

# Godly Play in Australia



# What is this Godly Play thing?

I felt a little strange and lonely in 1996 when starting to make materials for Bible stories and Christian education, replicating the Godly Play approach. But it is not so weird anymore. More people are hearing about it and trying it out in various contexts. It is a slowly growing yet profound movement in Australia today.

Since becoming deeply engaged with this meditative and thoughtful approach to learning, particularly with young children, I have encountered a number of adults who, like me, find that it enriches their faith and learning too. Using tangible materials to represent stories and teachings, you are encouraged to wonder about your connection to Christian faith and human values. Wondering is a key component – a playful yet profound wondering. Often education can become associated with quizzing or testing people for what they know. Christian religious education in the Godly Play style of wondering, brings an appreciation that knowing can be done through the head, heart and hands.

I have worked with a team in a congregation where we ran a Godly Play worship space for three years (2001-2003). In that time we observed and encouraged truly deep

connection between formative stories and rites for children between the ages of three and eight. The parents and grandparents of these children were also significantly touched.

I have also been an advocate for Godly Play in various workshop-based and academic contexts, including teaching Christian Education as an associate of the Charles Sturt University School of Theology, since 2006. As a Minister of the Word, with the Epping Uniting Congregation in NSW (from December 2010), I have just started exploring how Godly Play may become a resource within a cross-cultural (and potentially intergenerational) Bible study.

It's always a joy to work with Godly Play, because of the profoundly visual, tangible and minimally verbal nature of the communication that happens when people come together around the materials.



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# The Story and an overview of Godly Play

The story of Godly Play began in 1960 at Princeton Theological Seminary with an urgent question that I was not yet able to put into words. Instead, I became so disruptive during the required Christian education class that the professor, D. Campbell Wyckoff, arranged to have me take a tutorial with him instead. He challenged me to write my own theory of Christian education to fulfill the course requirement. This creative and wise intervention set me on a path that has brought me all the way to Australia, over fifty years later.

## The Decades of Development

The response to the inarticulate question has become Godly Play. It now moves into the future with a new generation of leaders like Moira Dickinson, an attorney on the Godly Play Foundation's board, to guide it. When Moira was a little girl in Houston, she was in Thea's and my first research class at Pines Presbyterian Church. You here in Australia will also help write the future chapters and my prayers go with you.

### 1960-1974

The first period of Godly Play's development was a bit more than a decade, but the main theme was clear. It was the search for a method. This search took place in various churches. It also involved three years (1965-1968) as a chaplain, teacher, and coach at a boarding school, where I worked with some 900 adolescent boys. It was a glorious time, but what I learned from my teaching of religion to them was that it would have been better to have a deep grounding in Christian language and experience during childhood, when we are naturally tuned to learn languages and their connotations.

The search also took me to law school, where I earned a J.D. and became a member of the Oklahoma Bar and the American Bar Association. This taught me that stories (cases) can be linked in valid ways (judicial opinions) that are shaped by a concept (the U.S. Constitution) without turning the stories into abstractions or their coherence into a rigid system. This had implications not only for Godly Play but also for my view of theology in general.

The search continued until about 1970 when the Montessori method was settled on. This was because Montessori teachers guide children, giving them maximum freedom to develop their own learning within constructive limits. This approach places

the spiritual guide alongside children as a mentor rather than between children and God, attempting to explain God to them. Montessori also teaches through the senses, so children can literally grasp meaning with their hands by having it encoded into teaching materials. This helps them grasp new and difficult ideas more easily.

Once this decision was made our family packed up and moved to Bergamo, Italy, near Milan. I enrolled at the Center for Advanced Montessori Studies. During the year our girls, Coleen (5 years old) and Alyda (8 years old), went to the Italian Montessori school while Thea and I talked, talked, and talked about what I was learning. The Center officially graduated me in 1972, but in reality Thea and I both graduated.

We returned to the United States, where I had accepted a position as the head of a Montessori school, but after a year Coleen's health caused us to move to Houston because of specialists at the Texas Medical Center. By the time this first period of development closed Thea had found her place. She taught music at School of the Woods, a Montessori school that today goes through high school. She taught there for over 35 years and had the pleasure of teaching the children of children she had once taught.

As this period closed, I was working various in Houston Montessori schools, served two churches as their Christian education director, and had become a Clinical Fellow at the Institute of Religion in the Texas Medical Center. After three years as a Fellow I began to teach medical ethics and the pastoral care of children at the Institute and in the five hospitals at the Medical Center.

## 1974-1984

When the second decade began Godly Play still did not have a name, but it had a beginning. Thea and I set up classes at Pines Presbyterian Church, St. John's Presbyterian Church, and at the Institute of Religion, but the first people who truly understood what I was doing were the play therapists at Texas Children's Hospital, where I worked with children as a volunteer. The experience in the hospital made it clear that children needed more than play therapy to cope with their existential limits, are palpable in the hospital setting. They needed to shift languages from coping with the hospital to coping with life and death. An example is the shift from playing with a model of a surgical suite to overcome the fear of the unknown, to becoming involved with the Parable of the Good Shepherd to sense God's presence to cope with what cannot be known, or at least put into ordinary language.

It was during this second decade that I also became a Clinical Professor of Pediatric Pastoral Care at Baylor College of Medicine, an innovative post that has since disappeared. My involvement at Texas Children's had expanded to working with the Consultation and Liaison Service as a consultant, which culminated in a team-taught course called "Myth, Ritual, and Parable in Family Therapy." It integrated Godly Play and family systems, which was a natural match. Maria Montessori graduated in 1896 as a physician in Rome, the first woman to do so, and was a systems thinker concerning children in open classrooms, long before this point of view became popular in the mental health community.

Another piece to the Godly Play puzzle that became evident during this time was about the power of narrative. I began, as the second decade drew to a close, to work at Houston Child Guidance on a team studying the families of suicidal children. In my terms, what these families lacked was any sense of a family story, so I decided to leave academics and move to Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Houston to encourage people to tell their unique family stories and to place them in the Christian story to give them deeper and broader meaning. It was at this time that I was ordained an Episcopal priest, something that had drawn me for most of my 22 years as a Presbyterian minister.

## 1984-1994

The third decade of development, 1984-1994, took place at Christ Church Cathedral, where I was Canon Educator. Godly Play continued to develop within the context of parish life and pastoral care. By the end of this decade the Cathedral had eight Godly Play classrooms in a new education building and the children's program had grown from about 100 children to about 350. The process of Christian education I was working on now had a name. It was Godly Play.

During this time I increased my contributions to academic journals about Christian education, continued presenting papers at meetings, and worked on two books: *Godly Play*, published in 1991, and *Teaching Godly Play*, which was published in 1995. Many conferences about Godly Play were hosted at the Cathedral and I began to travel to do workshops on a limited basis. It was also during this time that I realized that Godly Play worked very well with adults and in counseling as well as in educational and pastoral care settings.

In the midst of Cathedral life I was also able to earn my D. Min. from Princeton Theological Seminary. The thesis was about parables, but the most important part of this experience was to engage with others in seminars and in written essays to analyze acts of ministry from four angles: the education/communication, pastoral care/counseling, theology/ethics, and administrative/leadership perspectives. This added to the experience with family therapy in the previous decade to integrate a systems approach into the practice of Godly Play.



## 1994-2004

During the fourth decade of development, 1994-2004, the Center for the Theology of Childhood was born and I was the first director. I began to travel widely to do workshops, even coming to Australia for a month from June 17 – July 13, 1996. This was at the invitation of Trevor Smith, an Anglican priest, as part of his work in distance learning for the church. It was a time of scattering seeds. We traveled all over the continent except for the Northwest, the North, and the Center.

This decade also saw the formal publication of the volumes of lessons in 2002. There are now seven volumes of *The Complete Guide To Godly Play*, but the corpus of lessons is larger than that and is still being developed and published. Creating these lessons is a complicated process and takes time. It involves the foundational theory for Godly Play, the method, the manufacturing of the Montessori-like teaching materials, and working out with children what to say and do in the presentations with an eye on the adults, since the mentors would also need to be able to become involved in what they were presenting.

This decade was complicated by health problems for Thea and myself. We became aware of Thea's cancer in 2001, so we were involved with chemo, surgery, and the ups and downs of treatment and tests. Between 2002–2006 I had five orthopedic surgeries, replacing both hips, a knee, and repairing two lower back problems that took away the use of my legs. I was able to regain my ability to walk except for the lower part of my right leg. Despite all of this, Godly Play continued to expand in the United States and abroad. New leadership was stepping forward.



## 2004-2014

This fifth decade began with several organizational matters. I retired as Director of the Center and the Godly Play Foundation was set up to coordinate the work of Godly Play Resources, where the teaching materials are made, and the Center for the Theology of Childhood, which became an academic institution with me as the Senior Fellow. To date we have had scholars come to study there from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Norway. It was also during this decade that Godly Play was recognized by awarding me honorary doctorates, which were granted by General Theological Seminary in New York City and by Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia.

This time has also been marked by the international expansion of Godly Play, which is exemplified by the launch of Godly Play Australia. The third European Godly Play Conference was held in the autumn of 2010 in Finland. This group meets every two years and the next meeting will be in Germany. Godly Play is also being discussed in some thirty or more countries, as noted by Facebook communications. The basic lessons have been translated into Finnish, German, Spanish, and Swahili. In 2011 the book *Godly Play (1991)* was translated into Korean, which marked the twentieth anniversary of its publication. One might also say that this year celebrates the translation of Godly Play into Australian English!

Looking back over these decades, the most satisfying memory is that Thea and I taught Godly Play on the conservative average of once a week for 35 years. This is one of the reasons why there is a sense of reality about the theory and practice. The last time we taught together was for a few Sundays in the autumn of 2008. She died just a few months afterwards on January 25, 2009. What we did not realize during those decades was how important our love for each other and the children was to the development of this approach. What we did realize was how much fun we were having together with the children.

Some scientific studies were undertaken in our classroom in the Texas Medical Center, but we quickly stopped using the scanning video camera, the people coding behavior from the other side of the one-way glass, recording children's voices, keeping their art responses to the lessons, and other scientific techniques, because we were not learning anything interesting from these techniques. We decided instead to not distance ourselves from the children or try to prove anything empirically to

anyone. We learned better by enjoying what we were doing, focusing on the children, using our informed intuition, and trying to become better teachers and to create materials that really worked.

In 1892 William James, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University, gave some lectures to teachers in Cambridge, near Boston. They were published as *Talks To Teachers*. In the early pages of that book he wrote that "... you make a great, a very great mistake, if you think that psychology, being the science of the mind's laws, is something from which you can deduce definite programmes and schemes and methods of instruction for immediate schoolroom use. Psychology is a science and teaching is an art; and sciences never generate arts directly out of themselves. An intermediary inventive mind must make the application, by using its originality." Thea and I decided to use our originality to fill that intermediary role.

Our two-hour "research" classes met on Saturdays with younger children from about 3-8 years of age in the morning and older children from about 8-12+ in the afternoons. Some of the children continued to come to these Saturday classes until they entered high school. We usually saw about 30 children each Saturday. I was reluctant to write down any of the lessons for three or four years, because seeing them in print tended to close their development too early. As we approach the creation of a second edition of all the lessons, it is now obvious that this was a very good practice and that still more editing needs to be done. This is because it is hard to move from the oral culture young children naturally inhabit, to the world of reading and writing, and also to enjoy the world of abstract theories.

Naturally, we taught each Sunday at the Cathedral from 1984-1994, where we taught the 10-12 year old Godly Play class. When we began at Christ Church Cathedral the children we taught had never seen Godly Play and when we ended the decade we enjoyed the company of children who had never seen anything else. Both groups of older children needed the same thing. They needed a room rich with Godly Play materials and supplemental books. They also needed to be challenged with informed content, firmness, creativity, close personal attention, and humor – much like I needed when I was so disruptive many years before in graduate school.

During our last few years of teaching, we had a class of younger children at St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Houston near our home. We had begun with a class of little ones in the early 1970s and so we had

come full circle. What we learned was how important it is to understand what happens during the whole spiral of early, middle and late childhood with Godly Play, so you can know where the group you are working with has come from and where they are going in this process. We were also happy to see how the spiral of the curriculum, the method, the theory, and theology had all come together.

The year that Thea died two more key books were published. The second edition of *Teaching Godly Play* (2009) came out in an expanded and more lively version and *Children and the Theologians* (2009) saw the light of day.

The foundational work has continued, especially as a byproduct of teaching in the certificate program for the spiritual guidance of children at General Theological Seminary in New York City. In addition to the history, theology, and theory the students experience in the program there are also two courses about how to use the Godly Play materials for children's spiritual guidance. The students, myself, and my assistants – The Reverend Cheryl Minor from the United States and The Reverend Peter Privitt from the United Kingdom – experienced all the Godly Play lessons during the two courses. There is nothing like experiencing lesson after lesson, eight hours a day, for two weeks, to see the connections among the presentations and to appreciate the different kinds of lessons – core, synthesis, extensions, enrichments and others. More information about this program can be found by going to the Seminary's website and looking under "The Center for Christian Spirituality."

As I look back on all of this, I wish that Professor Wyckoff could be with us here in Australia, but he died in 2005. He and I often met at professional meetings over the years and after his retirement I got to visit him and his wife in their home in Albuquerque before he died. We always enjoyed remembering what happened in his classroom in 1960 and what had come of it. God laughs and plays.

# An Overview of Godly Play

We turn now to an overview of Godly Play. The literature about Godly Play is, of course, much larger and more varied in interest and opinion than this overview suggests, both pro and con. Still the view of the Founder is a good place to begin.

A key resource about the history of Godly Play will soon be available. It is Brendan Hyde's new book *The Search for the Theology of Childhood: Essays* by Jerome W. Berryman from 1978-2009, published by Connor Court here in Australia. Dr. Brendan Hyde is Senior Lecturer, Religious Education, at the Australian Catholic University on the Melbourne Campus. He studied at the Center for the Theology of Childhood in Denver at the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, using the archives there to prepare his manuscript.

Five areas will be mentioned, beginning with the historical context for Godly Play. The theology of Godly Play will be briefly discussed, and then the educational theory, the method, and the curriculum.

## History

The understanding of children by selected theologians may be found in my *Children and the Theologians* (2009). The themes of ambivalence, ambiguity, indifference, and grace emerged from this study as the legacy that still shapes our thinking today. There are times when all of us are ambivalent, ambiguous and indifferent about children, but when these themes dominate the church's implicit, de facto theology of children it paralyzes our best thinking about them, sometimes without us realizing it. This book suggests that we move children as a means of grace to the theological center of our concern. When children are welcomed, God is known and when adults become like children in matters of spirituality, the church moves toward the kingdom Jesus spoke of.

## Theology

The theology of Godly Play was formally addressed in a keynote address at the Third European Godly Play Conference in Finland in the autumn of 2010. I roughed out this theology as a map, a story, and a game. A longer version of that presentation is now being prepared.

In the meantime a preliminary statement of the theology of Godly Play can be found in two articles in the *Sewanee Theological Review*: "Children and Mature Spirituality," Vol. 48, No. 1 (Christmas 2004), pp. 17-36; and "Playful Orthodoxy: Reconnecting Religion and Creativity by Education," Vol. 48, No. 4 (Michaelmas 2005), pp. 437-454.

The revelation children convey as a means of grace involves three insights, as mentioned in the *Sewanee* articles: (1) They reveal how to play hide and seek with God, which is a theme known to many theologically minded poets. This is also a theme that is found in Samuel Terrien's *The Elusive Presence*, which presents a Biblical theology connecting but respecting both the Old and New Testaments by the experience, as he says, of God's "elusive presence." (2) Children reveal the importance of deep, contemplative silence to know God. They do this more naturally than adults, who sometimes need to relearn what they knew as children and develop conscious practices to do what they once did without thinking. (3) Children show how to bless and be blessed. This also is done non-verbally so that when we are with children in a wondering way, it opens adults to be more like them, which enables them to support children's true nature better, which in turn enables adults to be more childlike and so on.

Godly Play attempts to draw children and adults together into a spiritual practice that has implications for and fosters the spiritual maturity of all. This is one of the reasons why Godly Play is organized in a spiral without a developmental floor or ceiling to limit its use and why Godly Play mentors are not likely to burn out.

## Theory

The theory of Godly Play has been addressed specifically in one of the courses in the General Theological Seminary certificate program, “Playful Orthodoxy: A Theory for the Spiritual Guidance of Children,” and in a book manuscript with that name. The theory argues that whatever we do with children in the church from parties to worship as well as Christian education, is spiritual guidance. This is because children already know God in an undifferentiated way and are curious about this. What they need is to learn how to “speak Christian” so they can be more conscious of what they already know.

The spiritual guidance is that Godly Play acknowledges the reality that children have experienced and stimulates their curiosity about this and the church. Classical Christian language is used to make existential meaning and find direction as it is being learned. This is done to help children identify the experience of God’s presence, to name it, to express it, to seek its elusive reality, and to get perspective on it and evaluate its use without distorting or repressing the experience of God’s presence. This is why merely entertaining children, reducing Christianity to the memorization of Biblical facts, or using techniques of unilateral force or persuasion to tell children how to think and feel about God can be counterproductive.

The playful orthodoxy of Godly Play fosters a deep grounding in the classical language system of Christian people while still encouraging children to be open to new ideas, new experiences, new kinds of people, and the future. How does this work? Christian language is associated with the creative process, the heart of God’s image within us, so that as Christian language is learned it is also used to wonder and to cope with the limits to our knowing and being. This is why Godly Play helps children enter adolescence with an inner working model of the Christian language system to help them fashion their new and larger identity as adults.

## Method

The method of Godly Play was first described in Godly Play (1991) and then with more specificity eighteen years later in Teaching Godly Play (2009). A Godly Play class is organized around the deep structure of the Holy Eucharist, which is used by nearly all parts of the Christian family for worship, regardless of the terminology. The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of Holy Communion are combined in the Holy Eucharist (again by whatever terminology one wishes to use) to draw children into the Christian language system while honoring their own ecclesiastical curiosity and theological experience.

The Christian language system involves four basic genres: sacred stories, parables, liturgical action, and contemplative silence. It works to open children to wonder, which in turn opens the creative process. God is beyond us as Creator yet hinted at in God’s creation. God is beside us as Jesus in the Gospels as well as experientially, as he was to St. Paul on the road to Damascus. God is within us as the Holy Spirit, who sustains and re-creates us. This network of complex relationships with God is available all the time and everywhere, bidden and unbidden, although people tend to emphasize one or another of these approaches to God at different times in their lives or even at different times of the day. The method of Godly Play uses all of these doorways into the Holy. It is not merely Christ-centered. It is Trinity-centered.





## Curriculum

Godly Play assumes that children know God before they enter the world of spoken language. This knowledge of God is vague and undifferentiated. As the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar has said, children first experience God in their mother's smile. Differentiation accelerates when children enter the world of spoken language and expands again when the world of reading and writing is entered. The use of narrative is especially important during these developmental periods. Later for some adolescents and young adults, interest shifts from narrative to a more abstract kind of knowing, although none of the earlier ways of knowing are left behind. Godly Play provides the tools children need for the development of their spirituality during these changes. Its curriculum spiral is attuned to children's development, but not limited to it.

The curriculum began to be published in 2002, and there are now seven volumes of *The Complete Guide To Godly Play*, but there are more lessons and materials developed than have been published and some of them are major pieces, such as "The Greatest Parable," which is the basic lesson about Jesus' public ministry. It brings together Jesus' parabolic communication with what we experience of God in the liturgy and the sacred story of the long and continuing search for God's elusive presence. It is about beginnings without end from Genesis and John's Prologue to now and beyond.



## Conclusion

When one reads a summary of Godly Play, such as this, it can sound rather boring and much too serious. This is probably the greatest mistake anyone can make about what actually happens in a Godly Play room. After all, it is play and play is pleasurable, but for children play is always serious fun. In Godly Play the pleasure comes from being engaged creatively with something that one is curious about with other children, who are also curious about God and what is going on in church, when they are not overwhelmed by the irrational, cultural prejudice against matters of the spirit. Most importantly, however, the pleasure comes from learning how to use this powerful language we have inherited. It has been entrusted to us so we can know God in developing ways as both a wellspring in the desert and a rock for our foundation. This means to cope with our existential limits is something people need as children and not just when they grow up.

Godly Play does not intend to provide a complete ministry with children and families. It is interested in the experience of God and the related language that gives the rest of the activities meaning. Many adults understand that this is something that children need, because they need it themselves, but this sometimes makes adults afraid. Even if they want to be mentors they feel that they know so little when they want to give so much. Being a guide for the greatest journey there is should not be fearful. It is hopeful, because God comes to meet us as we journey, a company of pilgrims, adults and children, joined by mutual blessing.

New materials, new lessons, new foundational work, and new structures for making all this available to children around the world continue to be developed at the Godly Play Foundation faster than we can communicate them, much less integrate them into the broader movement. God seems to be running ahead, laughing and skipping, challenging us to keep up.

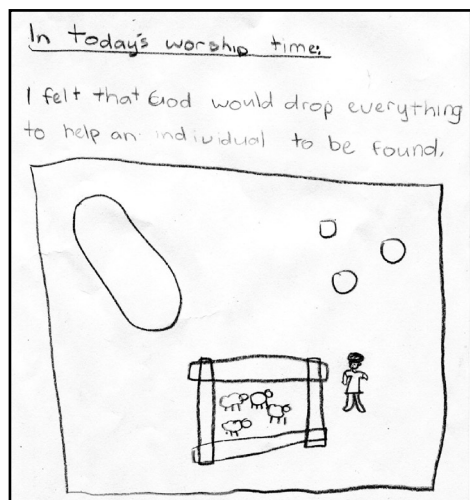
### **The Reverend Jerome W. Berryman, M. Div., J.D., D. Min., D.D., D.D.**

Senior Fellow  
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Denver, Colorado, USA

Jerome and Thea Berryman at Bear Lake not far from their beloved mountain house near Estes Park, Colorado, in the Rocky Mountains of the United States about 2006.

# Why I love Godly Play with children

The day I experienced my first Godly Play story I was filled with excitement! At last I had found a way to invite children right into the story – to meet God rather than just hear about God. I felt I had struck gold! And I have never looked back.



I started using Godly Play straight away, with minimal training, by making up a story box and telling children the parable of the Good Shepherd. In Godly Play, the storyteller memorises the story, and tells it from their heart – which shows children how important Scripture is to the storyteller.

Before long, I was inspired by children's responses. Once I told "the Good Shepherd" to upper primary children, many with no church connection, in a school holiday drama programme. I gave the children paper and coloured pencils so they could respond to the story. One boy's response is shown above. He says "In today's worship time I felt that God would drop everything to help an individual to be found." This 10 year old boy made the connection between the Good Shepherd and God which the storyteller does not explicitly give. I rejoice that this boy felt that God cared so much.

Years later, I finished a year of Godly Play lessons with a story about God bringing the light of Christ to each of us. I lit a tea light candle for each child from the Christ candle – naming each child and saying, for example, "Jane, this is your light". One beautiful response, from a child of 10, is shown to the left. As I started to snuff out the candles, one boy called out with some desperation "Nooo! Don't snuff my candle!" What other approach touches a child so deeply?

In telling the parable of the leaven to a classroom of 6-year-olds, we wondered together what the leaven might be. A girl suddenly brightened up and her hand shot into the air. "I KNOW!!!" she cried out. "What do YOU think the leaven might be?" Her eyes shone and she exuded enthusiasm through every pore of her body – "It's love!" The rest of the class were caught up in her excitement. I have never seen a child gain inspiration and wisdom in this dramatic way in a "normal" Sunday School lesson.

A mother came to me, after her 6 year old daughter had attended my Sunday School class for a year (which was mainly using the Godly Play storytelling approach, but following the lectionary – using the assigned passage as my script each week). She said – "Thank you so much! After a few years not believing in God, my daughter has just told me that she has decided she does believe in God. I'm sure it's something to do with being in your class."

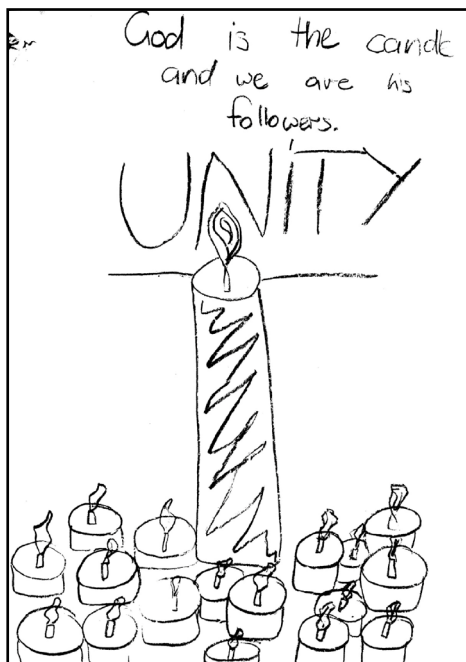
After a 6 month break I came back to teach Sunday School. I told the Old Testament story using my wooden people and "desert tray", and then I started asking wondering questions. Hands shot up around the room, however they wanted to ask a question of their own rather than answer my questions. And what they were wondering about was really deeply looking at the passage from the point of view of each of the people in it. Very impressive!

For 7 years now, I have told Godly Play stories to children. I love it because it is the most effective form of discipleship for children that I have found. It models for children how to be open and listen to what God might want to say to them through the Scriptures. It encourages them to slow down, and enjoy being quiet, reflective and creative without any pressure to perform. This is delightfully counter-cultural in our noisy, achievement-oriented society.

Several early students, now teenagers, still remember the stories we shared together – little seeds of faith deep within. I wonder when these seeds will germinate into a mature life of faith within each person? I wonder who will be there to continue the discipleship process when the right time comes?

Wishing each person who reads this, a deep encounter with the living God.

**Carolyn Handley**



## Godly Play in SA

I am currently running Godly Play for our 'Sunday School' class at Tea Tree Gully Uniting Church. We have a 'Godly Play' room set up in a multipurpose space which is special because it works! The children love this room as it has everything they need and it has become a very safe, sacred space for the kids.

We have been using Godly Play for about two years although this year we started it full time, that is every week.

I have a huge passion for Godly Play as I see it as unlike any other 'curriculum' because it gives the children space to explore God and faith without pressure or anxiety.

I often say that Godly Play presents the Bible and God like a wrapped Christmas present under a tree, that kids just want to shake and find out what is in there. It is for this reason that children are eager to read the Bible and ask more questions. I am excited with

what we are doing at TTGUC and I hope that we can help others create Godly Play spaces where they are.

If you are in South Australia (or anywhere) and need some help or encouragement in Godly Play, I would be happy to help you.

### **Kerry Folland**

Children's Ministry Coordinator/  
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# Testimonials

I first encountered Montessori style religious education in 1996 when The Reverend Dr Jerome Berryman came to Australia to introduce his work – Godly Play. I went out to his workshop with a sense of curiosity; the words ‘Godly’ and ‘Play’ do not appear side by side very often. So I went to see. I was swept away.

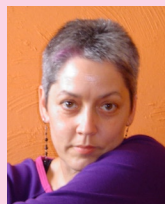
Jerome’s introduction to this wondrous work left me quite changed. I was fascinated as to why the telling of stories I had heard a hundred times before could have so entranced me. I was amazed at the story’s capacity to capture and engage and to call me to genuine wonder. I sat on the

floor with the storyteller and heard stories I could have told him, and yet I was able to enter them in a fresh way. I knew them, the words at least, and yet it was as if I was hearing them for the first time.

I left that single-day workshop with the earliest of his curricula then in print, *Young Children & Worship Sonja M. Stewart & Jerome W. Berryman 1989*, tucked firmly under one arm. I drove myself home past a church office where I photocopied the templates for the story of the Banquet. I coloured them in; the pencils too working their magic of helping me into the story just as much as the

words themselves. Within a week I had told my first story, despite my fear and trembling. I was hooked. Everything changed for me after that day; my focus, my preaching, my faith journey and eventually my working life.

Heartfelt thanks to my teacher, friend and guide in it all, dear Jerome.



**Jeanette Acland**

My interest in Godly Play originally came from the junior primary religious education syllabus in Catholic schools in Melbourne, which was influenced by the Godly Play process. Since then, I have studied the Godly Play methodology in great detail, and have been lucky enough to have spent some time working with Rev Dr Jerome W. Berryman at the Centre for the Theology of Childhood in Denver, Colorado. I use Godly Play with both my undergraduate and postgraduate students at the Australian Catholic University, as well as with teachers in schools. The process is both profound and sacred. It never ceases to touch both myself and those with whom I participate in this process.



**Dr Brendan Hyde**  
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I first came across Godly Play when the RE team of the Catholic Education Office, Sydney began to look more closely at Religious Education in the early years of school. In 2004 teachers and RE personnel from all dioceses in NSW and some from interstate gathered for a forum on Religious Education in the Early Years. At this forum it became clear to me that the innate spirituality of the child and the particular ways young children learn required an approach to RE that would nurture the young child's natural curiosity, wonder and spirituality and better suit their ways of learning.

On looking more closely at the approaches of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and Godly Play, I was excited to find ways that had been developed over time to specifically meet both the spiritual and learning needs of young children.

The experience for me of Godly Play training in Trumpington, UK in 2004 convinced me that this approach would be a wonderful way to engage our children with the Church's sacred scripture, liturgy, teaching and life. It would do this in ways that helped children to make meaning of their own experience and of key existential questions with which we all grapple.

At the same time this presented a challenge, as the context of Godly Play was not that of the school. It seemed clear to me however, that the approach would also suit a school system where community and relationships were highly valued and where the notion of a safe and predictable learning environment was well understood.

For us the 2004 Forum clearly pointed the way, as the teachers who attended from our Archdiocese, when asked what they felt was needed in the revised curriculum, responded with such comments as: 'more hands on learning', 'small groups, social interaction', 'religious experiences of children can find

expression in the teaching/ learning', 'more focus on Bible stories', 'ritual, symbol and image are important', 'programs need to be flexible', 'play is important', 'discovery through wonder, greatly underestimated at the moment', 'tactile, auditory and visual experiences to encounter sacred scripture', 'not ticking off outcomes, but exploring rich experiences', 'encouraging students to find meaning for themselves, not having it thrust upon them', 'curriculum loads realistic'.

It was clear to me that an approach like Godly Play would meet these requirements and the many others that were received.

In 2005 our RE Curriculum K-2 was released for schools reflecting the Godly Play approach and principles. Professional development was provided for all teachers along with resources for the storytelling. Our journey into Godly Play has been an ongoing one with continued support for teachers through the work of RE advisers, a number of whom have also trained in the UK or USA.

The feedback I receive from our RE advisers, teachers, principals and parents on the response of the children is truly inspiring!

The launch of Godly Play Australia and this conference will bring together Christians from many denominations who want to support children's spiritual and religious development in the Godly Play way. I look forward to the outcomes that will emerge from the formation of such a community.



**Sue Moffat**

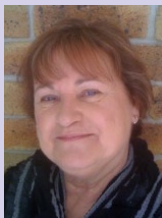
Education Officer: Religious  
Education  
Catholic Education Office Sydney

I work as a Teaching Educator: Religious Education for the Catholic Education Office in Parramatta. I have had many years experience teaching and leading in Catholic education, with a particular focus on Religious Education. Four years ago I travelled to Cambridge in the UK to undertake Godly Play teacher training. This had an impact on my thinking and practice and I returned to Birmingham in the UK the following year to take part in Godly Play Trainer training.

I have worked extensively in the field of training teachers to enliven Religious Education, using Godly Play principles. I have also focused on writing scripts for Scripture storytelling, 'based on the principles of Godly Play'. This led me to undertake a research project to investigate the

effectiveness of Scripture stories using 'hands on' materials, such as are used in Godly Play and again based on the principles of Godly Play in partnership with the Australian Catholic University.

Most recently my work has revolved around adapting Godly Play for use in the Catholic school context. I was fortunate to have met Jerome Berryman at the European conference in Finland in 2010.



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## Betwixt and between

I love being in a Godly Play group – there is a sense of expectation in that the children bring novel and sometimes random insight. It takes me into their space of freshness and simple faith. Jerome Berryman's words ring true for me, "children show the intensity of biological, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of grace ... A kind of communication of God's overflowing exuberance".

This can be linked to Bonnie Miller-McLemore's appreciation of finding God in the chaos of life with children. As we let our selves enter in the children's world, "playing draws us into creation, it heals and resurrects. It re-creates ... the liminal space 'betwixt and between', neither 'this-nor-that', a place suggestive of,

and open to, transformation and encounter with the sacred. After we play we feel different than before, refreshed, renewed, born again".

Berryman, J., (2009) Children and the theologians NY: Moorehouse

Miller McLemore, B., (2007) In the midst of chaos San Francisco: Wiley



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# 'Grown-ups', Godly Play and Formation for Ministry

'Perhaps it might be worth 'doing' a systematic theology using Godly Play?'

This was a thought spiraling in my head as we attended Core Training at Rippon College, Oxford. Happily, one of my past lecturers was undertaking a sabbatical there, so we were able to talk a bit about the possibility. He didn't think it was such a crazy idea and encouraged me to return to Australia and 'play' with adults engaging in ministry formation.

In the nine months since then, I have incorporated the use of circle, story, response and feasting in several ELM courses. I would not claim that we are having Godly Play sessions, but we are drawing from the wealth of the tradition. We do not always have all elements. However, we do have students who are used to interactive and group-generated learning, so many slip into 'the circle' as a place of belonging.

Early experiences have taken place in the context of:

- 'Caring in Times of Grief and Loss – Funerals and Bereavement Ministry' Course (Parable of the Good Shepherd)
- 'Understanding Sacraments' four-day course (Liturgical stories: The Holy Trinity; Circle of the Holy Eucharist; Holy Baptism; Good Shepherd and World Communion; Circle of the Church Year)
- 'Lay Preacher Lectionary Days' (Sacred Stories – Creation; 10 Best Ways; Circle of the Church Year)
- 'Living Values – Elders and Leaders Days' (Parable of the Mustard Seed; 10 Best Ways; Good Shepherd and World Communion; Faces of Easter)
- 'Introduction to Biblical Studies – Exegesis' (Faces of Easter; Journey to Jerusalem)

So far, I have found that adults struggle to enjoy a story and engage in wondering the first time. The difference between a first and second session is astounding, as people find peace in silence and calmness in listening. Adults enjoy a lengthy response time, but trust needs to have been developed before they feel able to accept the invitation to respond. I am now trying days where adults gather to form a circle and have a first story. We then do some collective work. After feasting on Morning Tea, we re-gather and explore and wonder about a second story. This time we have personal response time, followed by lunch. We then do group work and have a final story and wondering. We share something of the spiritual feast we have enjoyed and send people off to continue to work in their own contexts.

It has been fascinating to observe the way that God's Spirit has worked in each setting. First God has worked on me. Learning stories, making pieces and remaking pieces as the stories become more and more written in my own soul prepares me. Every time I greet and gather a circle and every time I tell a story, I sense God working gently on me. Every time I am present while others are responding and feasting, I experience the most enormous feeling of privilege. So it is that I have discovered that the Formation for Ministry (which participants assure me is happening for them) is happening for me too. It is like the Gospel – we think we carry it to others, but really, we are the disciples who discover that God is already there in every place, person and situation – even amongst 'grown ups'. Godly Play is about discovering God anew – and God can be encountered amongst adults, as well as children!



**Rev Amelia Koh-Butler**

ELM director,  
Synod of NSW-ACT, Uniting Church in  
Australia

# *The Godly Play Prayer*

*May the Good Shepherd  
who knows all of the sheep by name  
lead you to the good green pastures,  
and stay with you through the times of desert.*



*May you find your pearl of great price,  
and know that you journey with the People of God,  
who are as many as the stars in the sky  
and as many as the grains of sand in the desert.*

Judyth Roberts is coordinating a Godly Play Network in Australia to support people interested in exploring this way of working with the Bible stories with children and adults.

See the Godly Play website: **[www.godlyplay.org.au](http://www.godlyplay.org.au)** for more information and to join the network.

Judyth Roberts is the Children and Families Ministry Consultant for the Synod of NSW and the ACT. She can be contacted on **0409 154 625**.