

Abstract: Forms and Functions of Encounters prior to Occasional Services

Occasional services (in this case baptisms, marriages and funerals) densify dramaturgically the biographical transitions in the lives of those requesting them. Thus, the service creates a performative space, in which the temporally stretched biographical transitions can be celebrated, experienced and interpreted. Currently, reasons for and expectations of an occasional service are increasingly diversifying and individualizing – those of pastors as well as those of the requesting participants. The conversation prior to the service is the place, where a dialogical encounter occurs between these manifold expectations, which have to be negotiated with regard to the joint service. The participants get to know each other, and they exchange wishes, information, and expectations. In research, this conversation, both its forms and functions, was comparatively neglected. Significant contributions mostly deduce theoretical categories, which describe formally what an ideal conversation prior to the service has to look like (information/exploration and pastoral care). Simultaneously, the functions of that conversation and its interaction with the other elements of the service (liturgy and sermon) have not been investigated empirically, either. Although initial empirical research focused on the respective manifold expectations of pastors and requesting participants, a qualitative examination of the actual conversational *practices* is yet a major desideratum.

(1) Hence, the primary goal of this research project is to develop a substantial grounded theory of the conversational practices in these initial conversations about occasional services. Therein, the project alternates the questions asked. Instead of asking what (is supposed to) happen(s), we examine the manner and modalities of these conversations (*how* instead of *what*). (2) The functions of the conversation can only be researched by looking at the interaction between conversation, liturgy and sermon. Therefore, in a second step the service will be documented and analyzed for its interdependencies with the conversation. This necessarily includes the respective experiences of pastors and participants after the service has taken place. (3) Lastly, the specific ritual functions of the conversation need to be reflected in light of recent insights of ritual sciences and their newly developed heuristics (agency, framing, reflexivity). Through this research process, the interpretation of tradition and situation in the conversation between pastors and participants becomes an object of investigation.

For this purpose, we established a cooperative agreement with the Protestant State Churches of Baden, Pfalz and the United Methodist Church in Germany (Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche), which facilitates data collection on the one hand and the cooperation of pastors on the other. Pastors, in particular, have important expert knowledge about the conversational practices in this area.