

Godly Play... with urban children?

How can something that requires children to sit quietly and respond individually work with a group of children that cannot listen to one another, sit still (at all), share attention, come with x-rated baggage, and a level of confidence in their boots? Well, it has not been a smooth ride, and I have been on a steep learning curve, but I can say that *it does*. The children who come, come regularly. They respond very positively to each session and are gradually building a growing vocabulary and language to describe faith. They are writing their own prayers and sharing in one another's prayers. They learn the stories and adapt them their own way; making connections with their own experiences and with other stories they have heard.

I have been running the club for about 20 months now. It runs every Monday after school, 3 weeks in every 4. The fourth is run as a normal after school club with games and activities. The children who attend are not from church going families, although many have been christened as babies. Mostly their experience of church is christenings and funerals.

I have found Godly Play to be an incredibly powerful approach for spiritual development with urban children. The needs of this group are different, and in some cases quite extreme compared to the other groups I have worked with, but nevertheless, the children are encountering God in the room, and are becoming more aware of the spiritual in the world around them as they become more fluent in "Godly language". They know that they are welcomed, loved and safe in our room. There is a continuity and stability in that space that they may not encounter outside of school. The adults offer unconditional love, though not without boundaries; boundaries that keep both themselves and others safe. In this space they hear stories, stories of people from long ago and far away, and yet they make connections with their own lives. Wondering about when they have felt lost or alone...where might they be in this story? Wondering about what is really important in this story, what could we leave out and still have all the story we need?

The children I work with come with baggage; well I suppose we all do, but their baggage seems far too heavy for their little shoulders sometimes. The Godly Play room is place where they can bring it, but hopefully put it down for an hour or so. One girl, who I know has had problems at school, came in one day and could not bring herself to join the circle. She seemed ashamed of herself and angry. She put herself right at the perimeter of the room. I invited her to join us, but she just shook her head, her lips pursed shut. Tears started to fall down her face but she just brushed them away. I told her that she was welcome any time to join us in the circle when she felt ready. As the story progressed, she edged forwards, and children made a space for her in the circle. When it was time for the feast she volunteered a prayer: "God, I am sorry for today. And thanks for the food and drink. Amen" She didn't need to say to God or us what had happened. She knew God knew and was listening.

Sometimes we have children of other faiths in the group. One Hindu girl who loved the storytelling said: "I'm a Hindu, I believe in Krishna. He's my god. He's blue you know." Another boy listening in added: "Is God blue? What colour is he really?" I wonder...

Another girl described hearing God's voice (after hearing the story of Exodus): "I was in a warm place, like my home and I kept hearing my name and I thought it was my mum and then I knew it was God." "Why was he calling your name?" "Because he loves me."

Another boy who has been a regular since the beginning of the club has ADHD. He finds it very difficult to be calm, or to let someone else have any attention. He is prone to shouting out, tantrums when he does not get his way, and making silly attention seeking noises during the story. However, he keeps coming every week. He finds listening to the stories hard, and yet he loves them. He particularly loves being the storyteller himself.

Another lad that we haven't seen for a while was fascinated by the idea of Jesus being born into a poor family. Why would God send his son to a poor family?

At first I was hesitant to tell the stories that describe the pattern of the church year, or the ritual of baptism, as we were not in a church setting. However, some of these seem to be favourites, particularly the story of baptism, with children very reverentially baptising the baby every week, and lighting candles for everyone in the room. The boy with ADHD is the first to identify which week we are on on our liturgical clock.

The model of Godly Play that I use may not look immediately like a "normal" session, and it has been through many different formats, but they all have a welcome, building the circle, story, wondering, response, feast and dismissal. They might not happen in that order. The latest version starts with the feast and building the circle combined. The children have just got out of school, and are thirsty and hungry, so it makes sense to start with the food and drink! We then have the story and wondering, and then the response. After tidy up time, the children return to the circle and they can share any work they want to, and we pray. I have to remember to leave enough time for this, as more children have something to pray each week.

Next week or the week after it might be different. An idea recently suggested to me was to start with a shared art project where everyone could participate in, where you can chat and build the circle as you work. We may try this soon. As I said at the beginning, Godly Play can really work with urban children, but you may need to be flexible and fit the format to your group. See what works for them.

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