**Investigating the impact of covid-19 socialisation restrictions on children’s spiritual well-being: Case Studies from Poland and the UK**

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**Abstract**

Parent and practitioners observations were examined to provide insights into the impact of covid-19 restrictions on children’s spiritual well-being, specifically related to reduced physical meeting of church communities in two case study contexts: Poland and the UK.  Exploration of the four domains of spiritual wellbeing was carried out (Fisher, 1998), with specific focus on how the abrupt changes in the communal domain may have impacted on other aspects of the child’s spiritual well-being.  Significant variations in the response by churches during the pandemic were overlaid by disparate perceptions of the spiritual needs of children in these contexts.  The extent to which these responses dovetailed with parental responsibilities and expectations of the church was considered alongside awareness of the changed nature of church’s activity with children during the pandemic.

**Keywords:**

Spiritual well-being, faith community, covid, church, children’s spirituality

**1 Introduction**

In the face of unprecedented restrictions of physical meeting due to Covid-19, many churches in Poland and the UK transformed into internet-based Christian communities.  The notion of online churches began in the 1980s (Hutchings, 2017), but online provision for children was a product of the pandemic situation.  Whilst spirituality is often evident through a child’s every-day activities (Eaude, 2005), these experiences are frequently supported by input from the local church (Fisher, 2006).  Fisher, Francis and Johnson (2000) emphasized the key role of the communal domain in an individual’s spiritual well-being.  Children’s reduced contact with churches during this phase is therefore estimated to be highly impactful.  Whilst many churches focussed on continuity of religious knowledge transfer, this paper explores the impact of reduced socialization within the faith community on a child’s spiritual well-being through inquiry into parents and practitioners’ observations.  There are different definitions of spirituality, and in this paper we tried to show this term in relation to well-being. Our understanding from literature is that children's spirituality is developed by children having a voice and role within church life. Our empirical research investigated the notions of Hyde and Nye (2006) that spirituality is innate and integral to every child’s being. We adopted Fisher’s (1998) concept of spiritual well-being through living in harmony in four domains (personal,communal, environmental and transcendental).

The theoretical framework of the analyzed interviews is the theory of recognition as a marker of social change (Honneth, 1995).  Spirituality is constructed through the accompanying relationship with the church, so a child’s developing relationship with the church is key.  Positioning the church in a relationship of a recognition is an important but difficult task as it assumes that recognition is an ideal interpersonal relationship based on reciprocity between actors.  The recognition also assumes that the relationships between entities within the church institution will not be hierarchical. In the presented article, it is assumed that recognition is treated as a condition of identity and adherence to specific religious values. Like Dziemianowicz-Nowak (2020, p.85), we treat recognition as a need realized on three levels: 1) recognition in the family; 2) the need to respect the rights of the child and recognize their moral competence; 3) belief in being part of shared values in the community.

It is key to have awareness of the presence of children in the church in Poland and the UK alongside the background of caring for their spiritual well-being. In the church in Poland and the UK, there has always been a concern for the spiritual welfare of children. It seems that due to the specific nature of church activities, the activities of individual communities are often not adequate to meet the needs of many children. The voice of children, especially the youngest in the church, is often not heard and taken into account. There are many excellent children's and family communities that respond to the needs of today's children, including religious settings. In the pre-covid church, there were examples of good spiritual well-being of children, but these were not universal and there were a great variety of approaches. When talking about the well-being of children in the church, it is most often in the context of parents' responsibility for it (Opozda 2018). This paper explores this further, within the covid-19 pandemic era.

**2 Context Setting**

*2.1 The Case Study Contexts*

In Poland, the issue of children's spiritual well-being was not a priority for researchers or authorities during covid, since well-being is most often associated with mental well-being and during covid it was connected with mental disorders.  Ciesielski (2020, p. 168) claimed that the church is of the belief that “leaving man alone in a time of uncertainty and fear and knowing how vast spiritual space in the modern world can be developed, the Catholic Church trusts that man, through self-reflection, will direct people on the path to salvation consistent with Catholic doctrine”.  This statement assumes that every person has the ability to self-reflect, and can incorporate spiritual aspects into this.  Scrutiny of all documents that have been developed by the Polish Bishops' Conference shows that the spiritual well-being of a child was not an issue of consideration.  The Pastoral Council of the Archdiocese of Warsaw (2020)[[1]](#footnote-1) wrote: “Another effect of the pandemic in religious life is the strengthening of prayer in the family circle, the celebration of the domestic liturgy of the word.  The "blessed" effect of the pandemic is a unifying effect on family ties and a return to prayer in families.”  There is no other information about the manifestation of religiousness in children and in the family.  It can therefore be assumed that the institutional church does not perceive the crisis of spirituality and therefore does not adopt any alternative forms of religiosity towards children.  The documents also do not contain any advice regarding how to pray at home during the pandemic.  Instead, we find numerous opportunities to dispense the faithful from their duties (Ciesielski, 2020).

Similarly, in the UK, initial focus within society was primarily on the educational and mental health impacts of the pandemic.  The initial focus of churches was to ensure delivery of online provision of Sunday services for adults, alongside social action within local communities.  Children’s discipleship was frequently overlooked, for example a national survey of churches regarding their experiences during the early stages of the pandemic did not refer to children’s ministry at all (Evangelical Alliance, 2020).  Alongside this, the Church of England opted to furlough the majority of their salaried children’s workers and regional support advisers for many months, which greatly impacted both delivery of activities and morale of children’s teams.  There was a great deal of uncertainty and frustration in many churches regarding the pandemic restrictions which were largely deemed to prevent face to face children’s work for significant portions of time.  Nevertheless, online provision for children did exist in a wide variety of models and approaches, across a range of denominations and geographic contexts.  However, it was usually separate from adult worship, often task-focused rather than spirituality-oriented, and frequently involved limited interaction and engagement of children (Holmes, 2020).  As the pandemic continued, the online provision of churches morphed into more child-oriented, interactive and relational and door-step pastoral visits to family homes were frequently reported, in an attempt to help children and families feel more connected with church.

*2.2 The Role of Church Communities in a Child’s Spiritual Well-being*

Children’s spiritual growth has been closely linked with their social growth, since they use life experience to aid understanding and respond to God’s grace (Shier-Jones, 2009, p.173).  Indeed, Hay and Nye (1998) observed that the child’s sense of relationship to others often forms a bridge to and from the child-God context, intimating that without these relational exchanges, children may have difficulty in grounding spiritual experiences into their every-day life situation.  In fact, Gomes (2002) emphasized the need to go beyond individual spirituality to participation in a religion, since human beings require “the framework, the companions, and the worship of his religion; the whole armour of the household of God.” This leads to the understanding that religiosity itself presupposes realization in community.  Similarly, Ingersoll (2014) emphasised that participation in the worship life of the congregation is found to have a positive influence on children’s spiritual development.  Holder (2010) also observed that practicing religion may increase social integration and support, and in turn improve the child’s happiness.  This sense of participation differentiates the child as an active rather than passive agent within the faith community, which Yust (2002) proposed was of great importance.  Taking this notion further, Mercer (2005) observed that full access to participation in the community could lead to children serving as ‘apprentices’.   Such opportunities to serve are a key part of a child’s spiritual journey (Yust, 2004).  Fisher, Francis and Johnson (2000, p.136) incorporated all of these aspects into their classification of communal interactions, and highlighted the impact that they have on a child’s spiritual well being.  With this in mind, this paper explored communal versus private faith, in terms of the impact of communal religious or spiritual participation as well as their current private practices (Kvarfordt & Herba, 2018, p.158).

*2.3 Observing a Child’s Spiritual Well-being*

Fisher, Francis and Johnson (2000) highlighted that the notion of ‘spiritual wellbeing’ incorporates the idea of health, alongside the spiritual.  This concept is described as the visible expression of an individual’s underlying spiritual health (Ellison, 1983).  Indeed, Fehring, Miller, and Shaw (1997) viewed it as an indication of one’s spiritual health, but also conveyed a sense of an individual’s quality of life in the spiritual dimension.  Fisher (1998) argued that spiritual health is exhibited by the extent to which people live in harmony within relationships of each of the four domains of spiritual wellbeing: personal, communal environmental and transcendental domains.  This paper is particularly interested in the relationships within the communal domain, which involves the quality and depth of interpersonal relationships, between self and others.  It is clear that the four domains are not isolated, but are interrelated, meaning that spiritual health is enhanced by developing positive relationships in each domain (Fisher, Francis and Johnson, 2000).  Therefore, the impacts of significant and sudden change in the communal domain as a result of the covid-19 pandemic will be explored in all four aspects of spiritual well-being.

**3 Methodology**

In this qualitative study, data was gathered in focus group interviews with parents (male and female; n=20) and practitioners (male and female; n=20) in two case study contexts: Poland (Catholic church context) and the UK (Anglican, Baptist and Evangelical church contexts), in order to investigate and compare the spiritual well-being of children during the covid pandemic in these two different contexts. The study participants were religiously engaged, denoted by their response to the research invitation which was distributed through church connections. In interviews, we asked about many specific things about religiosity and spirituality, the role of the church and community since these were all issues which were relevant to our research aims. Participants were asked about how they would define and describe spiritual wellbeing in children, to what extent a connection with a church community facilitated this, and for their observations regarding how this may have been impacted during the covid-pandemic.  Analysis of the focus group data took place using MAXQDA 2020 software, sorting the data into the four domains of spiritual health using thematic analysis (Fisher, Francis & Johnson, 2000, p.142). This framework was selected since it enabled the researchers to view spiritual well-being in a holistic and comprehensive manner.  During the integrative review of the transcriptions, 61 codes were extracted from the Polish data and 57 codes from the UK dataset (figure 2).  These codes revealed a range of definitions and understandings of spiritual well-being of children, and participant perceptions of the impact of covid-19 on this.  The specific ‘analytical categories’ (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019, p.66) were formed using specific terms used by researchers and research participants.

**4 Empirical Findings**

*4.1 Attributes of Children’s Spiritual Well-being*

Figure 1 shows the codes which were generated from the data, categorised according to the four domains of spiritual well-being: personal, communal, environmental and transcendental. These codes derived from the interview responses of participant parents and practitioners to the questions: “How would you define spiritual well-being? How would you describe a child who is in a good state of spiritual well-being? To what extent do you think that connecting within a church community is beneficial for a child’s spiritual well-being?”

*Personal domain of the child’s well-being*

Several key views arose from the Polish parents and practitioners regarding spiritual well-being of a child from the perspective of the personal domain.  First of all, participants stated that children have needs and felt that it is very important for them as parents and practitioners to meet their needs.  A second emerging theme was that these needs most often relate to their everyday life understood as the sphere of play, learning and duties resulting from fulfilling family and social roles. Finally, interviewees deemed that key to children's well-being is the feeling of being free to choose to take action and the feeling of being valued.

A common theme amongst UK participants was a need to allow children to explore and discover spirituality and faith for themselves.  Indeed, many expressed that a spiritually healthy child would be one who feels able to investigate their own personal spirituality and independent faith, rather than simply accepting pre-packaged and formulaic notions.  Alongside this, it was suggested that when a child chooses to engage spiritually of their own free will and independence, this would exhibit a good sense of spiritual well-being in the personal domain.  The final aspect of the personal domain which interviewees described was that a good understanding and questioning of faith, rather than simple acceptance and regurgitation, demonstrated good spiritual health.  One participant felt that when a child exhibits the fruit of the spirit, this would indicate that they have applied the faith to their own life in a personal way, hence demonstrating a good sense of spiritual well-being.  Other participants however did not think that this was a prerequisite.

*Communal domain of the child’s well-being*

Within the Polish interviews, community was viewed as a tool for building or expressing a child's well-being primarily through the relational dimension.  A child in its world meets other children, other adults, but at the same time creates a community that is different from the wider community.  In the community, we can also get to know the child and his needs.  It is a relatively continuous group of people who meet to share themselves and grow in faith and shared values.  In the narratives of the respondents, this category was the second most significant for a child.  In it, parents can become observers and participants in the child's religious life.  The child's well-being is revealed through the applied religious practices and active participation in church services by performing roles.

In the UK data, participants reported that a sense of being valued as part of the faith community, and having a role to play within it was one of the main features of the communal domain of spiritual health.  Another frequently expressed belief was that where children were able to show care and compassion amongst their community, it enabled the child to demonstrate this most effectively.  Bible knowledge and the ability of the child to experience being part of a collective faith story was also felt to be a very important aspect of the communal domain of spiritual well-being.

*Environmental domain of the child’s well-being*

The third category distinguished in the research, in which a child's well-being can be recognized is the environmental domain.  Themes emerging from the Polish data included indicators such as shared values in other environments which were outside of the church, and the wider rights of the child to have their own opinion, be able to express that opinion and have their will respected.  The statements were dominated by the child's well-being, which is expressed in the child's involvement in activities in kindergarten or school.  In the area of religiosity, a few parents and practitioners showed concern that the values shared at home would be respected in other environments.

This domain was not spoken about much by the UK participants, although many expressed that evidence of this well-being would be if a child can transfer their beliefs and associated behaviours into contexts other than the church setting.  This, they reported, would indicate that the child is independent in their faith, rather than being reliant upon the adults who nurture them.  Flowing from this, participants felt that this may coincide with the child exhibiting a sense of purpose, which could lead to them engaging social action and activities of an outreach nature.

*Transcendental domain of the child’s well-being*

Participants in the Polish sample found this category very difficult to define.  They viewed children as having only a predisposition to mature faith, a willingness to be with Jesus, to follow his life or to be in a relationship with God.  During the analysis of the respondents' statements, they were convinced that everything that is divine in children manifests itself in ‘children's limitations.’  In the statements of parents of children up to 3 years old, there were statements that the children did not have a relationship with God, or at least it was impossible to observe it.

In the UK interviews, this aspect was predominantly about the child having a connection and engagement with God.  Many spoke of the need for children to be open to a transcendent being but also highlighted that children seem to have a natural inclination to respond by reaching out to a transcendent being in times of crisis.  Conversely, many were keen to emphasise that evidence of spiritual well-being would require children to have an awareness of God’s power but at the same time not to “think that God can fix everything.”

*4.2 The Impact of Church Changes on Children’s Spiritual Well-being*

Figure 2 displays the codes which emerged from the interview transcripts concerning the changes to church due to the covid-19 pandemic, and the impact of these on children. These codes derived from the interview questions: “What have been your observations in your setting of children’s contact and connection with their church community during the covid-19 pandemic?”

According to the Polish participants, the main encouragement for children to pray derived from the church and family community.  Due to covid, the relationship between families and the church disbanded, so in cases where there was no prayer in the family, it did not occur at all.  A mother of two children stated:

“It seems to me that during the covid pandemic this personal relationship with God weakened, the children had no motivation to motivate other people and encourage them in personal development.”

Other parents report:

“when it comes to the environment, when we lock children within four walls, their only environment is their home.”

“for my children, the church is a paddock and they behave there as if they were on the playing field.”

These statements show the importance of a child's relationship with the church community.  These supportive, caring, and loving experiences cease to exist when there is no community.  The above statements demonstrate the feeling of parental helplessness towards the behaviour of their children.  Parents subordinate their time and customary family activities to the rules of the church.  In view of the impossibility of change and constant helplessness, they usually give up participation in the Holy Mass, postponing Sunday rituals until "the children mature".  This is encompassed in the feelings of one parent and practitioner:

“We completely do not understand the divine and it pisses me off, because we have to do the Holy Mass for everything, expose the Blessed Sacrament and say three litanies and these children do not understand it completely, they mainly think about aching legs.”

Other parents have not given up on religious practices, probably because their children despite "constant boredom and many questions of when is it over? they do not behave like in a circus.” The problem of the deficit of recognition served by the church is clearly visible in the quoted narratives. Both the parent and the child will either submit to the rituals at this stage or resist them. In the latter, prayer in believers' families is practiced only at home.

I have the impression that the church is only disturbing. I have the impression that we organize ourselves better as parents by doing home liturgies than by taking advantage of the pastoral offer of our parish (Practitioner and parent)

This statement corresponds to the position of the church, which emphasizes that the role of parents is to be the first and most important catechists (e.g., the 2008 Synod of Bishops)[1].

Most of the sermons I watch are infantile. The parish priest from the round-up takes a vicar priest who wants to be the so-called chaplain of children. Most of the sermons for children are silly questions, no religious formation at all (Practitioner)

It can be seen that the recognition deficit in the church does not go away with the exit from it. The recognition deficit becomes an element of everyday family life. Lack of consent and cooperation with the church becomes a form of deprivation of religiosity in the family, which by its nature presupposes practice in the community.

This state of deprivation worsens even more during covid:

Before that, the daughter was involved in a singing community that sings in the church. Covid has come, it's all over, no singing, just a message that maybe we'll come back one day. (Parent)

Overwhelming fear and the absolute rules on which the functioning of rituals during covid is based, arouses the parents' helplessness, which is strained by the situation in society. Most of the priests and practitioners has a feeling of powerlessness.

Based on the conducted research, we can observe, on the one hand, a great longing of parents for a return to normality, and on the other hand, the hope that the church in its previous form will never return. Most parents said that during covid the church was not interested in children.

In the UK context there was an overriding feeling that continually changing restrictions in churches and the inability to physically meet together as usual had significantly affected the experience of church for children.  The key impact reported was impaired relationship building and a loss of familiarity that children have with the church setting and being part of a community of believers.  One respondent stated that: “children have lost their security due to everything in their world constantly changing.  This has greatly impacted their spiritual health.”

Parents reported that children greatly missed gathering together for both the social aspects and collective activities such as singing and reading the Bible together.  These events are often not replicated in the home context so have not been replaced amid church closures.  It was notable that many reported their child’s favourite part of church is usually the ‘biscuit time’ at the end, and many anticipate this fondly.  However, this facet of church is very difficult to replicate when delivered online, largely due to the fact that genuine and informal socialisation opportunities are challenging through online provision.  Both parents and practitioners observed that adults often felt more connected with their faith community than children do during the pandemic because they have other opportunities to connect socially with friends.  There was a strong sense of children missing their friends through the entirety of the pandemic-induced church closures.  Many observed that children’s faith had often orientated more towards individuality rather than being a communal activity as a result of these restrictions and changes.  One participant observed that prior to the pandemic, the experience of being part of a worshipping community provided unique opportunities which were often not available to a child in the rest of their life:

“The church community provides an opportunity for children to reconnect together...they can interact across the ages and generations, unlike what occurs at school.”

In connection with this, many practitioners deemed that the online provision had become very task-driven, so that the goal was to produce an activity session of a set length of time to include a specified range of activities.  They felt that this made it difficult to be spiritually focussed because there were so many other demands and restrictions to consider and balance.  Further to this, there was concern expressed about the place of children within the church, since practitioners observed that adults were no longer used to seeing children involved in the worship life of the church.  Many felt that children’s voice and agency within church life had always been limited but that this had reduced even further during the pandemic.  One parent (who was also a practitioner) reported that her children had helped to produce resources for online delivery, and this seemed to have greatly boosted the children’s faith due to them feeling that they had a part to play.  Connecting with this, participants unanimously viewed parents as having become even more influential on their child’s faith whilst there are restrictions on church attendance:

“A child’s faith is directly influenced by their parent’s faith.  They are like sponges because they hear everything and take it in.  for those whose faith is not vocal or visible, children won’t have much input.  For many children, their only input usually is church Sunday mornings, so they are getting very little input during the pandemic.”

Nevertheless, one participant stated that “like an acorn, children have everything that they need built into them naturally, so that they can grow spiritually.  We have to trust that God will protect the faith and spiritual health which they had prior to the pandemic.”

*4.3 Approaches of Supporting and Encouraging the Spiritual Well-Being of Children*

Participants were asked: “In what ways do you think practitioners can foster and encourage children’s spiritual well-being during covid-19 restrictions and the associated restrictions and limitations?”. In the narratives of the Polish respondents, there were three different strategies for developing a child's spirituality during Covid-19. The first is an appeal to all parishes to maintain a relationship with children and their parents during the pandemic, and ensure that every child is cared for by their priest to maintain religious identity. The second approach is to provide a few suggestions on how to organize online community meetings: recording videos, organizing exhibitions, competitions, uploading children's works online, dividing children into smaller parish groups in order to comply with the applicable restrictions. The third response reported was that old pastoral practices should disappear and new ones should be introduced and adapted to young children, so that these should be based primarily on established relationships with families, for example:

In my opinion, there is no such thing that we can replace this Sunday Mass together with the children with anything else and it will give the same results. It cannot be done. And if at this point we are limited to individuals and not to families, then we are dealing with the disappearance of this religiosity understood by going to church. There is also a kind of split in the family (Parent)

I think a lot of people won't come back because it's more convenient. If you can have this mass on TV, if it has been so good for a year, why should I come back to the community. But why? Because we go back to what was before the covid, because there are no relationships in church communities (Practitioner)

The UK participants conveyed in depth their endeavours to support the children’s spiritual lives.  It was interesting to examine the nuances of the conversations, in that there seemed to be more emphasis, understanding and familiarity around teaching the children about spiritual aspects and training them in their own faith, rather than fostering their spiritual well-being.  With this in mind, many were unsure about the different aspects of spiritual wellbeing which have been investigated in this paper.  Overall, there was certainly a desire within both parents and practitioners to support children’s spirituality, but the notion of their spiritual well-being was not a topic which seemed to have been considered much prior to the focus group discussions.  Nevertheless, many agreed that the role of practitioners is to enable the children in exploring faith themselves rather than to train or teach them.  One viewed her role as “creating space and then getting out of the way”.  To this end, some practitioners reported distributing objects such as Bibles, holding crosses, or other icons for children to use in their own home whilst it was not possible to attend church physically.  Others reported equipping and encouraging the children to do this through activities provided during the session, such as “catch and chat” to explore and discover God without providing all of the answers.  Many observed that children preferred adult worship songs to children’s, and a frequently mentioned notion was the value of parents, carers and practitioners modelling spiritual activity and engagement to children, and the particular value of intergenerational faith communities in this way.  Many reported the need to empower children to see God in their everyday activities, and furthermore to enable them to be in communion with the divine, which they said “isn’t as complicated as we often make it.”  One practitioner conveyed the importance of help the children to be attentive to what God has to say in times of change, and not to be afraid of talking with the children along these lines.  All of the participants agreed that it was important to support children in talking about their emotions.  Overall, there was strong agreement that good spiritual well-being is exhibited when children can connect and relate with the divine independently.

**5 Discussion**

*5.1 Perceptions of Spiritual Well-Being in Poland and the UK*

These perceptions were derived from the interview questions: “Thinking particularly of the children with whom you have contact, how do you think these changes will impact children’s spiritual well-being, both in the short term and long-term? How have these different aspects been impacted?”. One aspect which could be considered in further research is which of the four domains of well-being the participants deemed to be most important, and perhaps the extent to which age influences such a focus.  Although this was not specifically asked within this study, it seemed the Polish participants slightly prioritised personal domain with link to community domain, whilst UK participants prioritised the transcendental domain, although for many this was inextricably linked with the personal domain; since many intimated that if the personal domain was healthy it enabled transcendental connection and engagement.  This difference may reflect that parents and practitioners in both contexts want children to have spiritual well-being in personal domain, in Poland it is strengthened in the community domain, and in the UK more in the transcendental domain   Despite the main area of interest for this paper being the communal domain, it is clear that all of the areas interact together. We can suppose that differences were due to culture or different beliefs.

Regarding the individual domains, the data was scrutinised for similarities and differences across the two contexts.  Regarding the personal domain, participants from both contexts included a sense of the child being cared for and having their needs met, reinforcing the idea that pastoral care is a key aspect in the process of nurturing children’s spirituality (Reynaert, 2014).  An extension of this was that Polish participants expressed particularly strongly that children needed to be included and involved in order to foster well-being (Hyde, 2010).  Freedom and the child’s ability to make choices were also described by interviewees in both contexts, although UK participants developed this further, talking about the ability to explore and discover spiritual encounters in a personal rather than formulaic way. This problem was also discussed in studies with children themselves, when children spoke about the contexts in which they can express their religiosity and one of them is the need for children to include them in religious practice (Heland-Kurzak, 2019).  There was an interesting difference of focus between the contexts: Polish participants often spoke about the need for ‘religion-friendly homes’, where faith was supported and encouraged.  Although UK participants conveyed the value of this, they preferred an emphasis on equipping the child to have a faith which is independent to that of their family.

Discussion of the communal domain in both settings revealed that it is considered vital that children feel they have a role within the faith community.  Both contexts similarly described how this may be outworked; with Polish participants expressing this as an openness to community religiosity and UK participants viewing this as the children having access to a ‘faith family’ and ‘faith story’ (Dillen 2007). A common thread through all of the focus groups was that evidence of spiritual well-being in this domain was connected with a child’s engagement and involvement in church activities.  It is interesting to note that whilst the Polish focus groups highlighted the value of children watching the Eucharist, the UK groups emphasised the importance of children being involved and integrated into the faith activities of the community.  Indeed, Ingersoll (2019) found that engaging children in religious practices in the church significantly influenced their relationship with God.

In the environmental domain, Polish participants emphasised a sense of agency and children’s rights and opinions being respected, alongside experiencing acceptance.  Shier argues that there can be a conflict of interest in giving children participation in decision-making (2009).   All focus groups wanted children to have a sense of purpose, and considered this key to spiritual health in this respect. This connected with the idea of theologizing in partnership with children (Hay and Nye 1998; Büttner 2007; Roose 2009; Huggler 2009; Petermann 2009).  Many also conveyed a sense that where children profess and exhibit the same values and behaviour in different environments, this demonstrates good spiritual health in the personal domain.  In the UK groups, this was expressed as independent faith, along the lines of spiritual questing (Hyde, 2010).

The transcendental domain was largely similar across both contexts.  All focus groups included aspects of connection, engagement and relationship with the divine.  A sense of natural openness and willingness to engage in prayer were also universally mentioned as signs of well-being in this domain.  Similarly, an awareness of God’s power and ‘superhero’ qualities were mentioned in all groups, although some UK participants were keen to emphasise that a healthy outworking of this would enable children to understand that God cannot simply fix everything ‘like a magic wand’, resonating with Hay and Nye (1998).  Another slight difference was the Polish participants emphasised love for God and this was not mentioned by UK participants.  It is thought that UK participants would fully agree with inclusion of this aspect, although worth noting that it was not mentioned by them in the discussions.

*5.2 Impacts of Church Physical Closures on Children’s Spiritual Well-Being*

It is clear that in both contexts, children’s access to church activity has been reduced, as a result of social distancing restrictions upon church meetings or complete physical closures of churches. Whilst Holder et al. (2010) found that children’s spirituality and not their religious practices (such as attending church), was strongly linked to a child’s happiness, it is important to note the impact that parents and practitioners in both contexts have reported upon the child’s lack of relational contact with their faith community.  Across all focus groups, there was a strong feeling that children had lost a sense of security and familiarity which they previously had in feeling a sense of belonging to the community (Hyde, 2010), and hence having good relational connections with members of their church.  Parents and practitioners alike stated that the long-term impact of this was uncertain and they worried about how children would consequently feel returning to church post-pandemic.

In both contexts, participants felt that the spiritual health and well-being of children had been side-lined in order to prioritise physical and mental health.  In the statements of the Polish parents, there was an appeal for the church and the church community to create a space for recognition of children.  Many of the UK interview participants similarly expressed a desire for children to have more of a role and sense of agency in church life during pandemic times.  In both contexts, there was a feeling that the pre-pandemic situation regarding this had been accentuated; namely in Poland there was a feeling that children were not recognised in the church pre-covid 19, and in the UK participants felt that children had frequently only had minimal input into church life.  In both cases, there was a strong feeling that this had been intensified due to the pandemic restrictions.  Furthermore, participants in both settings described great variation of this across churches, and again this diversity appears to have been intensified, so that those churches whom have consciously included children and given them a significant role in church life have strengthened this during pandemic restrictions, but in cases where this was negligible, this has reduced even further.  It therefore seems that there is a great need for church communities in both contexts to intentionally create space for children and ensure that they have a role and a voice as part of the faith community (Ingersoll, 2014).  It can be analyzed in perspective of relatedness as a “need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others” (Deci & Ryan 2000).

Practitioners in both settings reported that the pandemic has opened the eyes of many, to reveal possibilities and opportunities which hadn’t previously been comprehended.  In Poland, there was particular insight gained in terms of the opportunities to adapt children’s activities to the age and needs of children.  In the UK context, there was increased awareness of the need for pastoral care of individual children and activity in small groups, rather than significant portions of ministry time being taken up with running programmes for large groups.  Some called for a transition from a task-focused ministry to a spirituality focussed ministry.  Both contexts conceded that online pastoral ministry entails significant barriers to both relationships in the communal and transcendental domain.

Participants in all focus groups commented on the impact of the home environment and how this had the potential to mitigate some of the impacts of church closures.  Focus groups in both contexts observed that where families were not actively supportive of a child’s faith, the impact of church closures on the child’s spiritual well-being had been compounded, and children’s relationships in both the communal and transcendental domain were likely to have been impacted greatly.  However, where families provided a supportive and equipping environment, participants had observed that children’s spiritual well-being had been less impacted across all domains.  Furthermore, practitioners in both contexts were very aware that during the pandemic, any church activities which children did access were facilitated and overseen by the parents, and therefore were subject to the scrutiny and filtering of parents.  According to participants, this could have positive or negative impacts on the nature of the child’s involvement with online church.  It is therefore key that churches communicate this need for religious recognition in the home context, and seek to equip families in this respect.  This will help to mitigate some of the impacts of church closures on the child’s spiritual well-being in the personal and communal domain, as well as in relation to other environments, and in relation to God.

**6 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The communal domain of church was identified as a key component of a child’s spiritual well-being.  A strong correlation was reported between interactions with the faith community and spiritual well-being for children, concurring with Fisher (2006). Several studies have reported that churches struggled in the context of spiritual leadership (Ciesielski, 2020; Deguma et al. 2020; Holmes, 2020), arguing that children were often missing from church.  In this paper, both parents and teachers in Poland and the UK emphasised the reduced role and agency which children have in the church and hence the difficulties which may impede them from returning to church of a pre-pandemic nature.

Despite the fact that both in Poland and in the UK you can find several suitable online church offers for children, the respondents mainly talked about the lack of physical contact, as well as the relationship with their parish or faith community.  According to some parents, the online church seemed to be more accessible for children than the one they knew before the pandemic.  However, there were many challenges reported, such as not engaging children with online church, no peers, and no individual approach to the child.

In the statements of the respondents, the personal domain of children's well-being is related to the religious commitment of the family in everyday life.  Therefore, in religiously committed families, it seems that the pandemic will have a lesser impact on a child's spiritual well-being. It appears that a religiously committed family becomes a substitute for a church for their child, equating to a domestic church. In the statements of the respondents, a reduction in confidence in the church and in its commitment was noted.

Although Cortez and Sarmiento (2020) suggest the pandemic could be an occasion for the return of the *Domus ecclesiae* (house Church) for Christians, our research indicates that believers are not prepared for this type of practice, and indeed crave relational connection with a larger faith community.  It therefore seems that churches in both contexts need to urgently focus attention upon facilitating such connections and empowering children to have a role and increased participation within church life.

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1. Conclusions from the online meeting of the Pastoral Council of the Archdiocese of Warsaw Wednesday 2 December 2020 (https://archwwa.pl/aktualnosci/jakie-wnioski-po-spotkaniu-rady-duszpasterskiej/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)