



Godly Play - let the adults play!

How can something that was developed for children - especially something with the word 'play' in it - be suitable for older people?

Godly Play, which was founded by Jerome Berryman, is an approach that helps people to explore their faith through story and to enhance their spiritual experience through wonder and play. It is a well established method of spiritual accompaniment that is based on research and practice in the fields of education, psychology, theology and spirituality.

When I discovered Godly Play fourteen years ago my understanding of play dramatically changed and this has been life changing in terms of my own spiritual journey and how I view my role as an accompanier rather than as a teacher. I believe that story and play are essential for our well being whatever age we are. Play enables us to enter into the creative process and where there is genuine play we are living in the present. People who train as Godly Play mentors for children find that Godly Play also 'works' for them as adults.

My church in Sheffield uses Godly Play with our children - but we also use it with people of different ages and needs and in many different contexts: children and staff in schools, adults who have mental health problems, people training for ministry, at a support group for international women, in adult fellowship groups, for intergenerational worship and in care homes for older people. Other churches in the area are also finding creative ways to use Godly Play, and Sheffield based 'Mutual Blessings' supports spiritually-enriching practices using the method and principles of Godly Play with people of all ages or needs, but especially those who may be on the edge of the church's ministry.

Four years ago a couple from my church began offering Godly Play in two care settings for older people as an alternative to the traditional worship service. It was warmly welcomed by both the elders and the staff. We realised that adaptations to

Berryman's method of accompaniment for children need to be made if we are to offer the best we can for older people. The spiritual needs of an older person are obviously different from that of a child and Godly Play can serve different purposes depending on the stage of a person's spiritual journey. For example, we are very intentional about Christian formation when working with children, whereas for people in their third and fourth age it is accompaniment as they make meaning out of their life's story that might be more important. In addition, the older person may have physical or cognitive needs which require adaptations of the story and other elements of the session.

Lois Howard in the USA has been using Godly Play for over ten years with a group of older people who have dementia and her work can be found on the website for the Godly Play Foundation. However, there is much work to be done regarding adaptations of the method for all the contexts in which Godly Play can be offered in care settings in the UK. Hence the Godly Play with Elders Project which Mutual Blessings started in January 2016. We are working collaboratively with practitioners and academics in relevant fields and are inviting everyone, nationally and internationally, to join our Godly Play Elders Team. There is an online space where people can share their stories and experiences, view resources, find all the latest updates on this work, ask questions and interact with other team members. You can find information and join the team by searching online 'Mutual Blessings Sheffield'

An important aspect of the project is the reflective evaluation carried out after the sessions, which includes inviting feedback from the older people and the care staff. This is a comment from one older person:

'If church had been like this when I was younger - I would have stayed.'

We want to create spaces that improve the well being of people - whatever their age. We realise that the name 'Godly Play' can create a barrier, especially because the word play is often misunderstood - and so in care settings we call it 'Stories for the Soul. But - however we name it - let the adults play!

Kathryn Lord is an accredited trainer for Godly Play UK

For more information about Godly Play please visit www.godlyplay.uk