

Doing Godly Play with adults – what are the differences?

In the UK and other parts of Europe Godly Play has spread equally as something for adults as for children. I've been sharing it with ordinands in the Cambridge Theological Federation for approx 14 years now. Moreover our 3 day 'core accredited trainings' in Godly Play are experiences of 'Godly Play with adults' too.

The word 'training' is almost awkward for these courses since we understand Godly Play as a form of spiritual guidance/direction no matter who's in the room, so our 3 day courses hope to provide an opportunity for seriously playful and playfully serious spiritual exploration for all. And it is from that adult experience of Godly Play discussions then arise about how this can also be offered to children, and specifically what the adult role to facilitate that needs to take to do that well (eg openness to the spirituality of others, curbing their power, tuning into a spirit of blessing, creating and maintaining safe space etc).

So, to answer your question about differences in doing this with adults - my initial reaction is that there does not need to be a difference - just authentic entering into the story and process by the door person and storyteller. And trust that what needs to happen will happen.

But, there is extra work with an adult group, if they've not done this before.

First if they have an idea that this is usually offered to children, it is essential to make the ground rule that this is not the place for anyone to fall into role play of (stereotyped) children - I tend to say 'be yourself, this is for you'.

Second, I explain that I sit on the ground to do this, and invite them to join me there, if they wish, but that if they feel more at ease on a chair that's fine - that what matters is a sense that we can get into this together.

Entering the space

If at all possible you should have a trained door person with you and be able to move from the 'introductory space' to the Godly Play space. There might be someone in the group who has prior experience of Godly Play who would be comfortable to welcome each person at the threshold - though there is the risk of it not being done well which might set the wrong tone. If there is no door person the adults can be asked to pause at the threshold and 'be still' before they join the circle. If there is no 'other space' then the adults will just be shifting from chairs to the floor. But don't launch straight into the story - a 'building the circle'/opening prayer helps to get ready.

Choosing a story

If I was doing a first example with a group of adults like you, I would choose a core story rather than one of the vol 6 enrichment stories. The linear form of the vol 6 stories somewhat assumes familiarity with the process of Godly Play, and core stories from which these develop. Naturally your fellow adults are likely to know the core stories in the sense of being Biblically literate, but knowing these through image, movement and action (via GP) is different. So, I would really encourage you to do a core story - eg the great family, or exodus, or exile and return etc.

Wondering

The wondering with adults can be more uphill at first - though not always. Children are especially natural at entering parables; whilst adults, sadly, can be especially inhibited. So the storyteller/spiritual accompanist might need to be especially open when inviting and responding to adult wondering. Take time, let it grow. But do give clear non verbal clues that it's ok to speak!

- sit back when the story ends to make clear this is now going to be a different kind of work,
- pause,
- look up, warmly and around the group, but gently so as not to intrude on those still 'in' the story,
- start to wonder yourself inwardly, then,
- hesitantly, ask the first question...and
- look up and back down to the story repeatedly..
- .give them time!)

Obviously it is ok if a group chooses to wonder inwardly/silently - but if you are partly doing this with view to later discussion of different methods - its good there's some verbal wondering too so that part has been 'demonstrated' too.

Response

When the wondering has got sufficient energy - that's time to move to the 'free response' part, 'taking your wondering further in your own ways'. We don't direct adults or children to specific activities at all. I mention some of the options –

- some people like to sit and think for longer,
- some people like to write or doodle,
- some people like something else in their hands - clay, pastels, charcoal, sewing, something to make -,
- some like to read,
- or take a walk and of course,
- sometimes the best thing is to spend time with the story yourself - you can get it out and work with it how you want to (make sure you've put it away so that it's no longer in front of you/implicitly 'yours' to enable this).

So we provide similar rich range of options for adult response as children, though with an eye to adult creativity - eg clay rather than play doh, water colours, finger labyrinths, oil paint, tapestry, books of prayer/information etc at an adult level - though that does not rule out picture books, especially art books. Just ensure that the creative response materials don't look patronising.

One more crucial thing to tell adults - it's vital to reassure them that this part of the process is just for them, and that no one will ask them to share what they do or think in this part with anyone else. Children also need that reassurance and promise, but sadly adults even more so.

Ending

And do end the personal time with a re-forming of the community, coming together for a feast - however basic. And a blessing to end and go forth.

So, with adults, I don't change any part of the process. It's such natural spiritual process - liturgically shaped, dancing between personal and communal response, verbal and non verbal expressions of spirituality etc - I don't want to mess with that!