

Godly Play – small groups in school

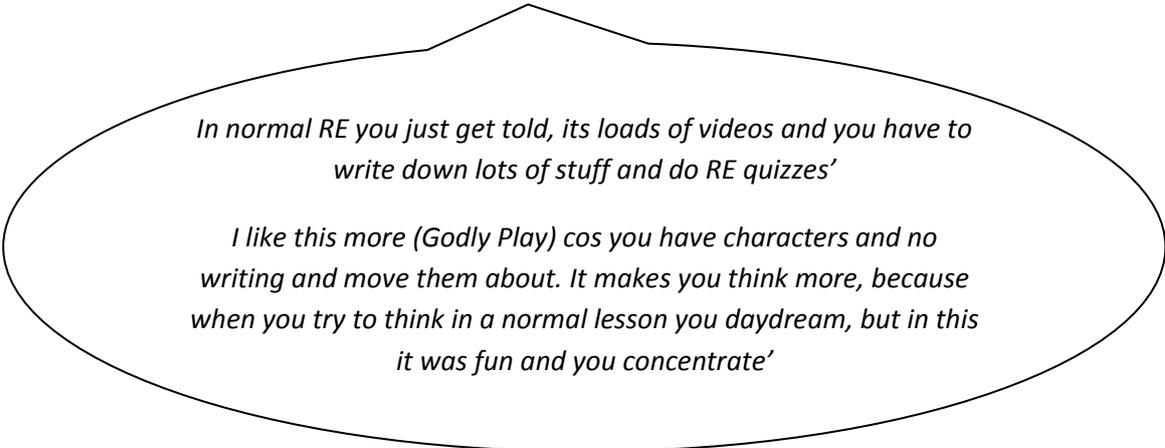
Extracted from: Rebecca Nye, *Soul Searching Report*, 2013 The Church Schools of Cambridge.

The following is an extract from a report by Rebecca Nye (*Soul Searching at Park Street School*). The project involved a year long, multi-faceted exploration of spirituality in the life of a school. This included sessions using Godly Play, some for pupils and some for staff. This extract focusses on how the pupils responded to Godly Play, and found in it an accessible and attractive medium for their spiritual insightfulness and needs.

Godly Play is an atypical approach to RE. It takes the view that children already have a rich inner spiritual life and that a function of religious language can be help them to find ways to be more aware of that, to promote their capacity to think and speak about this kind of knowing. It has an ‘experiential’ emphasis, and is built around exploration of religious narratives or traditions (Judeo-Christian, though some have extended this to other faiths). It was first taken up by some UK schools in 2000, and now makes a contribution to RE in many schools. For example, Godly Play is a core part of the Diocese of London RE Schemes of work¹, widely promoted and resourced for schools in the Diocese of Oxford².

This was not something teachers at Park Street already used, so I was invited to first demonstrate it to the staff, and then use this in sessions (whole class and small group) with pupils.

In summary, pupils of all ages responded very positively to this kind of RE,



In normal RE you just get told, its loads of videos and you have to write down lots of stuff and do RE quizzes’

I like this more (Godly Play) cos you have characters and no writing and move them about. It makes you think more, because when you try to think in a normal lesson you daydream, but in this it was fun and you concentrate’

Some teachers also expressed a sense of relief and release, for example that parables had a lot more to them than they’d realised, and that even familiar (Christian) material could be rather interesting!

¹ <http://schools.london.anglican.org/99/re>

² <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/mission-ministry/youth-children/children/godly-play/godly-play-for-schools/>

- Overall, Godly Play sessions promoted an **imaginative, questioning and hands-on** opportunities for using religious language to explore and make meaning. At the end of sessions, I was often asked ‘do you have more of those’ or ‘when can we do that again’?
- Godly Play sessions provided a context in which sharing and probing a religious narrative allowed pupils to **become more aware of important personal/spiritual concerns**. For example, reflection on the ‘pearl of great price’ stimulated thoughts about loss and connection to family members who had died, who were in danger or far away, and what they’d be prepared to ‘give up’ to secure those things/people of great value to them.
- The playful, but structured, style of Godly Play meant **deep things could be explored** without being heavy.
- Pupils’ **natural learning/recall** of the religious narrative presented was impressive, despite (or because of!) a lack of formal activities to ensure this. Returning some weeks later, groups would enthusiastically re-tell the story in considerable detail.
- Pupils found the visible and tangible objects used in Godly Play helped them to see ideas and make connections more easily, providing a visual and kinaesthetic ways to express the spiritual sense in the stories or in their minds. It **cuts through the burden of wordiness** pupils can feel restricts their engagement with religious material.
- Teachers commented on the **participation** of shy or less able pupil. This is a typical finding with this approach – it gets round some of the traditional privileges that more able and more verbal pupils have.
- Godly Play sessions at Park Street confirmed that, with the appropriate tools, very **young children have a capacity for meaning making from religious topics** that equals or even surpasses the more inhibited capacity of older children.

This is illustrated in the following account of a small group session with year 1 pupils.

Parable of the Pearl of Great Price: Small Group from Class 1 – age 5-6

The session began with a lot of excitement as they recognised the ‘gold box’ which had contained a different parable (the lost sheep) that we’d done with their whole class some weeks before. On seeing the box, they spontaneously retold the story of the lost sheep. At first they seemed disappointed that this time it would be a different story. That contrasts with pupils’ usual complaint that too often it feels like there’s repetition in RE – in this case, they wanted to revisit the material.

Using the Godly Play approach to parables (Vol 3 The Complete Guide to Godly Play), the first stage encouraged children to enter into a really imaginative, creative frame of mind – to put literal, linear thinking to one side in order to help get into the metaphorical mindset of parables. Pieces from the box were considered one at a time, not to ‘decide’ what they would become in the story, but rather to imagine an infinite set of possibilities and give the pupils permission to feel personally engaged in a meaning making process. This clearly appealed to these children, whose creative and lateral thinking was playful and full of energy.

In the next stage, a preface was spoken outlining that this parable explores a question: *what could the kingdom of heaven be like?* Jesus’ parable words were spoken with care (in less than 50 words) whilst slowly moving physical images (taken from the box) to help to see the story. Visually, this story has great impact as the merchant searching for a pearl ends up giving up the entire contents of his home (represented by about 10 separate wooden images) and even walls of his home, for a single pearl. In this short, but key, part of the session (presenting the religious content) the children were very still, focused and really gripped by the unfolding and surprising action.

A stage of ‘wondering’ aloud followed (carefully guided), as the children enthusiastically tried to make sense of what they’d just seen and felt. They gave the protagonists feelings, motive and character. In so doing, they playfully opened up themes including – *morality and stealing, what makes someone deeply happy versus materialism, sharing and inequality, love of neighbour*. None of these issues was suggested to them – these were meanings that arose for them from this story.

A period of free play with the story objects developed very naturally – the pupils quite literally took hold of the story to explore it further. At this point the small group was very collaborative, and having the pieces to move and play with enhanced their ability to see, listen and debate each others’ ideas. They also seemed deeply contented at this point – singing and humming. Their conclusion was a re-arrangement of the material, using the ‘walls’ of all the dwellings where the merchant had searched into one big place which they decided was ‘better’ as it could now be *‘for everyone, and for everything’* (putting all the pearls and home contents in it).

It was interesting how this resonated with themes this group had discussed with me previously – about death and dying, and their imagining that in heaven people need to make new homes from scratch. Finally, they were prompted to wonder about ‘what the pearl could really be?’ They suggested it *could be like a power* – because it had the power to create homes for everyone and provide everything people needed in life – pointing to the new

picture they'd made with the story. This thought seemed to touch on a sense of deep mystery for one boy, inspiring him to tell us about the idea that there was a time before anything was created, even before day and night, light and dark.

Although the predominant mood of this session was open-ended and playful, it is possible to see significant, natural, exploration with the question 'what might the kingdom of heaven be like?' in the discussion described above. .

Unfortunately, the session ran out of time. The children were frustrated by that. They said they wanted more time. In particular, they wanted time to draw at this point. They were right to feel that – and the next stage in 'proper' Godly Play would provide that. Amongst other things, this would have helped them to integrate or at least focus/manage some of the otherwise overwhelming volume and depth of thought experienced in this session.

Some key points from this session (and others)

- 1) Even the youngest children have profound spiritual insight in response to religious language.
- 2) Teachers can ease children's access and help them to communicate spiritual thought when allowing them to speak in the 'native' languages of childhood: play and story, and art.
- 3) Dialogue between children can produce rich spiritual conversation, especially if it is in a small group in which the adult is present to support them, but not to direct them.
- 4) The value of Godly Play materials/lessons is that it has worked out a way for the religious language speak for itself through an image, gesture or carefully planned phrase. This puts much less pressure on the teacher, and also helps to curtail unnecessary wordiness (which children complain of).
- 5) This session illustrates a wide range of moods. Spiritually sensitive RE needs to avoid being compartmentalised as 'just the very personal and reflective bit' – it's also about energy, debate, collaboration, difficult stuff and really enjoying yourself.

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