

Where stories hold power

Godly Play Coordinator Captain Yvonne West introduces Stevie Hope to a different way to disciple



What is your role?

I am the Godly Play coordinator for The Salvation Army in the UK and Ireland Territory and a Godly Play UK advocate. Godly Play UK is a Christian movement centred on childhood spirituality and provides training and support for those using the Godly Play method.

What is Godly Play?

A Godly Play session is about 90 minutes long. A session starts with welcome and building the circle, and then we share the story. The stories include sacred stories, parables and liturgical stories that explore church practice. We then move to wondering about the story and a time of response. We gather back in the circle for a feast and end with a blessing. Because of the time, people might be tempted to just tell the story, but there's a reason why we include all the elements in a full session.

Who is Godly Play for?

Initially, Godly Play was devised for children, although it is also used in other age groups. The Godly Play materials are expensive, but they last. This means people can actually play with the stories without breaking them.

What does discipleship look like through Godly Play?

Godly Play is centred on childhood spiritual formation. We believe that

children have an innate sense of God, so it offers sacred space for them to explore stories and develop language around Christian practice. The biggest chunk of time is given to response. In a Godly Play room, you have lots of materials – paints, pencils, books, things to listen to – and it's about the children responding in their own way.

Godly Play also helps create community. The stories, wondering and feast happen in the circle, and a big part is building trust and creating community there. It allows them a sacred space to explore for themselves what that relationship means for them. One key feature of Godly Play is we don't ask the children about how they responded – it's between them and God. That can be difficult for teachers to get their heads around, because it's not about what we want the child to learn. We hand that over to the Holy Spirit.

What kind of stories are there?

Godly Play is liturgical, it follows the Church calendar. Many of the stories – Pentecost, Easter, Advent, the Good Shepherd – are standalone. We also have stories around Salvation Army practice: the flag story looks at our ceremonies, another story is around the mercy seat, and there is a social action story.

Can anyone lead Godly Play?

You need training. It's not just about telling the stories; there's a whole theology around childhood spirituality – children are not empty vessels to be filled. I had to unlearn everything I'd learnt as a children's leader, as I was used to preparing a session with outcomes and learning points!

What does the training involve?

Godly Play UK runs an online introduction course to help people decide if they want to invest in it. They also run a three-day core training course. If a division comes to me with a group who want to do Godly Play, I can request a course be run in their location. Officers and employees can access funding for it through the Learning and Development Unit at William Booth College. There's also a budget for local leaders and volunteers, which I'd love to see more people access!

- To find out more, visit tsa.link/godly-play-training or email godly.play@salvationarmy.org.uk.



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