



### **Imagine someone who....**

- creates a space to think big
- learns as well as teaches
- doesn't always know the answer
- builds a community
- enables children to make connections
- is open to the unexpected
- slows down the pace
- provides the tools then stands back

### **Imagine an approach to Christian nurture and education that**

- promotes knowledge, skills empathy, spiritual growth
- develops the needs of the whole child
- provides a multi-sensory approach to learning
- develops language and communication skills
- develops thinking skills
- provides depth and reflection in every session

### **Godly Play can help you see and do things differently**

#### **In Godly Play children discover who God is**

*"In most religious education children are told who God is.  
In Godly Play children discover who God is."*

Godly play is an approach based on Montessori principles – we respond to the child's request to 'help me do it by myself.' This puts the teacher in the role of spiritual supporter or guide who fully accepts that each child has his or her own relationship with God already. The teaching takes place in different ways at the same time: it is multi-modal and multi-sensory.

#### **Teaching with time**

Through the regular, predictable shape of each Godly Play session, children are implicitly introduced to the importance of and need to set aside and structure our time when we prepare to come close to God. This patterning of time allows not only for preparation and a period dwelling on being in the presence of God through Scripture, but also allows time for discerning a personal response to such experience as well as time set aside to journey on from this intimate experience back into 'everyday' life. The patterning of time helps the child to recognize safe enough ways of risking the emotional investment to become deeply engaged and open to God and to themselves. Children are helped to recognize the significant personal thresholds that need to be crossed as we do this. They are indirectly taught the spiritual strategies of entering and leaving devotional time.

A 'lesson' adopts the established pattern of Christian worship. Entering the playroom is the first threshold, marked by a personal greeting at the door. Preparation both individually and collectively occurs as the children gather in a circle around the storyteller, sharing news and settling down in expectation of the day's presentation. Next, God's word in the form of a story is presented as something to which a special kind of attention is paid by both adults and children alike – a mysterious gift rather than as narrative entertainment or platform for a teaching point. Time follows for 'collective response' as the group of children and adult(s) wonder together about the many meanings and resonances for them in the presentation. Then time is allowed for individual response and further discovery of meaning as the children each choose for themselves ways to work/play using a wide variety of art and craft materials, or the story materials themselves 'in their own way'. Typically this personal time ends with re-forming as a group, as a community, and a 'feast' (of juice and biscuits) is shared together to mark this period. The session ends with a word and or gesture of personal blessing for each child as they both leave behind and take with them something of their experiences.

### **Teaching with space/order**

In a Godly Play room the design of space serves to focus the child's predominately visual attention on images and ideas at the heart of the Christian understanding of God. We may say something is important every week, but what is seen every week will have a far more penetrating effect as the children begin to construct their own faith. Images referring to the Incarnation and the Resurrection are placed in primary lines of sight for the child's eye level on entering the room (e.g. a nativity set of the Holy Family and an empty Cross). Secondary referents, e.g. Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus Light of the World, a candle, are close by.

Children are involved in helping to care for room, perhaps setting up in their own way a prayer corner, arranging flowers etc. As much as possible the room teaches without words about the care and valuing of its contents, and about an implicit order that helps us grapple with the great variety and mystery of God's ways. One area of the room is set out with

material used to present Old Testament narratives (e.g. days of creation images, Noah's ark, figures of Abraham and Sarai, Moses, the Prophets, Exodus narratives etc). The materials that support the Gospel narrative is located in its own space, on a different set of open shelves, easily surveyed by the children at all times.

On other shelves parables and saying of Jesus are found, often in closed golden boxes to suggest these are both like gifts and somehow less transparent in meaning. This deliberate structuring of resources becomes familiar to children, as they learn where to find favorite stories for themselves and learn their way around a visual Bible and its different genres without in any way stressing their developing literacy. As they sit to hear the 'story of the day' they are physically surrounded by and visually cued to make connections with other familiar stories on the shelves. And in the response times children often choose to combine materials from different presentations as they playfully explore how they feel one (e.g. Old Testament) narrative is illuminated by another (e.g. New Testament).

### **Teaching with materials**

Religious ideas and stories are given tangible form that encourages the child to 'handle' and work out the ideas and their feelings for themselves. This helps the children to really get 'in' to the story in reflective and 'playful' frame of mind – the mode in which they do their deepest 'work', engaging with their whole selves – mind body and spirit.

Every story or 'lesson' has its own handcrafted set of figures or objects, made from wood or fabric wherever possible. The children are encouraged to handle these things (just as the ideas they symbolize) with great care – as things of beauty, meaning and which will last. There is nothing plastic, disposable or broken. The quality of the materials is matched by an attempt to strive for simplicity of design. Figures do not have detailed features or colorful clothes, for example, to allow children to project imaginatively their own feelings and ideas about the narrative.

A sheltered carpentry workshop and Christian community based in Norwich (St Michael's Cottage Crafts) has begun to meet orders for Godly Play story sets. They seem able to produce sets that are both beautiful and inexpensive. And whilst Churches and others wishing to take up this model may need to find more money than usual in the initial stages of furnishing a 'Godly Play' curriculum – these materials can last for generations, unlike magazines etc. It may be more realistic to buy materials bit by bit, and you may find (sometimes elderly) carpenters and others within your Church who would be pleased to help your children's work in this non-contact way.

Story sets not only cover important Biblical narratives, but can also help you to explore Church tradition and liturgical expression. There are child-sized sets for baptism,

communion, the church year – seasons and colors, saints, A Lenten puzzle and much more, with scope to develop more to follow local Church custom. Godly Play rooms can also include a child-high altar table, lectern, pulpit, sacristy if desired. I have seen children explore all kinds of feelings and understandings of Church and faith in this ‘Church corner’ in ways they would rarely feel at ease to do in ‘Church’.

### **Teaching with language**

As Godly Play has been developing over many years (since the 1970s), it has been possible to discern how particular forms of words are best able to help tell the essence of each story presentation. There are well-tested scripts for stories told in Godly Play style that say only what has to be said, and do so in a way that children seem to absorb the language into their own ‘play’ and in the case of older children, into their spoken and written prayer. The emphasis is on simplicity, getting to the essence of the story rather than ‘exciting’ elaboration. Silence and gesture are also treated as powerful languages for spiritual expression, and children are eager to pick up on this. There can be more drama and omnipotence conveyed in a silent gesture than in an attempt to speak as God might speak (Brian Blessed or Laurence Olivier?)

The set of story scripts, which teachers are encouraged to learn by heart – never read from the book -allow for subtle cross referencing between the language and phrases in different stories so that the child learns ‘refrains’ and connectedness of scripture without realizing it, just like mother tongue. For example, a number of the stories talk about “when God came so close to Moses/Noah/Abraham/Mary/Paul, and Moses/etc came so close to God, then...” as a way of speaking about their special relationship with God and its consequences. Having a familiar script also enables the children to internalize the story over a period of years, since it is told the same way every time, yet each time they will doubtless bring fresh understanding and perceptions as they ‘master’ the basic drama and can enter at new levels of sophistication. (Compare with the experience of struggling to learn a new hymn. At first we may concentrate mainly on getting to grips with the tune, and any refrain, but with practice and familiarity the meaning of the words can be savored, and even old favorites can still surprise us with ‘new’ ideas or phrases we’d never noticed before).

Finally, there is, of course, scope for supporting the simplified scripted Bible story telling using the story materials with verbatim readings from the Bible. A good time for this is at the ‘feast’.

### **Teaching with people and with respect**

In Godly Play there are usually 2 (but no more) adults present. Each has a carefully distinguished role. The ‘story-teller’ leads group time, tells story and focuses on the

presentation of God's word – and as such is more 'spiritually' engaged. The 'door-person' helps in more practical ways like an usher or deacon assistant. However, this includes the very important duty of greeting the children individually as they begin the session and helping them 'collect themselves' in order to begin. This benefits from a good knowledge of the different characteristics of each child in the group. The door-person also may sit to one side with any child who is finding it really hard to focus in the group – i.e. deals with the behavior issues in a way that tries not to disrupt the rest of the group wherever possible.

The storyteller is emphatically not an actor or entertainer, but really listens to what God may be revealing to her too as the story unfolds and as the children respond. Unusually there is little eye contact. The storyteller is not the focus; instead the unfolding story or religious message is the focus. The teacher creates a sacred space but then 'gets out of the way' to allow the children to meet God directly. This is wonderfully powerful, and has to be seen to be believed – it turns ordinary teaching and storytelling techniques on their head and creates a compelling contemplative level of attention in even the youngest of children.

A key element in the Storyteller's role is to lead the 'wondering' period in response to the story or presentation. Key wondering questions are:

- I wonder what you like best about this story
- I wonder which is the most important part?
- I wonder where you are in this story?
- I wonder if there is any part we could leave out, and still have all the story we need?

*(Wondering in response to liturgical presentations and in response to parable presentations can follow a slightly different pattern to help the children get the most from those genres See Teaching Godly Play)*

The storyteller invites reflections on the story, accepting all contributions as equally valuable early attempts to verbalize often ineffable insights. There is no attempt to manipulate responses to reach a premature 'teaching point' or to explain what the story 'really means'. This non-coercive pedagogy ensures that the children experience and learn the most vital lesson of all: that scripture holds never ending layers of meaningfulness for each one of us, rather than collection of finite answers or recipes for Christian life. It allows the child to experience for themselves how God can speak in personally meaningful ways through the Bible and Christian language.

Many other approaches to Christian education that seems to be in line with 'good' educational psychology strive for an experiential element. Usually this involves asking the child to identify a familiar life experience and then link this to a religious message. Godly Play takes a different approach to experience – rather than depending on recalled ht~

experiences and analogical reasoning, it believes and trusts the long track record (!) of the Bible, when carefully presented to children, to have its own power to provide deep experiences in situ that will more naturally raise up meaningful connections in the child's own life. These connections are often most vividly explored in the children's artwork in the 'personal response' period. In this way, religious language and story are not just tagged on to add colour to our life experiences. The respect for the children's own insights and meaning making, regardless of whether or not these appear strictly 'orthodox' to our ear (and that may simply reflect their expressive limitations in any case), is carried over into the way the adults interact with the children during the 'personal response' period. This is when the children will be mainly playing 'in their own way' with the story sets or undertaking some creative work. They are not told how to play (other than not in a way that injures or disturbs others), so the story may undergo some significant variations in re-telling, usually as they project themselves into the narrative exploring important personal issues and emotions they need to bring before God. In this way they are both deepening their understanding of the sacred story and of themselves. Children engaged in art or craft work are not directed 'what to do' either. The adults in fact are very cautious about interrupting or pre-judging the children's work. The emphasis is on inviting the children to comment on what they have done and find their own words for what is meaningful or of value, rather than teacher commentary.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The heart of Godly Play is that it does not depend on knowledge, but on personal response and spiritual engagement with God's word within a supportive, safe community of friends. Consequently it 'works' with all ages, including adults, and it works well in groups with a wide age or ability range. It began as an approach for very young children – aged 3-6. However, it lends itself to the most sophisticated theological reflection too; I use it with ordinands. The challenge now is to ensure that children are still included in Godly Play, as increasingly those working with adults are finding it has such deep potential to reach people directly, simply, 'where they are'.

**Dr. Rebecca Nye**