



## Stories for the Soul for those living with dementia

### A. Background and description

Godly Play—which when used with older people may be usefully retitled 'Stories for the Soul'—offers an alternative and innovative liturgy for people of all ages and needs. An international three-year project (2016–18) on 'Godly Play with Elders' is discovering the many benefits that it brings; including being especially significant for the well being of people who are living with dementia.

Godly Play is a creative and imaginative approach to Christian nurture and spiritual life developed by the theologian and educationalist Jerome Berryman (J.W. Berryman, 2009 *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, Denver: Morehouse Education Resources). The Godly Play method is centred on the pioneering educational work of Italy's first female physician Maria Montessori who, in the 1930s, worked in an asylum and in slums with children who were considered by most people at the time to be unteachable. She discovered that these children could be reached by engaging their hands and their senses. She found and followed the strengths, interests and passions of the children and created the right environment for them to flourish. Berryman developed the Godly Play method, basing it upon Montessorian person-centred values, for children, but the method brings spiritual nurture for all participants of any age.

A familiar liturgical pattern is used as the process for every Godly Play session:

- (1) *Gathering*: each person is individually welcomed as they join a physical circle, overseen by a storyteller and doorperson;
- (2) *Preparation*: the community is built both by the storyteller and doorperson and also peer-to-peer, and people are helped to get ready with a song or prayer;
- (3) *Word*: the storyteller presents a story—often biblical or about the Christian tradition—using sensorial and kinaesthetic materials;
- (4) *Wondering*: the story is reflected upon as a group;
- (5) *Response Time*: the participants are invited to a time to express meaning, for example, by painting, reading, writing, playing, talking, praying;
- (6) *Feast*: food and drink is enjoyed together—with prayers and perhaps songs—before a final blessing.

The 'wondering' and 'responding' to the bible's sacred stories is, in fact, a contemporary expression of the ancient spiritual practice of *lectio divina*. Instead of meditating abstractly on Christian scriptures, there is opportunity for play (in the true sense of the word) in a creative (perhaps artistic) and kinaesthetic way. The creative process of Godly Play is a means for people to explore—verbally and non-verbally—questions that include: existential meaning; spiritual identity; how to belong to the church; life-skills; and acquisition of language that helps relate the religious and secular aspects of a person's identity.

The method affirms and honours elements in our Christian tradition which have been less evident in recent centuries: non-verbal communications, quietness, receptivity, awe and wonder. The practice models kindness and mutuality by how it organises space, materials, and the community of people, and seeks to embody the biblical ethic of how the people of God are to live together.

## **B. The benefits of Godly Play as a participatory liturgy for people living with dementia**

A Sheffield *Godly Play UK* project— which is looking at how the method can bring spiritual wellbeing to people in all areas of the church’s ministry— chose one of its priorities as ministry with older people in care settings, including those living with dementia. There was encouraging anecdotal evidence from others in the UK who were beginning to try out this method, as well as evidence from Lois Howard’s ministry over eleven years in the USA (Lois Howard, 2015, *Using Godly Play with Alzheimer’s and Dementia patients*, Denver: Morehouse Education Resource; available at <https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/usinggodlyplaywithalzheimersanddementiapatients>).

With funding from local and national providers, the Sheffield project is being tried and tested week by week in a variety of care settings in Sheffield, in the UK and internationally: nursing homes, residential independent living, mental health chaplaincy, dementia cafes and church based groups. The majority of these are care settings for people living with dementia.

The method creates an environment that belongs to the circle of participants and the spiritual accompaniers are guests in the care setting who wish to enable participation and hospitality from the posture of guest. It is apparent that many needs are being addressed within a liturgy that enables mutuality and empowerment: the valuing of individuals and the building of community; reminiscence; mental and spiritual health support; maintaining self and purpose.

## **C. Practice Narratives**

What follows are some practice narratives—with fictitious names—arising from the reflective practice from throughout the project. They illustrate how the liturgical methods have a profound effect in practice, for individuals, and are divided into four sections (C.I.–C.IV.):

### ***C.I. The valuing of individuals and building of community***

The community, which includes residents, care staff, relatives and sometimes children, is built up and individuals are respected:

#### **Setting 1**

"The care staff and the residents of a care setting for independent living, were having difficulty with the way Arthur, who has dementia, was responding to them. The chaplain observed that the Godly Play sessions allowed Arthur to work well in community. The individual welcome given to each person and the building of the circle meant that Arthur felt valued and therefore accepted the request of the storyteller to let others have a turn at speaking, whereas in other situations this would have resulted in confrontation."

#### **Setting 2** (this example was taken Lois Howard, 2015,—see above)

“Every Wednesday morning 16 pre-schoolers marched in and sat at the feet of the 'Grandmas' and 'Grandpas' for a Godly Play story. [They] would wonder together after the story and then sing together. Finally the children would give hugs to all the 'Grandmas' and 'Grandpas'. This was the highlight of the week for both the children and the older adults. For some of the Alzheimer's folks it was the only time in the week that they smiled.”

### ***C.II. Reminiscence***

Reminiscence can take place during any part of the liturgy:

#### **Setting 3**

“Godly Play was tried out in a Bible study for Spanish speaking people with early stage Alzheimer’s disease and found to be tremendously successful. One Christmas, for example, one participant responded to the ‘I wonder’ questions by reciting a poem she had learned when she was a child. Another woman told us that Fidel Castro took Christmas away from them in Cuba. She then described Cuba without Christmas as if it had just happened yesterday. During the telling of the Creation story participants energetically echoed my words every time I said, ‘And God saw that it was good.’ The program kept people engaged and helped them recover lost memories.”

#### **Setting 4**

“Each person in the group is given a gold ‘Story Box’ in which they can store objects that are special to them, including from their life story and from the Godly Play stories. The sensory stimulation helps them—during the individual response time—to access memories of their own story as well as the Christian story. The Story boxes are given to everyone in the session, including carers, so that the people with dementia are not singled out and so that all take part.”



Caption - Each person chooses what objects they would like to store in their gold 'Story box'.

#### ***C.III. Mental and spiritual health support***

Godly Play leads to discovery and meaning making—both verbally and non-verbally—by allowing time for reflection. The older people with dementia are affirmed, esteemed and valued:

#### **Setting 5**

“Because the participants had been able to enter into the story of Holy week—which was told using a beautiful wooden model of Jerusalem—this enabled a deep reflection about the washing of feet and the cross. A visiting sister had joined us and, whilst holding the hand of her brother who has dementia, wondered with the group about grace, love and forgiveness in family relationships.”

#### **Setting 6**

“During the Response Time people were given the choice as to what object they wanted to hold. Dora held a compact mirror and chatted to a member of the team about how at 80 years old she had written an article for a newspaper on fashion for older women. The conversation and mood then shifted, as it often does with Dora, when she began to focus on the mistakes she had made in life. The team member suggested that they both look into the mirror and say to themselves, and to each other—‘You are a beautiful person.’ They laughed great big belly laughs, as they did this.”

#### **Setting 7**

“Barbara, laid out the ten commandments from the story and a large shell on a coffee table and spent half an hour drawing the shell and writing some commandments inside and around a big heart. She was pleased with her finished picture— 'Do not covet what others have' was written out three times along with a new commandment 'Honour yourself.' She explained that she no longer has parents and so had written a new commandment.”



Caption: Barbara responding to the story of the ten commandments

#### ***C.IV. Maintaining self and purpose***

The strengths, passions and abilities of the elders are followed, and they are enabled to bless one another in liturgy which is fully participatory:

#### **Setting 8**

“During the Response Time a lady was telling the storyteller how she used to sing in her church choir but felt increasingly excluded from the congregation. Together they quietly practised singing 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow' and the lady was surprised at how the tune just came to her. At the final blessing this lady beautifully led the group in the singing.”

#### **Setting 9**

“After the story of the ten commandments Alice (who has very poor hearing and sight) arranged the tree blocks to mirror the way the story had been set out. Alice showed off her creation with a beaming smile, thinking back to the time when her teacher had told her that she was ‘no good at art.’”



Caption: Alice with her arrangements of the tree blocks as the ten commandments.

#### **Setting 10**

“During the Response Time Edna chose to write out John 3:16 'For God so loved the world ...' and was pleased to read these words out to everyone during the Feast.”

## Setting 11

“Performing an act of loving service to the group by always volunteering to wash up after the Feast was very important to Sheila who was the wife of a retired minister.”

### **D. International links and collaboration with others**

The sharing of reflective practice stories from around the world (Europe, Australia and the US) allows for an evolving and exciting innovation in liturgical action using Godly Play for people with dementia. A chapter on how to adapt the method for use with older people (including those who are living with dementia) in the book *Godly Play—European Perspectives on Practice and Research* Martin Steinhauser and Rune Oystese, Eds (2018, Waxmann: Munster), is leading to wider communication.

The project has made presentations at the Research Symposium on Ageing and Spirituality (March, 2017 and March, 2018) and at the New Contextual Church Conference (April, 2018). There is collaboration with others interested in this field of work: writing articles for the *Christian Council on Ageing*; working together with trainers for *Playlist for Life*; joining forces with *Livability* to organise a conference on Creative approaches to dementia; and presenting workshops at *Care Home Roadshows* and at several Anglican and Methodist workshops on ministry with older people.

### **E. The challenges and the work ahead.**

Challenges of the Godly Play sessions include: adapting the story materials so people with dementia and people with visual and aural impairment can engage their senses and access the story; adapting the choices in the response time so they are appropriate for people with dementia; enabling the elders to serve each other safely in the feast time. The varied nature of the needs of people with dementia and the uniqueness of each group of elders means there is no ‘one size fits all’. Our method is to establish / gather / suggest a variety of best possible practices from which those at local level can draw from and adapt to their unique situation, and to develop support and training materials.

The words ‘Godly’ and ‘Play’ can be misunderstood and are a barrier to care staff, to elders and to their relatives, and for this reason the sessions can be helpfully renamed “Stories for the Soul.” Wider communication issues are being addressed by the launch of a “Stories for the Soul” website [www.storiesforthesoul.org](http://www.storiesforthesoul.org) to communicate to care settings and to Christians involved in ministry amongst people with dementia the benefits that Godly Play can bring. There are many challenges for under-resourced care-settings for staff to be liberated to effectively support our voluntary sessions and there are financial and time challenges for churches and volunteers of sustaining this ministry of spiritual care.

To lead Godly Play sessions well it is highly recommended that people attend the 3 day accredited course provided by *Godly Play UK*: the investment of time and money for the training and resources can sometimes be an obstacle. It is encouraging that from the three diverse care settings that have been worked most closely with in Sheffield, three employees have chosen to train as spiritual accompaniers in Godly Play: a chaplain for the Methodist Homes Association, an activities co-ordinator and a mental health nurse.

The liturgical integrity of Godly Play demonstrates that there are different ways to approach community life together; for employees and residents and relatives and other visitors including

volunteers themselves and there is the potential for this to help bring a change in the culture of care. An adaptation of Godly Play—called Deep Talk—for use in secular settings may prove effective for the training of care staff to understand the ethos of this method and to enable them to think through purpose, value, hope and meaning in their workplace. Deep Talk may also prove beneficial for elders who may have no religious background but would benefit from such a story based participatory method.

The Godly Play session ends with a 'Feast'—a new communion for people living with dementia which also uses some of the verbal and non-verbal language of Godly Play would be a very valuable addition to the liturgy of Stories for the Soul.

## **References**

Berryman, J.W. (2009). *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of children*. Denver: Morehouse Education Resources.

Howard, L. W. (2015). *Using Godly Play with Alzheimer's and Dementia patients*. Denver: Morehouse Education Resource Available at:  
<https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/usinggodlyplaywithalzheimersanddementiapatients>

"Godly Play—European Perspectives on Practice and Research" Martin Steinhauser and Rune Oystese (Eds), Waxmann, 2018 Munster, New York

Website: [www.storiesforthesoul.org](http://www.storiesforthesoul.org)