

Godly Play

At St Mark's Episcopal Church



Room 206, 2nd floor of Parish House
Sundays at 10:10 a.m.
Kindergarten and 1st Grade

Godly Play is a creative and imaginative approach to Christian formation

Godly Play is based on long established, tried and tested approaches

Godly Play uses symbols and objects as well as words

Godly Play values process, openness and discovery

Godly Play encourages people to make meaning for themselves

Godly Play invites listeners into stories and encourages them to connect the stories with personal experience

Godly Play is a non-coercive way to encourage children to move into larger dimensions of belief and faith, through wondering questions and open-ended response time.

Godly Play is a way of preparing children to join in the worship and life of their congregations as they develop a deeper understanding of stories, symbols and rites

Godly Play is a variation of the Montessori tradition of religious education

Godly Play influences the church's support of spiritually rich practices with children.

The heart of Godly Play:

- Creating Sacred Space
- Building and working in community
- Learning religious language
- Using religious language to make meaning

A Godly Play session includes a time to:

- get ready
- tell a story using objects and artefacts
- explore the story more with open questions and discussion
- respond with a free choice using a variety of materials – art... silence... play... writing...
- enjoy a simple feast and sharing

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 some 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 ways to become deeply engaged and open to God and to themselves. 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 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 adults 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' 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. 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 narrative is illuminated by another.

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. 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.



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.

Teaching with people and with respect

In Godly Play there are two 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?

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.



