children in Religions*, ed. Susan B. Ridgely (New York; London: New York; London: NYU Press, 2011).

[40] Boyatzis, "Agency, Voice, and Maturity in Children's Religious and Spiritual Development," 27.

might lead to strong prescriptive and normative assumptions on approaching a particular age group of children. Reformulating Boyatzis, one could say that such stage theories of development inscribe a strong normativity when interpreted as ontology instead of theory. In the above, I have shown that this normativity is reproduced in the preachers' insistence on how preaching needs to be age-appropriated.

Here it is vital to note that, although the individual preachers reproduce such normativity, it is difficult to go against normativities that have long upheld traditions. Especially the obviousness which Marlon and Mark refer to demonstrate that they do not seem to entertain the possibility of questioning whether they should uphold this normativity or not. Therefore, the timespace of age-appropriateness greatly configures Marlon and Mark's preaching practice in providing normativity which decides what 'makes sense for them to do', a normativity that is expressed in their understanding and practice of how preaching for children needs to be age-appropriate, short, simple and include some visual or dramatical element. [41]

An essential observation is that while homileticians have long argued that form and content cannot be separated in preaching, several of the preachers observed and interviewed in this study often make this separation.[42] For instance, Merete at St. Michael's reflects on the role of theology in preaching for children:

> **Merete:** Well [. . .] when preaching to children, I am a very creative preacher. I really like to work together with others and always come up with dramas and fun things. I love doing this together with other people! But I am occupied with the preaching containing some theology. It is not just a retelling of the texts. It is so much more. I am sure you noticed. And, I am sure you have heard those retellings many times. They make me so discouraged.

Merete claims that preaching for children needs to be more than retelling stories; it also has to contain some theology. However, she does not specify what she means by theology. The preaching event at St Michael is organised as a dramatic conversation between Merete and the church educator. This conversation presents several dogmatic statements, such as 'Jesus is our redeemer' and 'Jesus opened the way to heaven', which might be what Merete refers to as theology. If so, Merete produces a timespace where 'dramas and fun things' (form) are separate from theology (content), all the while arguing that the practice of preaching for children needs to include theology. Hence, theology becomes an entity that she can insert into or remove from preaching. In this way, Merete displays the conflict between the age-appropriateness and

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[41] Schatzki, *The Timespace of Human Activity : On Performance, Society, and History as Indeterminate Teleological Events*, 184.

[42] Fred Craddock claims that "the method is the message. So it is with all preaching: how one preaches is to a large degree what one preaches." Craddock also maintains that the method communicates theological content and hence, he argues strongly against separating form and content. Fred Brenning Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 3rd ed. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). Other homileticians have also argued against separating form and content. Contributions like Buttrick's *Moves and Structures*, and Lowry's *The Homiletical Plot*, as well as McClure's *Other-Wise Preaching* and Rose's *Roundtable Preaching* all demonstrate that the form of preaching and the content of preaching are closely tied together. David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (London: SCM Press, 1987); Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Expanded ed. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001); Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

ordinary preaching timespaces by wanting to involve the children and have drama while not sacrificing theological content.

All of the preaching events observed in this study differed from an ordinary preaching event in the Church of Norway. I believe the emphasis on the timespace of age-appropriateness show that the preachers, in this negotiation between age-appropriateness and ordinary preaching, end up being more occupied with *how* (form) one should preach than *what* (content) one should preach. This division between form and content perhaps reveals a view of communication close to a transfer model,[43] which is widely criticised by both homileticians and practice theoreticians.[44]

Thus, in preaching for children, the preachers negotiate between focusing on children or preaching or between the timespace of age-appropriateness and ordinary preaching. In the interviews, the preachers state that they are concerned with content, yet, enacting preaching events makes significant changes in form and small changes in content. The changes in content are frequently limited to using simple words and speaking in short sentences. Thus, the content of those same preaching events remains quite theologically sophisticated and dogmatic—e.g., the ransom theory of atonement, sin, or God's destruction of the world through a flood—or the polar opposite, namely simple "messages" repeated throughout the preaching event, like "Jesus wants you to be friends with everyone."[45]

Moreover, this separation of form and content demonstrates that the timespace of ordinary preaching and age-appropriateness are produced as conflicting timespaces in the practice of preaching for children.

6.2.1. Target audience

When asked whom they considered the target audience of preaching events in Sunday worship services, most preachers in the study stated that children were their target audience, yet some articulated intentions to include the whole congregation. One way this conflict is visible is in how preachers use manuscripts. Most preachers refer to the importance of connecting with the children and looking them in the eye, aiming to preach without manuscripts.

> ***Interviewer:*** *I noticed it [the manuscript], because yesterday you did not have one, and today you did and used it. It seems like you chose to have two different approaches. Can you reflect on that?*
> ***Nicole:*** *Yes, well, I need to look the children in the eyes. Like, yesterday, when we were five children in the little side chapel, and they sat there in the first row, well then, I needed to look them in the eyes. Today there were many adults present, and I thought, 'I have to remember the name of those islands in the Pacific'. Then I needed the manuscript. I used a lot of the same sermon as yesterday, and I do not think I remembered what the islands were called then. I just said, 'some islands', and that's fine. But when the adults*

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[43] The transfer model of communication represents an understanding of communication that assumes the transfer of information from a sender to a receiver, with little or no recognition of the communication being interpreted or otherwise differently understood or appropriated by the receiver. See Marianne Gaarden and Marlene Ringgaard Lorensen, "Listeners as Authors in Preaching - Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives," *Homiletic* vol 38, 1 (2013): 31–32.

[44] Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching*.; James V. Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 73.

[45] Kristin Graff-Kallevåg and Jan Olav Henriksen, "Jesus og Kaptein Sabeltann - en analyse om hvordan det forkynnes om frelse for små og store," (forthcoming).

are there, well, then it needs to be in order. I have to know the names of those islands. So, therefore [. . .] the manuscript helped me remember them.

As this statement shows, Nicole has different ideals for children and adults. In preaching for children, she needs to look them in the eye; she needs to remember her facts and be precise for adults. This reveals another version of the central assumption that preaching for children is different: ordinary preaching needs to be more intricate and precise. In enacting preaching for children, this ambivalence and negotiation results either in preaching events that target children, not adults, or that target both, yet in separate sections. As Pastor Mark says in his sermon, "You adults are not getting off this easily; there's something for you too."

Also discussing his target audience, Sam, the pastor of St. Emmanuel, is concerned that worship services and preaching events should be for the whole congregation, yet this particular Sunday, the children "ended up" becoming his target group. He attributes this shift toward the children to the text "he got" that Sunday (from the lectionary), which concerned the Annunciation of Mary.

> **Sam:** When I got that text about Mary, right? I could link them together.
> **Interviewer:** Mmm.
> **Sam:** So I felt like [. . .] that I could remain in that Tower Agent theme [designated by the event] and that the Bible story, or Bible text, became an element of the Tower Agent theme, although not a big element. But what I intended, at least, was that the theme and the text would become part of the whole, so to speak.

Linking the text of the Annunciation to the concept of Tower Agents, the Christian education event and the timespace of age-appropriateness both influence how Sam interprets the biblical text. Hence, it seems that compared with the timespace of ordinary preaching, it is not the timespace of the biblical text but rather the timespace of age-appropriateness that determines how the biblical text is interpreted. I will return to this finding in the next sub-heading, where I discuss the timespace of the Bible in greater detail.

Moreover, none of the preachers in the study uses the pulpit. In the interviews, the preachers do not reflect on this. Although I do not know whether the preachers use the pulpit typically, it does seem like an element of defining preaching for children as different from ordinary preaching. Stepping down from the pulpit allows the preacher to be closer to the children, who usually sit at the front pews at these events. As such, this stepping down might be part of the preachers' effort to have eye contact with the children and make themselves more available for them.

The pulpit is one of those places that has become what Schatzki calls' standardised'[46] – preaching happens from a pulpit. Hence, this stepping down is another way to demonstrate the dominance of the timespace of age-appropriateness in preaching for children. Despite the long history and tradition of preaching taking place in the pulpit, the assumed advantage of being closer to the children encourages a break with tradition.

Furthermore, Nicole mentions that the change in space, from a side chapel with five children on Saturday to the Sunday worship service with adults and more people present, configures how she preaches. The preaching in the side chapel on Saturday produces a time and space where direct communication between Nicole and the children is possible.

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[46] Schatzki, *Timespace*, 75

However, not all preaching on Saturday in the different congregations takes place in a side chapel; some take place in the church nave. Therefore, the deciding factor for whether preaching events are different is not the place but the timespace. While the Christian education events produce a time and space where the children are allowed to be concretely and directly involved in the preaching events, worship services seem to add a spatiality and atmosphere that reduce flexibility and room for direct verbal involvement.

Nevertheless, the preachers still argue that preaching events in worship services should also be age-appropriate and directed at the children to further their involvement in the preaching event. At the same time, the preachers state that they wish to provide worship services for the whole congregation. Thus, the preachers, particularly the pastors, seem to believe that worship services should be 'age-less' but preaching for children should always be 'age-specific', thus producing a tension between worship services and the timespace age-appropriateness.

These negotiations show that timespaces are both interwoven and conflicting.[47] The normativity described in developmental theories and the tradition of considering preaching for children as different from other preaching is strong enough to determine what makes sense for the preachers to do. As such, both the ordinary preaching and age-appropriateness timespaces configure the practice of preaching for children – the former by introducing a contrasting, perhaps perceived neutral way of preaching, and the latter by providing theories and methods that maintain the difference.

6.3 The timespace of biblical texts – Harmonization

Every preaching event in the empirical material also revolves around a biblical narrative, maybe because they are easy to dramatize. Hence, a fascinating aspect of the preachers' practice of preaching for children is how they approach the timespace of Bible texts. The biblical texts have many connections to the past, as historical, religious, cultural and liturgical texts. Because biblical texts are used as religious texts, they are also connected to the intentions and future hopes of those who read and interpret them.

Consequently, the biblical texts stretch out beyond the practice of preaching for children in time and space and are part of its dimensionality. In all preaching events, the dynamic of using old texts filled with intention and tradition to interpret the present situation and provide hope or purpose for the future is present. However, in the practice of preaching for children, the temporal, historical, cultural and liturgical aspects of the biblical texts are seldom explored during the preaching events.

The primary marker of the biblical texts existing in a different objective time and space is to dress up in clothes that look similar to those with which Jesus and his disciples are portrayed in Western art, often with kitchen towels as headscarves. While the preachers seem to put this dressing up in the category of being fun and conveying that this story happened in a different objective time and space, in interviews with children, they asked why one always had to dress in 'funny and ugly' clothes when doing dramas in the church. Hence, in retelling biblical stories, dressing up does not communicate the change in time and place that the preachers aim to convey.

The preachers act in ways that harmonize this timespace with the other timespaces in the practice: the biblical texts fit seamlessly into the preaching events, even if you have a kitchen towel on your head while you tell it. Where one might expect tension and conflict, no tension

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[47] The worship service itself could also be described as yet another timespace that needs to be negotiated in preaching events. However, for the purpose of narrowing the scope of the article, the collisions and negotiations in the worship service as a whole will not be discussed.

exists. The preachers present biblical and personal stories as well as stories from yesterday's newspaper as existing within the same timespace and, hence, produce a timespace where the past, present and future do not exist simultaneously but are conflated into one. As a result, this harmonious use of biblical texts might obscure how foreign parts of the Bible are to modern readers and presuppose a biblical literacy that transcends unchurched children or even churched adults.[48]

Furthermore, the preachers emphasize making the preaching concrete, short, and compatible with the event theme rather than starting with reading the text, again showing that the age-appropriateness timespace is exceptionally dominant in configuring the practice of preaching to children. Therefore, the timespace of biblical texts is conflated with a harmonized 'message' which the preachers wish to convey so that questions of historicity and critique are not being raised.

7. The dominant timespace of age-appropriateness

In the analysis, I show that when the preachers produce time and space in the practice of preaching for children, they give primacy to the timespace of age-appropriateness. Other timespaces are primarily coordinated and subordinated, and if conflicts arise, the age-appropriateness timespace 'wins' the conflict.

The preachers are remarkably uniform in their concerns about target audience, materiality, visuality, involvement and brevity. I believe that Boyatzis makes a compelling argument concerning how theories can be used as blueprints for practice, dissolving nuanced theory into normative assumptions.[49] The analysis shows that reliance on theories and tradition can create norms that determine what 'makes sense for people to do'. Therefore, the lack of scientific, homiletical research on preaching for children contributes to the dominance of the timespace of age-appropriateness. Whenever the timespaces of ordinary preaching and the timespace of age-appropriateness conflict, the preachers do not have homiletical literature and theory available for their decision-making. Alternatively, they at least do not recognize homiletical theory as a tool to use when preaching for children.

Moreover, remarkably, the ordinary preaching timespace produced does not include the same attention to psychology and pedagogy. The above raises the question of whether the New Homiletics' critique, claiming that it is impossible for the preacher and listeners to entirely identify with each other or for the preacher to access a shared experience with adult listeners,[50] has not been expanded to include preaching for children. The age-appropriateness timespace in preaching for children seems to provide a way around this critique and creates a timespace where it is possible to know one's audience and tailor preaching accordingly.

This article does *not* argue against considering the age of most listeners, nor for dismissing theories and insights from educational studies and developmental psychology. Children do grow in understanding as they mature. Nevertheless, children are more than simply their age. All seven-year-olds are not the same, just as all forty-five-year-olds are not the same. Just as one would advocate for an intersectional perspective on women and race, children should be approached as complex individuals with intersecting identities. Thus, the practice of preaching for children could benefit from including insights from the last decades of homiletical

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[48] For the purposes of anonymity in the review process, this reference is omitted.

[49] Boyatzis, "Agency, Voice, and Maturity in Children's Religious and Spiritual Development."

[50] Ringgaard Lorensen, *Dialogical Preaching: Bakhtin, Otherness and Homiletics*, vol. 74; Gaarden, *The Third Room of Preaching*.; McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching : A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics*, 51.

research: like the critique against New Homiletics, or newer empirical and theoretical contributions, such as Other-Wise preaching and dialogical approaches to preaching. Doing so might complexify preaching for children and thus give children's intersectional identities more space.

This nuancing might also contribute to questioning the separation of form and content with which preachers operate. In the separation of form and content, preachers express an operant understanding of theology and communication where theology is a static entity that can be inserted or removed, and communication is merely transferring a message from one person to another. This understanding diverges from the views of theology and communication that they express in the interviews, however, in which most preachers discuss theology and communication as more dynamic and dialogical. Consequently, I claim that becoming aware of one's normative assumptions about preaching, communication, and theology affects how one preaches, and it is beneficial for preachers to be more consciously aware of these *also* when preaching for children.

8. Conclusion

Timespaces configure the practice of preaching to children in several ways; the most important is through conflict, pitting the timespace of age-appropriateness and ordinary preaching against each other. When a conflict arises, the timespace of age-appropriateness almost always prevails. This conflict leads to a separation of form and content and an emphasis on *how* to preach instead of *what* to preach.

I criticise the emphasis on creating preaching that 'fits' an age group. The assumption that preachers will gain access to the children's experience, emotions, thoughts, and reflections in narrowing the target age group is flawed. Here, homiletical theory has a role to play. Adopting a dialogical and practice-oriented understanding of communication, where the aim is not to transfer a message from a sender to a receiver but to create a space for reflection and appropriation, might provide a bridge over the form-content divide.

One of the advantages of a dialogical approach is that some pressure is taken off preachers; if meaning is created in the meeting of consciousnesses, preacher and listener share responsibility and (at least some of) the power of meaning-creation. Another advantage is that such an approach weakens the temptation and opportunities to tailor preaching to the target audience because the focus of a dialogical and practice-oriented understanding of communication argues for interaction between conscious individuals, not with groups.

Hence, treating children as individuals and not according to their age group might make it easier to address their existential needs. Therefore, I claim that the preachers' practice of preaching for children can benefit from lessening the influence of the timespace of age-appropriateness on the practice and allowing preachers to employ homiletical resources in preaching for children. Finally, I propose that the above demonstrates that preaching for children is both similar to and different from ordinary preaching. Hopefully, this article can function as a spark for engaging debates in the homiletical community concerning the practice of preaching for children in the future.