



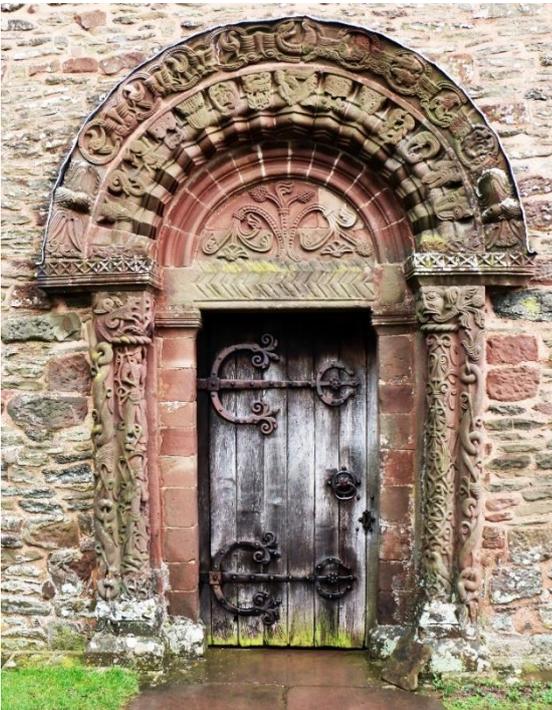
## Associates of Godly Play UK

# The Magazine

Issue 16

March 2025

### At the threshold



**Welcome to this sixteenth issue of our Godly Play UK magazine, which will reach you in the season of Lent.**

The Godly Play lesson of the 'Faces of Easter' recalls how Jesus went into the desert – a dangerous place – to find out more about who he was, and what his work was going to be. When we put these magazines together, we never know precisely who will come to read them, or what you may be looking for (although we've done our best to provide what we think you may need!). But we are delighted that you are here and hope you will find something that is for you within its pages.

*A Christian movement centred on childhood spirituality  
providing training to transform thinking and practice for the whole of life*

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## Building the circle

We have great news to share in this issue of the magazine. After a search which did not take too long, we have found new suppliers for our Godly Play resources and we are delighted to share the details with you. Jennyruth, a workshop near Ripon for people with learning disabilities, will be the main supplier. We shall continue to recommend the olive wood Holy Family made by craftsmen in Bethlehem.

We are delighted, too, that our Core Training Programme is once more beginning to flourish. There were two courses at St Padarn's Institute, organised by the Church in Wales, in February, and on page 22 you will find a list of five courses for the rest of the year. In addition, our online Introductions continue to attract significant numbers. We have received quite a lot of bursary applications in relation to these courses, and it has been good to be able to respond, thanks to the generous support of our Associates.

Following the success of our conference in Gloucester last year, we have decided that we can offer another conference and so we have booked St Andrew's Church in Rugby for 6 June 2026. Put the date in your diary now!

Supported by a substantial grant from a charitable trust, we have recently embarked on an exciting partnership with the Roman Catholic Education Service to develop Godly Play in their new school RE curriculum. Andrea Harrison tells us more about this on page 20.

Godly Play was developed as a result of a great deal of thought and research by Jerome Berryman, who carried on thinking and researching throughout his long life. In the spirit of this commitment to evaluation and deeper understanding, we offer in this issue two articles by researchers. Brendan Hyde is based in Deakin University in Australia, while Robin Barfield is from Oak Hill College in London.

Once again, we offer our profound thanks to our Associates, who fund this magazine and allow us to work in places where financial support is often needed.

## Thank you, Dani

We have been very sorry to lose Dani Redhead, one of our trustees, after many years on our board. Dani is a Godly Play practitioner in her own church and was instrumental in setting up the Cambridge network and the Godly Play resources library in the area. She has supported many people in their early Godly Play journeys and is always a source of wisdom and expertise.

Dani has been a key member of our Godly Play resources group, who monitor the development of Godly Play materials in the UK. This has been a lot of work over the years, and we are grateful for all that she has brought to this vital area. Perhaps her most unseen role has been her support for the trustees in taking the minutes of meetings. It is a vital but unglamorous task, and we have been glad of her remarkable typing skills and ingenious capacity for turning a rambling conversation into a few clear sentences!

We thank you, Dani, for all your enthusiasm and support and we wish you well in your new ventures.

Find out more about our current trustees on page 20.

## Reflections on Core Training at Hull Minster



*By Iona Dyson,  
introduced by Susie  
Steele*

*Twelve years ago, Godly Play UK Trainer, Susie Steel started using Godly Play at an after-school club for 7–11-year-olds in an urban deprived part of Hull. She writes, ‘The group ran for five years. It was a wonderful, yet challenging, experience – one that will stay with me for a long time; I*

*learned so much about Godly Play and myself during that time, thanks to the young people and the families there. But when I moved on, I wondered what would endure of it all.*

*‘Years later I am delighted to say that the impact is still being felt; and a new generation has been inspired to carry on the work. There is a golden thread connecting the work then and the work now. Hearing that Iona and Gemma both wanted to attend the three-day course at Hull Minster was thrilling for me. Gemma’s children had been regulars at the previous Godly Play group, and through that I had become friends with her. The voices of her children became part of the training as Gemma shared their memories with the group.’*

*Today, Iona Dyson co-leads a faith-based charity which works alongside children, young people and their families in the heart of Hull, sharing life together. Iona writes:*

Our work is missional, and I am passionate about finding ways to share faith that are accessible and relevant, bringing hope and healing through sharing the gospel in the everyday.

### **It's a long story**



Gemma and I recently completed the full three-day Godly Play training course at Hull Minster, so we are now fully qualified 'Godly Players!' We have been dreaming together about how we can use this approach where we are with the children and young people we know and were delighted to be able

to spend time with Susie Steel reflecting on her experiences of running a Godly Play group here in the community some years ago. The children and young people she worked with then are now fully grown teenagers or even officially adults, but they still have very clear memories of the group and what it meant to them at that time. Susie, along with others created a very special space that was so meaningful to them. Gemma's children attended the group at that time and as we reflected together, Gemma said, 'The Godly Play room gave the kids the chance to be themselves. It can be tough growing up around here, you have to be hard; but in that room nothing else mattered, they could be themselves and could be vulnerable. It's a chance for the kids to learn positive stories that they can share too instead of just all the negative stories you usually hear.'

I also asked Gemma how she found the training; 'I feel so proud of myself. Being dyslexic, it's been so hard for me to do anything in my life, but I did this and I'm so happy. Doing the training was a new experience for me, being with new people and doing a proper course but I felt safe and able to let go and be vulnerable myself.'

### **Precious time**

The training we took part in was immersive; we entered the Godly Play room as ourselves and spent each day there, participating in everything and learning from the approach being modelled to us by Susie and Richard who were running the course. I personally found it quite a profound experience. Years of research have gone into developing the Godly Play stories, they are rich with symbolism and meaning which does not always come in the form of words but also the materials, the movements and through the simplicity of it all. The space we were in had beautiful baskets and boxes and figures arranged all around the room plus some works of art, everything is chosen and placed intentionally with the aim of creating a sacred space where children, or adults in our case, can discover and explore their

own spirituality. Each day we began with a story and then followed a response time where you have space to respond in your own way to what you have heard, and to process whatever spoke to you. It felt like precious time, to reflect on the story and sit with what our souls had received and to really allow it to sink in. I enjoyed the opportunity for a creative response, drawing, or painting, modelling out of clay, for example, which allowed me to make something that captured what I was feeling and hearing.

### **Meeting the Good Shepherd**

Unexpectedly, I came away changed from the experience of three days in that Godly Play room; something was different within me, and I can only put it down to having met with the Good Shepherd in that space. I felt nurtured and affirmed in my own unique spirituality, I felt able to meet with God in the way that I was created to and having that space and time really made a difference to me. I find the Godly Play approach so important for giving space to hear yourself and others and allowing the group to wonder about the stories together. I saw the parables from a completely different perspective through being able to ask questions, make suggestions and ultimately play with it as a group. The approach reminded me of Jesus's ways of storytelling: often he would answer a question with a story or tell a parable to explain a deep truth, leaving people to question or discuss what truth could be taken from the stories.



### **Our first story**



At our Monday Club we shared our first story just before Christmas – the Holy Family. Using nothing more than wooden cut out figures and a piece of purple felt I told the story of the different characters and their part on the night the Christ-child was born. We then wondered about the story together and then each child had a chance to respond in their own way. There was a beautiful moment where I looked around the room and each one was working on their own

response; cutting, sticking, drawing, colouring, playing with the wooden characters, setting them up, knocking them down, and even some running and jumping! Each child was responding in their own way, regulating as they needed, it felt like a special, holy moment – our own sacred space. Over the course of this next term we are hoping to build on this, sharing more stories and strengthening the circle and space. We will be gathering/making resources and playing with stories together. We hope and dream that children meet God in these stories and find themselves in the story too.

## Our new suppliers

We are delighted to be able to tell you that we have found new suppliers for Godly Play materials in the UK.

### Jennyruth Workshops



Jennyruth Workshops, in Ripon, will be our main supplier.

Set up in 2003, Jennyruth Workshops is a registered charity and social enterprise, dedicated to empowering adults who have a learning

disability by providing meaningful work opportunities in a supportive and inclusive environment.

The success of the workshops is built on a foundation of community support and sustainable practices. It is more than just a workplace and provides a supportive environment and opportunities for personal and professional growth for everyone involved.

We are delighted to have recently signed an agreement with the Godly Play Foundation to become the sole UK manufacturer and supplier of Godly Play resources. Initially, we will be launching a limited range on our website, which we will add to as soon as stock is made. If there are specific resources anyone would like that are not available online, please do contact us on

[godlyplaysales@jennyruth.co.uk](mailto:godlyplaysales@jennyruth.co.uk).



Find out more about Jennyruth workshops: <https://www.jennyruth.co.uk/home>

### Micah 6-8 – Holy Families from Bethlehem

Micah6-8 is the personal Christian ministry of Ian White. Travelling frequently to the Holy Land, Ian has established a link with Christian artisans who craft the Holy Family from olive wood prunings. We have been commending these items for some time and despite all the current difficulties, Ian still receives sets regularly which you can buy from him: [ian@micah6-8.org.uk](mailto:ian@micah6-8.org.uk). You can see more about his work at <http://www.micah6-8.org.uk/>



## Feature articles

### *New research on Godly Play*

*As we often explain to people who are new to Godly Play, one of its great strengths is the deep thought, and years of research and practice with children, which have shaped and formed it. We also tell people that Godly Play is about Process, not Product, and there is always more to discover, more questions to be asked.*

*We are very grateful to researchers Robin Barfield (Oak Hill College, UK) and Brendan Hyde (Deakin University, Australia) who have recently published research on Godly Play, and generously agreed to share their work with us. Brendan and Robin each write about parables in Godly Play, but from somewhat different positions in relation to Christian education. If their wondering about Godly Play sparks more wondering in you, we would love to hear about it! Please do email us ([admin@godlyplay.uk](mailto:admin@godlyplay.uk)) if you would like to share your response.*

### ‘Truth’ as *aletheia* in the Godly Play room

*By Brendan Hyde*



*Dr Brendan Hyde is a Senior Lecturer in Education (Pedagogy and Curriculum) at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. He is particularly interested in initial teacher education, out-of-field teaching (especially in RE), affordance theory, and how children's spirituality can be nurtured through education.*

#### **Two clues**

*In reading this article you will need to encounter two different words that mean ‘truth’, one Greek and one Latin.*

- *Veritas*, the Roman word for truth, is based on justice.
- *Aletheia*, the Greek word expresses the idea of truth as disclosure

I lifted the lid of the parable box and placed it ajar so that its contents remained concealed. I am always taken by the showing and hiding of the materials contained in the parable box, and the way in which the pieces are slowly revealed to children, with the lid always remaining ajar – never completely open, but at the same time, not closed. ‘I wonder what this could be?’ I said playfully, as I took the green felt underlay from the box and spread it on the floor, with my hands slowly and deliberately smoothing out the felt. Responses began to flow ... ‘It’s green!’, exclaimed one child, ‘Maybe it’s a field’, wondered another. Slowly, the other pieces of the parable were revealed and placed on the green felt with appropriate wondering as to what each of the pieces could be – the cool clear water, the places of great danger, the sheepfold, and the sheep. Then, we were



ready to tell the story. I came to the part where the Good Shepherd knows each of the sheep by name ... 'True?', asked one child. 'The Good Shepherd really knows the names of all of the sheep?' I smiled. 'Well, sure,' replied another child. 'otherwise, why would they follow him?'

### 'True?'



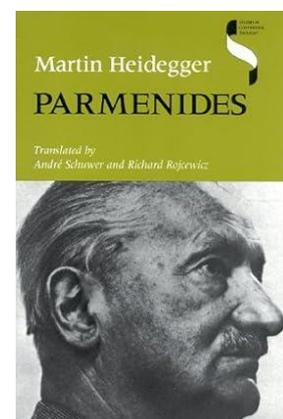
We continued. I came to the part where the Good Shepherd shows each of the sheep how to get safely through the places of great danger, and I hid one of the sheep behind a black piece of felt that had been placed on the green underlay.

'True?' asked the same child again – for a second time. 'Sheep don't really hide behind rocks, do they?' Again, I smiled. 'They might,' pondered another child, 'if they are being naughty'. We continued, and after the parable had been told, we wondered together about it. 'I wonder if you have ever heard the

Good Shepherd calling you – maybe not using words, but I wonder...' I contemplated. 'Yes!' replied one child enthusiastically. 'True?' interjected the same child again who, twice before, had made the exact same remark. Coincidence? In the Godly Play room, I have learnt over time to trust the process. There is always something more profound playing out ... something being revealed, and at the same time hidden ... elusive ... 'Is it true?', asked the child again. 'I've never heard a shepherd calling me. What's it like? And how do I know that you're not just making it up?' It seemed to me that this parable may not have been opening itself for this child today. Its meaning remained elusive – at least for now. This child was fixated on 'the true'. I couldn't help but wonder what sort of truth he was seeking. Was whatever 'true' might be getting in the way of this child's meaning making, or are there other ways in which to understand 'true'? Is truth always factual and immediate, or can it be thought of differently?

### 'Truth' as *Veritas* and *Aletheia*

In the *Parmenides*<sup>1</sup>, Heidegger distinguishes between two kinds of truth – *veritas* and *aletheia*. *Veritas*, the Roman word for truth, is based on justice. *Veritas* is pragmatic, and bureaucratic. In contrast, the Greek word *aletheia* expresses the idea of truth as disclosure. It refers to opening and closing, showing and hiding. I think Godly Play provides an experience of truth as *aletheia* – a constant interplay between showing and hiding. I think the story at the beginning of this article shows this. Let's explore what happens in the story more closely.



<sup>1</sup> Heidegger, M. (1992). *Parmenides*. Indiana University Press.

### What the child says: ‘true’?

The child asks on three occasions whether it was ‘true’. If by ‘true’ the child is intimating the technical notion of *veritas*, then it could be stifling his meaning making. Evidence and facts usually indicate truth, and anything to the contrary is false, or worse, a fairy tale.

But the fact the child asks ‘true?’ on three occasions is significant and could suggest truth as *aletheia* – a gradual revealing through the conversation and wondering between the storyteller, the other children and this child, in which the ‘undetermined possibilities of a thing’<sup>2</sup> are shown. This wondering and questioning in which truth is gradually disclosed, or shown, reflects the idea of truth as *aletheia*.

### The parable: the opening and disclosing, showing and hiding

In presenting a parable, there is *aletheia* – opening and concealing, showing and hiding. The lid of the parable box is never completely opened. It remains ajar – there is an ‘opening’ to the parable materials, but at the same time, those materials are hidden from the direct view of the children. This reminds us that the meaning of a parable can remain elusive – undisclosed, for both children and adults.

Sometimes, the ‘lid’ of the parable box does not open at all, and the meaning of the parable remains an enigma. Truth remains concealed and undisclosed. When this happens, Berryman encourages children to return to the parable materials again, and again, so that, eventually, the meaning may become clear, disclosed. The child’s manipulation of the parable pieces represents the ongoing ‘conversation’ and engagement with the parable, oriented towards the discovery of the parable’s meaning<sup>3</sup>



The wondering which takes places (when the child asks his third ‘true?’ question) also contains possibilities for openings and disclosing. Wondering is characterised by curiosity and playfulness. The storyteller is also involved in wondering. As Berryman<sup>4</sup> himself notes, ‘When the teacher is truly wondering, the children sense wonder in the air. It manifests itself in the playfulness present in the room. Permission and reinforcement are present to encourage it.’



The playfulness associated with wondering aligns with Gadamer’s<sup>5</sup> reflections on play. In playing, the players are drawn into its power so that they become lost in the playing. The conclusion of the play is unknown. It is not clear exactly who will win, or what a player’s next move might be. In wondering, too, the outcomes and possibilities are unknown. Those wondering explore the many twists and turns that present themselves. Possibilities open and disclose themselves,

<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, H-G. (1989). *Truth and method*. Continuum.

<sup>3</sup> Hyde, B. (2010). ‘Godly Play nourishing children’s spirituality: A case study’. *Religious Education*, 105(5), 504-518.

<sup>4</sup> Berryman, J. (1995). *Godly Play: An imaginative approach to religious education*. Augsburg.

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, H-G. (1989). *Truth and method*. Continuum.

while others remain hidden or elusive as those who are wondering engage playfully in this act.

### **The open space: ‘the middle realm’**



The Godly Play room is an open space where the truth of what is explored ‘appears in the open’<sup>6</sup> It is, to use Gadamer’s term, the ‘in-between’<sup>7</sup> or the middle space in which opportunities exist for playful engagement.

Berryman describes the Godly Play room as an open space because it is modelled on Montessori’s prepared environment. The mentor in this space guides the children, but is not the obstacle that comes between the child and the child’s experience.<sup>8</sup>

Godly Play is a game to be played in a specified space. In the same way that ‘the chess pieces [are] moved on the chess board, the pieces of religious language need an area in which to be moved [by the players] to make meaning and find direction’<sup>9</sup> The place for playing this game is a room in which the religious language – in the form of an array of materials (the game pieces) – surrounds the children, the players.

However, Berryman<sup>10</sup> goes further by aligning the Godly Play room to the ‘middle realm’ or ‘centre point’. In this space one ‘feels’ what Godly Play is like as it is experienced. It is place where, under guidance of the storyteller, children may choose from among a range of constructive alternatives, those activities that they feel have meaning and significance for them. The middle realm, this ‘in-between’ space, brings into the open the search for meaning being undertaken by the child, in which truth as *aletheia* is gradually disclosed.

Therefore...

We don’t need to be unduly concerned with teaching the ‘truths’ of the Christian tradition. Truth as *aletheia* emerges in the open space of the Godly Play room. Therefore, Godly Play cannot teach ‘untruths’ because the materialised language of the Christian tradition provides the structure that guides the process. *Aletheia* unfolds in the middle space of encounter between children, their wonder, the materials and the creative process.

Children’s search for truth, is real. They won’t use the language of adults, but they can engage with the disclosure and openness, through their wondering and questioning, and through their play with the materials – sacred stories, parables and liturgical actions. Truth is already given, remaining latent until it is uncovered, brought out into the light in the middle-space.

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<sup>6</sup> Heidegger, M. (1992). *Parmenides*. Indiana University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, H-G. (1989). *Truth and method*. Continuum.

<sup>8</sup> Montessori, M. (2013). *Absorbent Mind*. Start Publishing LLC.

<sup>9</sup> Berryman, J. (1982). ‘Caring for sick children: The parish, the Hospital, and theological play’. *Liturgy: Ministries To the Sick*, 2(2), 47-53.

<sup>10</sup> Berryman, J. (2013). *The spiritual guidance of children: Montessori, Godly Play and the future*. Morehouse Publishing.

# Evangelicals and Storytelling in Godly Play

By Robin Barfield



*Robin Barfield teaches practical theology at Oak Hill Theological College, with a specialism in children, youth and families. His recent PhD researched the theological and pedagogical assumptions of Godly Play in relation to evangelical models of ministry, and he tells us something about his findings here, focusing particularly on parables. Robin spent nearly 25 years serving local churches in South London and the North-West of England. His passion is to see practitioners equipped to reflect theologically on their practice.*

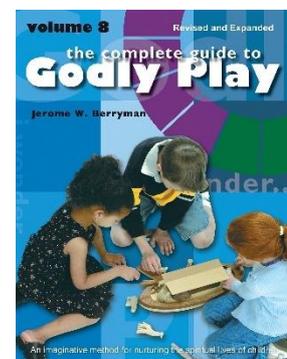
In recent years I have come across evangelical Christians drawn to Godly Play as a process that allows children the space to interact meaningfully with the Christian tradition. Although Godly Play has its source in a liberal and sacramental American Episcopalian tradition, the sense of agency which it provides for a child has delighted evangelicals who want to take the views of the child seriously. This contrasts with evangelical publications which leave little space for disruption, disagreement, or doubt, and which pay little attention to what the child is thinking. I have heard comments where the storytelling approach of Godly Play is particularly valued.

One of the key content lesson types are those of the parables. The liturgical action lessons tend to be less appealing to a more informal evangelical style, and the sacred stories rely on a different biblical theology than that to which most evangelicals hold. The parables play into a love for stories and the creative way in which evangelicals love to lead sessions. Do Jerome's parable sessions fit with evangelical theology as closely as they seem?

The term 'Evangelical' is hard to define exactly, but I am using the term to describe those who hold to the Evangelical Alliance statement of faith and/or present the historical markers of being centred on the Bible, the cross, conversion and some form of activism.

## **Parables in Godly Play**

Jerome Berryman, founder of Godly Play, views the parables as 'a kind of riddle that uses short fiction to reference a transcendent symbol' (*Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Vol 8, p.165). What he seems to mean is that the parable presents a physical image that communicates. Interpretation of this symbol is not just dangerous but reduces the symbol to less than it is. Instead, the parables are playful and open ended, resisting interpretation. To presume that the parable has an intended purpose would be 'pseudoplay' and even 'blasphemous' for Jerome. Parables must remain as uninterpreted images. This is a key reason why there is no set aim or adult teaching in a Godly Play session.



Jerome has removed each parable from its gospel setting and the story is considered alone, as one may read a fairytale. Take Berryman's retelling of the Good Shepherd which makes use of the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15, the 'I am' saying in John 10 and Psalm 23. These are not dealt with consecutively or set within any biblical theological context but intermingled and interwoven.



There are no insights provided into first century shepherding techniques to aid the child's understanding, nor are there hints as to why Jesus was speaking this parable in Luke 15 or what conclusions the first hearers may have come to. These are freestanding literary units for Berryman, and he wants them to be heard as such. This is why parables are grouped as a separate lesson type rather than being contained as part of a series on, say, Luke's Gospel.

### Parables in the evangelical curriculum



In turning to Evangelical curricula published in the UK, I'm going to consider *Splash* and *Xtreme* from Scripture Union, *Click* from The Good Book Company, *Go Teach* and *Mustard Seeds*, an online provision. These are merely examples, but they are those that tend to start with the exposition of Scripture rather than a thematic format.

UK evangelical publications do not have such a pronounced place for parables. They tend to occur within the consecutive or near consecutive run of texts in a gospel. There is an end purpose or aim that has been set by the curriculum writers each time they are employed. The whole of the session is designed to move towards that end. This, I believe, is why many evangelicals are attracted to Godly Play: it allows the child to have a voice, giving them freedom to contribute. Most questions in the evangelical material cited above are closed rather than open wonderings, continuing the move towards a set end.

There are two other aspects which must be considered in evangelical publications: the first is that the passage is set in its gospel context – in the session on the lost sheep, the initial setting of the Pharisees muttering is normally mentioned. This matters, as it aids the child's understanding in interpretation. Evangelicals tend not to see these as fairy tales which could be plucked out of their original setting and used at will. Rather, these are stories which are embedded in their historical and textual location.

Similarly, parables are stories which are embedded culturally. It is important for the children to understand the practices of first century shepherds to make sense

of how the story develops. The evangelical publications make use of opening activities to bring the horizon of the child in line with the horizon of Scripture by giving them opportunity to actively understand the first century culture. This may be seen in, for example, a game exploring sheep and shepherds.

### Contrasting theologies of parables



The differences between the two pedagogies would suggest a difference in theology. There appears to be a difference in how parables are conceived, interpreted and understood; a difference in what a parable is.

Jerome Berryman draws on the work of John Dominic Crossan, a key representative of the Jesus Seminar, which sought to look behind the gospel texts to discover the historical Jesus.<sup>11</sup> This leads to a sense in which the meaning of the text cannot

be uncovered or known. It is then up to the reader to construct their own meaning. The contrasting and disparate nature of these interpretations are unimportant.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, are more likely to see the parables as ‘stories with intent’, in the words of Klyne Snodgrass.<sup>12</sup> Each parable is carefully crafted and given an intentional setting in the gospels giving guidance as to their interpretation. Paula Gooder, in her work on parables, similarly expects the meaning of the parable to emerge from the text in its context, not to be constructed by the reader.<sup>13</sup> Craig Blomberg suggests that parables have a rigid intention whilst giving some fluidity of interpretation between parables.<sup>14</sup> Whilst evangelicals do not speak with one voice and there is some variation in the theology of parables even between these three authors, there is still a common thread that the meaning cannot be constructed but is uncovered. This, then, requires providing the interpreter with the wider tools of cultural, historical and literary setting – the child needs to know to whom



<sup>11</sup> Jerome W. Berryman, ‘Being in Parables with Children’, *Religious Education* 74, no. 3 (June 1979): 271–85; Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Books, 1991), viii; John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Polebridge Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Ebook (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), <https://www.perlego.com/book/2015276/stories-with-intent-pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Paula Gooder, *The Parables*, Ebook (London, UK: Canterbury Press, 2020), <https://www.perlego.com/book/1891948/the-parables-pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

Jesus is speaking this parable, why he may have used certain words and motifs, and where it sits in the gospel writer's narrative arc.

There is a clear connection between the theology of evangelicalism and evangelical practises of children's ministry which does not seem to exist between evangelical theology and Godly Play practices at this point. The issue here is not about the merit of either model but the fit between the theological approach of the model and the user. Does the theology of Godly Play fit with the theology of the churches where it is used?

## Reflections



How do you understand parables? Are they free-standing stories, akin to fairy tales, where the meaning can be constructed by the children? If the child wishes to respond by saying she is the shepherd and Jesus is the lost sheep whom she rescues, is this permissible? If you do, then Godly Play fits you well. If that is not your theology, then perhaps you adapt rather than adopt Godly Play in its completeness. If we adapt Godly Play, does it lose its coherence and

consistency, which is one of its great strengths?

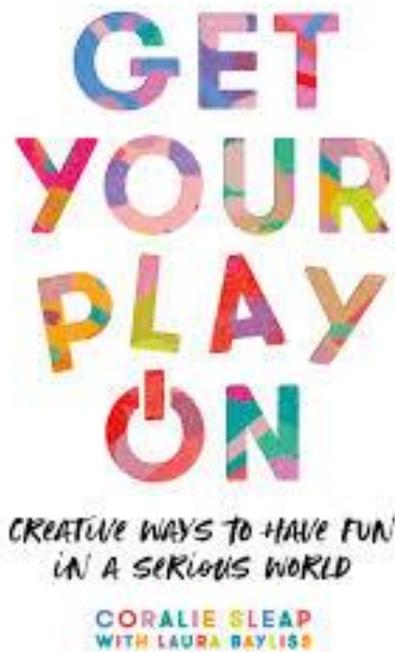
When we adapt the Godly Play parable lessons, can we do that in a way that reflects the set scriptural context? This may be easier with some lessons than others. The session on the lost sheep from Luke 15 has been mixed with Psalm 23 and the 'I am' saying in John 10. This makes it harder to do justice, not just to the gospel context but also to the historical context, presuming we believe they exist.

The agency and voice that is given to the child in Godly Play is streets ahead of what I have seen in the evangelical models. This is good; evangelicals believe in the full humanity of the child! The question may then be around what position that agency is exerted. Does the child have the freedom to decide what the story means or, once the meaning is uncovered, their agency is in deciding the impact of the story on their lives? Of course, there may be a sense in which the child should have the agency to disagree and disrupt any interpretation which a Christian community has already reached on a parable, but how would this look different from the open 'meaning making' that is seen in a Godly Play session? Can we enable them to exert their agency in applying the meaning they have uncovered for the week ahead – how can they see school or home or play being different because of this?

- How do you understand the parables?
- What do you believe parables to be?
- How do these beliefs shape the way you place them before children?
- Do you adapt Godly Play presentations for your context? If you do, what guides your practice?

# Taking your wondering further...

## Book reviews



*Get Your Play On: Creative ways to have fun in a serious world*, Coralie Sleep, 2021, Harper Collins

*Reviewed by Judy Yeomans*

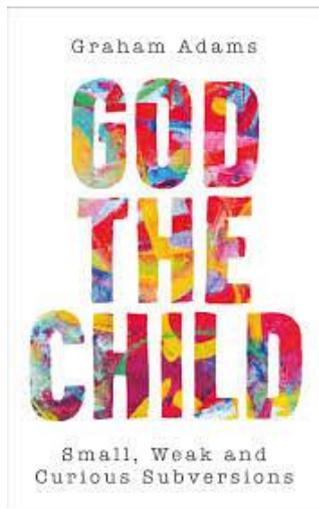
*Judy Yeomans is a Godly Play Trainer and Play Therapist still trying not to stop messing around and focus!*

I jumped on this book one afternoon coming away from one meeting and finding myself waiting in front of a bookshop window on my way to another. Yes, I want some of this, I thought. So, I missed my bus and dashed in to buy it.

This is an easily accessible book full of fun, as the author lays out more than

100 different activities and ideas across one and two double page spreads, tempting grown-ups back into the playful lives of their childhood. It's eye-catchingly colourful, with the suggestions neatly divided into five chapters, each focussing on a key aspect of play: Creativity, Connection, Imagination, Thinking and Movement. Dotted throughout are short pieces by experts on play, such as a vet on why animals play, and a board game inventor on how getting lost in games is good for you. Each activity is designed to help you recover the flow state you probably experienced most days in childhood, taking you outside of yourself for a while to become mindfully (or perhaps mindlessly) absorbed again.

As this review will be going into our March edition of the magazine, I invite you to shrug off that bad day at work and celebrate one of the many national days in the world's calendar. How about throwing a party for Peanut Lover's Day on the 1st or Crayon Day on the 31st?



*God the Child: Small, Weak and Curious Subversions,*  
Graham Adams, 2024, SCM Press

*Reviewed by Sian Hancock*

*Sian Hancock is a Godly Play Trainer.*

'I've just read this new book by Graham Adams. A radical re-think. God found in the smallest places... presence found in the smallest cracks. God as open palm ... God in playful disruptive events displaying a different understanding of power ... God as curious horizon seeker ... and much more ... I think it's worth a read and discussion.'

This was posted by Peter Privett on Facebook in July

2024.

Well, who could resist that kind of promotion? I couldn't, and following a conversation with the Godly Play UK's Lead Trainer group, I eagerly awaited my copy to arrive, curious to know more and excited for the theological insight that would honour the spirituality of childhood.

Through his exploration of the childness of God, Adams highlights three key themes – smallness, weakness and curiosity – characteristics more often aligned with the child, thus subverting the greatness, strength and omniscience of the adult God more commonly perceived in worship. *God the Child* was already sounding like the paradox of adult intellect and the fragile naivety of the young.

The book is structured in three parts, (the Godly Play approach might be to 'wonder what this could really be?') as it explores the themes firstly of smallness but present everywhere; secondly, weakness that playfully reframes action; and finally, curiosity that pushes back the boundaries of thinking. Each part has three chapters that develop the theme using powerful metaphors to challenge broader thinking and to consider through the lens of black, disability and queer theologies, to wonder on the synergies, possibilities and challenges when 'a child is in its midst'.

It's often a disquieting read, 'God the Child does not impose meaning or story... but poses the questions, and more questions...' Godly Players are used to a spirit of discovery and that is often grounded in curious questioning and lifting the lid on the imagination.

Adams includes poignant prose and hymns that embody the theological adventure he has gone on through the question, what if God is best understood as a child? In Godly Play we're used to wondering together in the circle, and there are thought-provoking reflective questions at the end of each chapter to ponder or discuss with others if reading as a group/team. This can help with the processing of new ideas and can be useful for applying to personal settings. This in turn may help readers deepen their understanding of the theology and values that underpin their ministry with children.

# The Feast

## A chance to meet ... Jane Southward



*Jane is the Education Officer at the Anglican Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. Last year she attended her second Core Training in Godly Play, and here tells Eona Bell about herself and her work with young pilgrims to the Shrine.*

**(EB) Godly Play begins with children. Can you tell us something about your childhood?**

One of my treasured memories of childhood revolves around musical shows. We were lucky to live near London and to be taken to see musicals regularly from about 11 onwards. I remember seeing *Starlight Express* and spending much time playing on roller skates and racing afterwards. I also remember seeing *Barnum* and then teaching myself to juggle (unsuccessfully!) and walk the 'tightrope' (edge of the toy box!). *Singing in the Rain* and *42nd Street* brought a spate of trying to tap dance, and I loved trying to get my tongue round the words of the Gilbert and Sullivan shows. This developed, as I grew up, into playing in the pit orchestra for a variety of productions including *Camelot*, *The Boyfriend* and *West Side Story*. I still love to lose myself in a musical – for my birthday this year I went to see the new *Starlight Express*!

**How did you first encounter Godly Play; what were your initial impressions?**



I first experienced Godly Play at a course when teaching and leading RE in a church primary school. I was deeply affected by the practical sessions and persuaded the school to invest in Godly Play one-day training for all staff, and in some of the Godly Play resources. My initial impression was the power of the wondering questions in making me consider familiar stories from a very different point of view, and also the

value of the response time. I have used Godly Play in school with classes of 30 and smaller groups, and every time it is both familiar and different, and always profound. In 2015, I embarked on a doctorate of education, studying how children

understand prayer. Remembering the power of the wondering questions and how the response time freed children to talk and respond naturally, I ran four Godly Play sessions with 7-9-year-olds, which, with permission, I recorded and analysed. The wondering questions and response time yielded rich data and became the basis for a model of how those children understood prayer.

**Walsingham is a special place – we held a memorable Training and Retreat there in 2024. How would you describe it to someone who has never been?**



Walsingham is founded round a vision which Lady Richeldis had in 1061 of the Virgin Mary, who came to her and asked her to build a replica of the Holy House where the annunciation had happened. While the original Holy House at Walsingham was destroyed in the Reformation, there is now a copy within the modern Shrine church. The whole experience of visiting the Shrine is very sensory – the smell of incense, sound of bells, sight of a myriad of lit candles

burning in prayer, tasting the well water and the indescribable special feeling of being in the Holy House itself. Pilgrimage is as much about fellowship as prayer, and eating together in the Refectory and meeting other visitors and Shrine staff is part of the experience. While many people come for a specific reason, there are always curious visitors who have come to see the Shrine and experience the quiet and tranquillity of the grounds. I've been coming to Walsingham as a pilgrim since childhood and it's always had a very special place in my heart, not just because of the uniqueness of the place, but because we used to meet my family here when they were on pilgrimage.

**What is your role, and who are the children you work with?**

My role is Education Officer. I look after school visits and assist with the planning and running of the Children's, Youth and Family Pilgrimages. I guide groups of children round the Shrine and help them to think about similarities and differences between Christian denominations and about how medieval pilgrimage and modern pilgrimage are really very similar. There's a lot of scope within the role to develop interests such as Godly Play, research into medieval pilgrimage and some academic writing too.



The children are a joy to work with and keep me on my toes. Their wonder at being in the Holy House never ceases to thrill, and it's such a special time being able to be quiet in the Shrine Church and to share Sprinkling with them. I work with a wide variety of young people from 7 weeks old to 18+ and from all backgrounds – the visiting schools are not all church schools by any means. This is a huge privilege – I feel very fortunate to be able to share Walsingham and my own experiences with students and families.

### **How do you envisage Godly Play within the life of the Anglican Shrine?**



I would like to see Godly Play being utilised with both school groups and church groups when they visit Walsingham. Now we have a dedicated space, we can offer it to groups who may wish to run their own sessions or, with three of us on the staff holding the 3-day accredited training, we can lead sessions for others. We are set up as a lending

library to allow the resources to be borrowed by local schools and groups, and hope to run further courses at the Shrine. I already make use of Godly Play techniques in teaching, particularly at the Children's and Family Pilgrimages and we plan to offer Godly Play sessions as part of these.

We are just starting off, with space to expand, and we are keen to create a North-West Norfolk hub for Godly Play and to encourage people to combine a session with visiting the Shrine and grounds.

### **Finally, when you're not working, how do you like to play?**

I love to play with fabric and I love music. I sew and create clothes, quilts, gifts ... the freedom for self-expression is endless. I play the violin solo and in quartet and orchestra and it's wonderful to immerse myself in the music, as well as being challenged. I find time to walk in nature, particularly along the beautiful Norfolk coast, often with a good audio book. Dreaming on the beach, paddling and kicking through leaves brings me such joy! Reading a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction, especially children's books, and more in depth reading to study is very satisfying. I find I can escape from reality into a world of imagination or learning; a good way to recharge after a busy time.

## Bite-sized news

### Godly Play UK and the Catholic Education Service

*By Andrea Harrison*

In 2023, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales launched a new Religious Education Directory (RED) and model curriculum for Catholic schools in England and Wales. The RED suggested that Catholic primary schools should use a range of pedagogical approaches to help young people learn about Scripture, including the Godly Play approach. Following this launch, many Godly Play trainers and advocates were approached by schools and diocesan staff with requests for training.

Andrea Harrison, Godly Play trainer, and Dr Sue Price, Director of Pastoral Outreach at Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, and a Godly Play advocate, decided to approach the Catholic Education Service to investigate whether schools could be better supported if we worked on a strategy with them.

The suggestion of the Catholic Education Service was that we seek grant funding to train and develop teachers in each region of England and Wales to support the Bishops' vision for religious education in Catholic primary schools.

Our bid for funding from The Sisters of the Holy Cross was successful and with Maureen Glacklin, National Religious Education Adviser, we sought applications from twelve teachers to undertake bespoke Godly Play core training and then work with us to develop understanding across their region.

We had not anticipated the level of interest and were delighted by mid-December 2024 to receive 48 applications. In view of the breadth and volume of interest, we are now planning to work with all those who applied, both before the selected twelve meet for face-to-face training and afterwards. In all likelihood, we will be seeking more funding to widen the project still further.

### Who are the Trustees of GPUK and what do they do?

*Someone suggested we should find out ... so here is some information ...*

*Godly Play UK is a Christian charity devoted to the support of training, advice and support for those who use the Godly Play method. We work with churches, schools, denominations, community groups and training institutions to raise awareness of the vision and values of Godly Play practice. Our trainers and advocates undertake this work, but as a charity, the vision and oversight is committed to a group of trustees. Trustees are volunteers who bring a variety of experiences and skills, and a passion to support the work.*

**Gill Ambrose** From starting out as a primary school teacher in Yorkshire, I have been involved in Christian education for most of my life, and on retirement from paid work, tumbled into the role of the chair of the Godly Play trustees.

**Mary Hawes** I'm an Anglican. When I first encountered Godly Play, I was convinced that it was just another resource. Now I'm convinced that it embodies the most effective way of helping children engage with God, Scripture and church life.

**Heather Moger** My first encounter with Godly Play changed me profoundly, and I love how it simply goes on giving, revealing deeply spiritual truths and fresh perspectives on my faith. Being a trustee enables me to give something back and help to keep the stories alive for generations to come

**Vicky Parry** I am Chair of the Finance Committee and support GPUK with financial and compliance matters.

**Rosemary Privett** A lifelong, now retired, teacher and educator, I have always put the child at the centre of my practice.

**Anne Richards** As a theologian, I am passionate about finding the God in Godly Play and find children teach me all kinds of wonderful things about the creative, delighting, and unexpected sides of God

**Rob Rogers** I am a retired CofE minister and practice lead for social, emotional and mental health with a local authority support service. Married, with two grown up children and now part of a local Baptist church, I bring with me a wide range of experiences from life to Godly Play.

**Alison Shaw** I'm an ex-teacher, semi-retired vicar, passionate about sharing Godly Play with children and adults, wondering what else we can discover together.

**DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WITH A PASSION FOR GODLY PLAY  
AND THE KIND OF EXPERIENCE THAT WOULD HELP US?**

**WE WOULD LOVE TO HAVE SOME NEW TRUSTEES TO JOIN US.**

**IN PARTICULAR, WE WOULD LIKE TO BECOME MORE DIVERSE,  
LESS FEMALE AND A BIT YOUNGER!**

## Sending out: Events and Training Opportunities

### **Online Introductions to Godly Play**

#### **Friday 2 May and then every Friday until 23 May 2025 10 am – 11.30 am**

Trainers: Alison Summerskill and Mary Hawes

You will have the opportunity to experience a whole Godly Play session, followed by three sessions each exploring a different Godly Play genre. There is also an opportunity to discuss key elements of the Godly Play approach. The group size is small, ideal for asking your questions.

Course details and a Zoom link will be sent out by email one week before the course begins. Cost £50

Booking: <https://www.godlyplay.uk/events/online-introduction-to-godly-play-19/>

#### **Monday 9 June and then every Monday until 30 June 2025 10 am – 11.30 am**

Trainers: Brenton Prigge and Mary Hawes

You will have the opportunity to experience a whole Godly Play session, followed by three sessions each exploring a different Godly Play genre. There is also an opportunity to discuss key elements of the Godly Play approach. The group size is small, ideal for asking your questions.

Course details and a Zoom link will be sent out by email one week before the course begins. Cost £50

Booking: <https://www.godlyplay.uk/events/online-introduction-to-godly-play-20/>

### **Three-day Core Training**

#### **Cambridge, St Andrew's Church, Girton, 24 – 26 April 2025**

Trainers: Eona Bell and Andrea Harrison

Booking: <https://www.godlyplay.uk/events/core-training-cambridge/>

Cost: £335

#### **London, St Mary's Church, Acton W3 9NW, 8 – 10 May 2025**

Trainers: Mine Yildirim and Jeanny Wang

Booking: <https://www.godlyplay.uk/events/london/>

Cost: £335

**Guernsey, Our Lady Star of the Sea Church, GY2 4HU,  
19 – 21 May 2025**

Trainers: Peter Privett and Alison Summerskill

Booking: <https://www.godlyplay.uk/events/guernsey/>

Cost: £335

**Cuddesdon, near Oxford, 25 – 27 October 2025**

Trainers: Brenton Prigge and Alison Summerskill

Booking: <https://www.godlyplay.uk/events/three-day-core-training-ripon-college-cuddesdon-3/>

Cost: £460 residential (early bird rate)

**Leeds, Church of England Diocesan Office, LS1 2EX  
18 – 20 November 2025**

Trainers, booking link and cost to come

**ADVANCE NOTICE  
SAVE THE DATE**

**Godly Play UK Conference 2026**

The next Godly Play Conference will be held  
in Rugby, Warwickshire,  
over the weekend of 5-6 June 2026.

Friday 5 June Enrichment Days

Saturday 6 June Full Conference

The conference is in the very early planning stage, so if there is  
something you would like to see offered, please let us know.

Send an email to [admin@godlyplay.uk](mailto:admin@godlyplay.uk).



May the Good Shepherd,  
who knows all of the sheep by name,  
lead you to the good green grass  
and stay with you in time of danger.  
May you find your pearl of great price,  
and know that you journey  
with all the people of God  
who are as many as there are stars in the sky  
and grains of sand in the desert.

The Godly Play UK Magazine is published twice a year and distributed to all on our mailing lists.

It is generously funded by Godly Play UK Associates. To find out more about being an Associate of Godly Play, look at our website: <https://www.godlyplay.uk/join/>

This issue was devised and edited by Eona Bell, Gill Ambrose,  
Peter Privett and Judy Yeomans.

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