

Associates of Godly Play UK

The Magazine

Issue 15

September 2024



At the threshold



Photo: Wikimedia Commons: „Dar Carmelia Hotel Door; Roman Deckert

**Hello and welcome to
this issue of our Godly
Play UK magazine!**

You may be reading it for the first time, as the magazine was originally conceived as a gift to our Associates, who contribute so generously to our work of sharing Godly Play more widely. But now the time has come for the magazine itself to be shared with a larger circle, and we hope that it will bring you encouragement, helping you reflect and go deeper in your Godly Play practice, by forging connections with others who love to wonder with God and with people. And if you'd like to explore the free resources to be found in previous issues, you'll find our magazine archive available at

www.godlyplay.uk

*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

When we received the news of the death of Jerome Berryman, we held back this issue to give time to offer a full appreciation of his work and the legacy he has left us here in the UK. We are grateful to Rebecca and Peter, who knew him so well, for what they have taken time to share with us.

We also give thanks for St Michael's Workshop, in Norwich, who supplied our materials for such a long time, and have sadly closed.

And we are still celebrating the success of our Conference at the end of June. It was a bold step after four years of plague and the fear it generated, to invite people to come together once more to celebrate their experiences of Godly Play and the faith it shares.

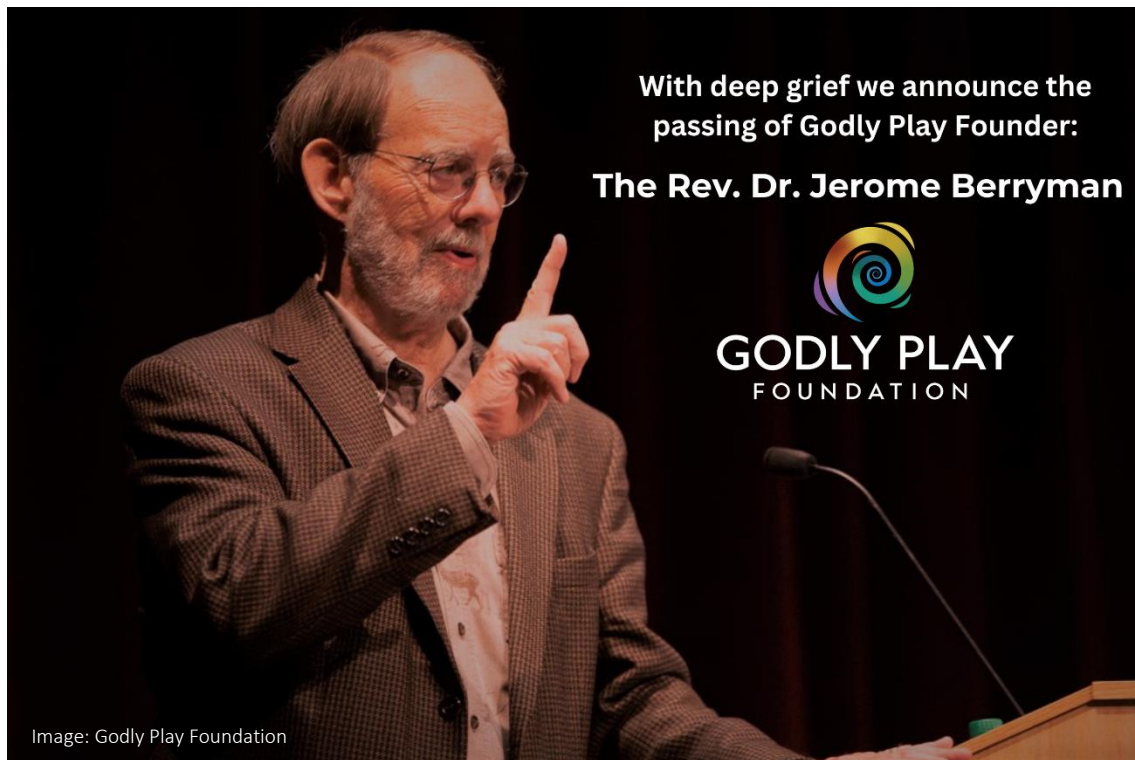
So now we look forward. Led by the Godly Play Foundation and their equity audit, we are beginning to explore the stories we all love so well for signs of implicit bias. And we are searching for new suppliers of Godly Play materials in the UK. This looked as though it would be an uphill struggle, but there are signs of significant hope. Look out for news of new partnerships and opportunities in the near future.

We hope you will enjoy reading about Jerome in our first piece and then move to Heather Moger's reflections on what Godly Play 'can really be'. We have some short book thoughts and an interesting interview with Pastor Waddle Tong from Reading Chinese Christian Church, where Godly Play is used in the trilingual setting of a diverse congregation.

Slowly, slowly, we are find ourselves able to offer successful courses once again. The online courses, developed to meet the conditions of the pandemic, have proved to be valuable well beyond their original purpose. And we hope that 2025 will see three-day courses in a greater variety of settings. If you would like one in your area, please contact us. We would love to hear from you.

Jerome Woods Berryman

4 June 1937 – 7 August 2024



Early in August we learned of the death of Jerome Berryman, the founder of Godly Play and Patron of Godly Play UK. Here, Peter Privett and Rebecca Nye tell us something about his life and work, and why his encouragement and support have been so important to Godly Play UK.

Peter writes first:

A beginning

In a beginning, a baby was born into the small, close-knit, wheat-farming, ranching community of Ashland, Kansas. Parents and grandparents lived almost opposite each and one night, a young boy climbed into the grandparents' bed to be so close to his grandmother that he could ask the question that was forming in his mind. 'Why do I have to die?' Her presence in the darkness put him in touch with the mystery of a larger presence. This and other childhood, sometimes wordless, experiences would lead to a lifetime search for words to give them voice, and a method by which the language could be explored.

Jerome Berryman, as a late adolescent, was asked by his junior high school teacher to lead a class. 'I talked mainly about football, basketball and track. I had something important to say about God and my life, but I did not yet have a deeply satisfying way to say it.'

At Kansas University he was a keen sportsman, focusing on basketball and hurdles, but he sustained a serious knee injury. 'The destruction of my knee,

stepping down over a high hurdle running flat out, ended all that. That's when I got theological. I had to put my world back together.'

Transformative experiences

A BA from Kansas (1959) was followed by theological training at Princeton Theological Seminary where he received his Master of Divinity (1962) and it was during this time that he met and married Thea Schoonyoung, a music student. For three years Jerome was an assistant, and then interim, minister for a Presbyterian church in Kansas and their first daughter, Alyda, was born.



A chaplaincy to 900 adolescent boys in a boarding school followed. 'When the boys were in mild trouble they could come see me in the gym and call me "coach". If they were in big trouble, they would come see me at the chapel and call me "chaplain". Those three years were when I realized that if I really wanted to make a difference, I needed to start earlier. That's when I became interested in children.'

During this time, the Berryman's second daughter, Coleen, was born with spina bifida: 'That event added to my awareness of the complexity and critical importance of childhood.' Through Thea and Jerome's care-full parenting Coleen grew into an independent woman, teacher and artist.

After Jerome received his Juris Doctorate from the University of Tulsa Law School, the family were in Arkansas, where Alyda and Coleen attended a Montessori school. Thea and he sometimes observed the classes, 'Perhaps this was the way to do religious education with young children, I thought.'

The family moved to Bergamo, in Italy (1971-2), where Jerome studied at the Centre for Advanced Montessori Studies. During that time, he met Sofia Cavalletti whose influence and work gave him the tools to fashion what was to become Godly Play.

Houston

They returned to Cleveland, Ohio, where Jerome created a Montessori middle school. But Coleen needed additional health care and the best place for this was at the Texas Medical Center, so the family moved to Houston, where Jerome began to work with the hospital's health care teams, teaching the pastoral care of children, medical ethics, faith development and the relationship of science and religion. It was a time of experimentation, and the development of the method that would become Godly Play.

Jerome began a consultation with Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Houston, becoming Canon Educator in 1985. After 24 years as a Presbyterian minister, he was ordained as an Episcopal priest. 'The awareness of this theological and liturgical change in myself had been growing for nearly a decade.'

Regular teaching sessions throughout the week with Thea – 2-hour research sessions and the 45-minute education hour – kept Jerome in touch with the realities of Sunday mornings. It was a time of refinement, development and experimentation. When he left the Cathedral post in 1994, Jerome's full-time focus

became the development and promotion of Godly Play, involving worldwide travel, leading consultations and workshops.

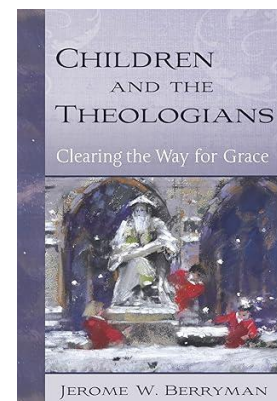
The Center for the Theology of Childhood

From 1998 – 2007 Jerome was executive director of the Center for the Theology of Childhood in Houston. It was time of rapid growth for Godly Play. Jerome had oversight of the development of a programme that recruited and trained trainers and saw the publication of the volumes of *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*. He retired as director in August 2007 and was appointed Senior Fellow of the Center. The Center is now the research arm of the Godly Play Foundation and includes a library of some 4,000 books focused on matters related to Godly Play, located in Greenwood Village, Colorado.

Jerome's influence on Christian nurture and spirituality has been profound. Throughout the world, many countries have created Godly Play spaces and programmes. But it has not always been plain sailing. Sometimes the rooms that he and Thea created have been disbanded. Speaking of one place where this happened, he said, 'There were eight beautiful Godly Play rooms. It was as permanent as I was, apparently.' Despite this Godly Play has been the work of a lifetime of discovery. Thea died in 2009. Jerome and Thea had loved to 'talk children' and he always acknowledged that she was the co-creator of Godly Play.

A theology of childhood?

In later years, Jerome focused on an exploration of a theology of childhood. *Children and the Theologians* appeared in 2009. Referring to a Godly Play conference in Finland, Jerome wrote: 'I am mostly interested in what they have to say about my first effort to state the theology of Godly Play, which the Finns cornered me into writing about (thanks be to God!). I have been avoiding this, never thinking I was quite ready to think about such matters. I was apparently waiting until I grow up – which is dangerous at my age since I may go on [to a better place] before I grow up.'



These later years were defined not only by his determination to work out his theology of childhood, but also by devoted care for Coleen, whose health had become very fragile. Several times a week he accompanied her to the hospital for dialysis. Coleen died in April 2020.

In Autumn 2021 Jerome gave a keynote address at Virginia Theological Seminary entitled 'Playing in the Flow of God's Creative Power: A Small Theology of Childhood'. The theology was condensed to a single sentence with commentary:

We are summoned from another realm
To feel like children,
Playing in the flow of God's creative power
With tears and laughter to guide us
And language as our leaven, so
We can know what is real and show it.¹

Having written this, he said, 'The sentence continues to mature, but that's its 'sentence' for the moment. We do need a doctrine of childhood.'

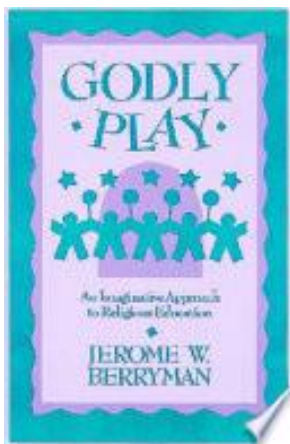
Jerome Berryman is survived by his daughter Alyda, and three granddaughters.

¹ *Let the Children Lead*, edited by Elizabeth DeGaynor, VTS Press, 2023: Chapter 1, Jerome Berryman

Rebecca writes:

Jerome Berryman and the UK

Jerome enjoyed a special connection with the UK, dating back as far as the early 1960s when he attended a postgraduate theology summer school at Mansfield College, Oxford. Later, in the 1970s, he gave lectures at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, about his chaplaincy experience with sick and suicidal children, work which became foundational to developing Godly Play. Through the 1980s Jerome fostered relationships with UK significant RE academics, consulting David Hay about his religious experience research, and John Hull, who was working on his multi-faith, tangible *A Gift to the Child* resources and curriculum.



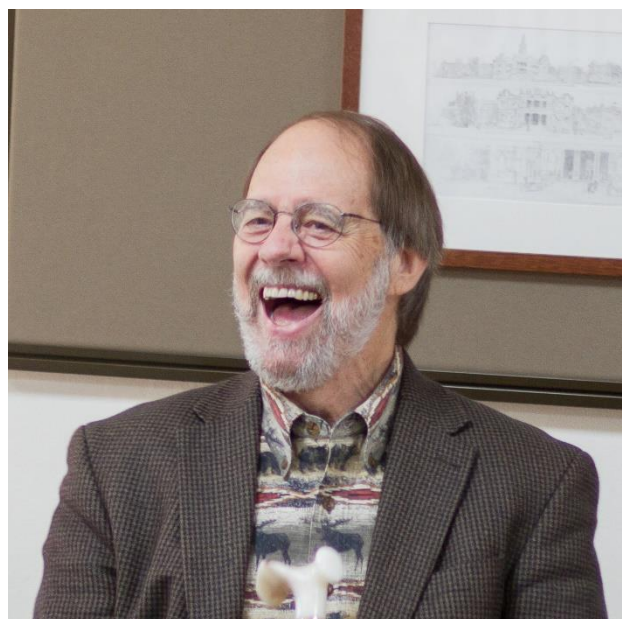
Whilst Jerome's seminal book, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* had been published in the USA in 1991, it was not until 1998 that as a childhood spirituality researcher I discovered his work and its relevance to the UK. Over the next 25 years, Jerome was especially generous and supportive to the development of *Godly Play* in the UK. For example, in 1999 he stepped straight off a transatlantic flight to lead a workshop on Godly Play in London, picking out the story materials from amongst the clothes in his suitcase. In 2001, he led an in-depth study of Godly Play over many days at the Old Divinity School in Cambridge, donating not only his time, but also many Godly

Play resources which were the foundation of the first UK Godly Play room in Trumpington and St Michael's Workshop, Bowthorpe. At this point, Jerome also made a special connection with the UK's Jewish religious education community, encouraging Rabbi Michael Shire to develop what has become Torah Godly Play (<https://www.torahgodlyplay.com/introduction>).

Influence and impact

Over many years, Jerome provided guidance and deep, playful friendship to Peter and me as we tried to respond to the growing interest in Berryman's thought and method, not only in the UK but across Europe. He was always delighted to hear about newly trained storytellers and trainers and he paid close attention to UK developments such as using Godly Play in school settings or in the Salvation Army context.

Jerome's last visit to the UK was undertaken (despite recent surgeries) to deliver keynote lectures to packed audiences at the Godly Play UK conference in 2014. And in this last



decade, as Patron of Godly Play UK, his ongoing support has been expressed through generous financial gifts and wise counsel.

Jerome's legacy is perhaps 'so big it is hard to see' and will doubtless continue to grow. In the UK it can be glimpsed in the countless churches and schools who have fallen in love with Godly Play, the many more influenced by its 'wondering' pedagogy, as well as its endorsements as an example of 'best practice' RE in national guidance.



However, Jerome's theoretical and theological writing leaves much more to be harvested, particularly for English readers. His books are indubitably challenging intellectually, reflecting the depth and breadth of his own life-long education. Readers of his work both struggle and benefit from his gift for

synthesising ideas from theology, psychology, education, philosophy, art and literature – in his later years he also wrote poetry and published a novel. Thus, Jerome's life's work, both theory and practice, has been remarkably – perhaps uniquely – grounded, rooted both in academic scholarship and through literally sitting on the floor, learning from children.

A more extensive biography of Jerome's life and work, by Holly Allen, can be read here:

<https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/jerome-berryman>

Quotations cited are from email correspondence with the writers, and from *Godly Play, An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*, Jerome Berryman, Augsburg, 1991: Chapters 2 & 7.

Impressions of Godly Play Conference, Gloucester 2024

By Mary Birchenall



Mary Birchenall is a retired university lecturer. Currently she acts in a number of voluntary roles, including a carers social group providing opportunities for relaxation and care for the carer. She also works with a local residential care facility for people living with learning and physical difficulties, to assist in their spiritual development and experience. Mary leads the work with children in her local C of E church. She loves reading and enjoys messing around with crafts, currently learning about collage work.

In truth, I came to the conference by default. I have been searching for an understanding of Godly Play for a little while and saw the conference advertised, preceded by an Introduction to Godly Play Day: perfect. Gloucester is a bit of a trek from Warsop in Nottinghamshire, so staying for the conference was a no-brainer.

‘An introduction to Godly Play’ day was all that I anticipated and more.

Firstly, the gentle teaching by demonstration and participation helped my understanding to grow. The quiet enthusiasm and professionalism of the storytellers demonstrated the potential value of Godly Play in many settings. And yes, I am that terrible thing, a convert! Despite personal struggles with timing and home demands I will be seeking Godly Play training, this year.



Secondly, meeting so many people undertaking a similar search about Godly Play was reassuring. The evening social event ensured that I would not feel isolated at the conference the next day, and I could retire to my hotel room with great anticipation for the next instalment of learning.



The conference itself was headlined about laughter and the keynote speaker certainly had us thinking about laughter, its joy, freedom, and cathartic components. If only I had had the courage to join in the laughter yoga session, but instead sought more direct learning about Godly Play. Each session I attended helped to further my understanding and realise the flexible nature of Godly Play. I had feared that this was a rigid process of storytelling but found that although the script and actions are given, the approaches to movement and speaking, the process of wondering ensured the individuality of speaker and listener were valued and as varied as the members of the group. I look forward to future developments in my understanding and eventual use of Godly Play.

Feature articles

‘I wonder – what could all of this really be?’ Perceptions of Godly Play

By Heather Moger



Heather Moger is a Godly Play UK Trustee, and Chaplain to a group of six primary schools in the Eynsham Partnership Academy, Oxfordshire. She first encountered Godly Play in the stable block Godly Play room in Cambridge, with Rebecca Nye and Gill Ambrose. A lifelong Christian, and a strong introvert, Heather has found in Godly Play the language to make manifest her faith, and the leaven in her ongoing vocational journey.

[I have been asked to lead some Godly Play style worship \(10 mins\) at the beginning of the July Deanery synod meeting. I'd welcome some ideas or suggestions...](#)

This Facebook post on the Godly Play UK page ‘bumped’ me (as we say in our Godly Play Scotland book group) – though I admit I did not know the full context. What was behind the request, I wondered? What was the Deanery synod organisers’ perception of Godly Play? Many of the comments that followed the post offered help by naming stories, ones that are inherently very short, or suggesting longer stories that could be cut to make them ‘fit’ into the short time allotted. The reply that ‘sparkled’ for me (again in Godly Play book group speak), was the reply which simply said, ‘I would want to ask for more time. Explain that Godly Play is something you cannot rush.’

Not just some colourful content

The reflections which follow grew out of a recent Godly Play Trustee meeting when we were taking a fresh look at perceptions of Godly Play, and what we believe is distinctive. Taking the Facebook post at face value, I wonder if it embodies a common perception, one I come across regularly when Godly Play comes into a conversation, that Godly Play is all about telling a Bible story with visual aids. I encounter many people who have had one or two experiences of Godly Play and are very enthusiastic about the impact it has made. On that basis, without being much further informed, they believe they know what Godly Play is. Some of the unofficial Godly Play videos on YouTube don’t help our case either! One thing Godly Play is not is a quick fix solution when some colourful content is needed in a Christian worship or teaching setting. So, I wonder, ‘What could Godly Play really be?’ – making no apology for setting out my thoughts in ‘Godly Play style’!

The focus on stories in the Facebook comments interested me. I love the Godly Play stories, learning and sharing them, but the story (the presentation) is not necessarily the part of Godly Play I like the best. Doing Godly Play is not all about the story, nor does it need only a storyteller. It involves a team of people, not least

the doorperson – who gets no mention at all on Facebook. The story or presentation is only one component of many in a complete Godly Play experience. When I did my first Godly Play accredited training, we were advised that when budgeting for resources, we should allocate more than half the money on response, not story materials. In *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Jerome Berryman’s recommended timings for an hour’s session affords the longest period (25 minutes) to the response time, and where time is limited, the advice given is to devote entire sessions to the response every three or four weeks. The story is not always the most important part of Godly Play.

Building community

On the issue of the ‘Sunday School slot,’ Jerome’s first suggestion is to spend time building the circle, and then to move directly to the feast, followed by a leisurely goodbye. ‘You will not shortchange anyone,’ he writes. ‘The quality of time and relationship that the participants experience within the space is the most important lesson presented in a Godly Play session.’ In other words, building community, not the story or presentation is more of what Godly Play really is. I wonder, in a story-centric deanery synod 10-minute opening worship, would we really have all the Godly Play we need? Perhaps the synod service could have begun with a doorperson greeting every member by name on entering the worship space, and asking each, ‘Are you ready?’ A short time of prayer, inviting God into the midst of the gathering to guide the meeting ahead and make known his story through our story might have followed, and with a final blessing the synod would then be sent out prepared for the business of the day.

The quality of time and relationship that the participants experience within the space is the most important lesson presented in a Godly Play session.

The synod request also risks devaluing Godly Play as a ‘Pick and Mix’ teaching tool. Any one story can be effective when told in isolation, but a story has greatest impact when it is received as one in a succession of stories within the Godly Play curriculum, shared with a circle of members who learn and grow together through



regular meetings. When told in a Godly Play room, the impact is even greater. The place the story holds on the shelves is a story in itself, received and understood within the bigger picture, the story of the People of God.

Discover, develop and deepen

Nor are the Godly Play presentations complete without the wondering that follows them. If a short or shortened story were to be told in the synod worship, a ten-minute slot would not accommodate much space for wondering. The ability to wonder is also something that develops and grows organically through regular practice, particularly in adults, who often find themselves having to re-learn how to wonder. It is worth

reminding ourselves that it was Jerome's intention when putting the presentations together that the core curriculum of stories should be repeated three times before additional ones are introduced. Although many of us have to make compromises and adapt Godly Play sessions in response to context, the true value of Godly Play lies in the way the approach conceived as a spiral, enables participants to discover, develop and deepen faith over a long period of time. If the Synod were already doing Godly Play as a regular part of its programme, a Godly Play style ten-minute opening worship would be value-added, but a request for a Godly Play style worship disconnected from the rest of the proceedings, presents a very different perception.

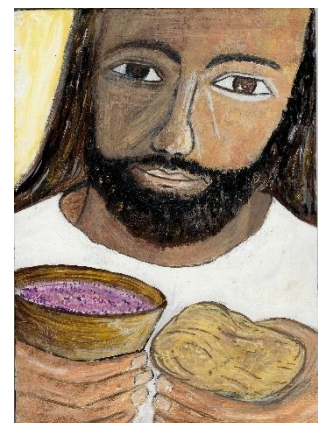
When the perception of Godly Play is that it's just another way of telling Bible stories, it's not long before someone exclaims, 'Oh, I couldn't cope with having to learn all those scripts!' It's a reaction I frequently hear when introducing Godly Play to schoolteachers on Discovery Days, who are taken by the concept but say they simply haven't got the time to 'get everything together.' They would prefer an off-the-shelf resource they can pick up, take out of the box and use straight away, like a ready meal from the supermarket. And indeed, there are plenty of those – as I was writing this article, an email from a Christian publisher dropped into my inbox advertising yet more new materials for working with children and young people, and proclaiming, 'It requires virtually no thinking from you – we've worked it all out, so you don't have to!'

The trouble with ready meals is that they work well as an occasional convenience, but they fail to sustain our long-term good health. Doing Godly Play is more like making a meal from scratch, requiring more time, effort and commitment. You must source the ingredients yourself, and prepare them, and the cooking takes longer. Though the recipe you follow determines the dish, there is still room for individuality: ten chefs could all make spaghetti bolognese from the same book but there would be subtle variation in the presentation and taste of each. And the recipe book? In the beginning you follow a recipe, but with repetition the process becomes easier, you internalise the stages and eventually you cook without it. That is why the Facebook comment I liked the best was, 'I would want to ask for more time. Explain that Godly Play is something you cannot rush.'

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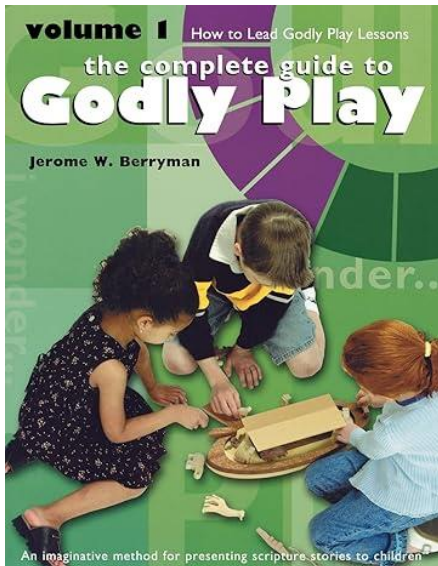
Getting ready

Godly Play cannot and should not be rushed. This proposes a different perception of Godly Play, one that gets us closer to answering the question 'What could all of this really be?' If Godly Play is rushed, so much is missed, as with the Mysteries of Christmas and Easter. I have seen how sometimes people walk right through Godly Play and don't even know it is there. We need to get ready to come close to a mystery and that takes time, and we need to get ready to come close to Godly Play, which also takes time. In his



keynote speech at the Godly Play Scotland conference 2023, Andrew Sheldon (until recently the Godly Play Advocate for International Development) explored four thresholds of readiness: theological, spiritual, emotional and pedagogical. Paradoxically, the better prepared I am in these ways, certainly not something that can be rushed, the less Godly Play becomes about me, and the more it is about God.

To enter a mystery is a serious time



Godly Play tells us that preparing to enter a mystery is a ‘serious time,’ and Godly Play UK has a strong vision ‘for childhood spirituality to be taken seriously’. To take something seriously means to treat it as being very important and deserving attention or respect. It is not simply a matter of completing the three-day training course and then thinking we know what Godly Play is. There is always more to learn – for every ending there is a beginning and for every beginning there is an ending – it goes on for ever. Jerome advocates, ‘When doing Godly Play, be patient.’ In the non-story pages of the Core Curriculum books (Volumes 2, 3 and 4), the section ‘Getting Started’ suggests ‘a thorough reading’ of *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of*

Children, and *The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volume 1: How to Lead Godly Play Lessons*, both by Jerome Berryman. I believe that ‘a thorough reading’ does not just mean once through from cover to cover before getting going, but an ongoing reading and referencing (alongside other child spirituality literature) to keep all the distinctive and vital elements of Godly Play fresh in our minds. Each time I revisit this material I notice something new. If we leave out these chapters, we will never have all the story that we need.

A gift that has already been given to us

To return to our cooking analogy, if you have ever watched Master Chef, you will have seen how ordinary kitchen enthusiasts step out of the familiarity and comfort of their home kitchen to face the unknown. They put themselves forward willingly, with courage and humility, knowing they are going to be challenged to their very core. As the series progresses, we see them grow in confidence and capability, and when interviewed, they speak with joy not of the outcome, but of everything they have gained along the way. Which brings me to the believe Godly Play really is. As with all things



Godly Play, there is no right or wrong answer, because Godly Play is for each of us what we need it to be. Like a parable, Godly Play is a gift, but one we can't buy like a birthday or Christmas present, because it has already been given to us. Godly Play is costly, not in terms of it being expensive to set up (another misguided perception held by some), but because to play seriously we have to put ourselves in God's hands and become vulnerable. Through Godly Play, we have to be prepared to allow God, the Master Chef, to turn us inside out and upside down and change us.



For some people, Godly Play can be hard to enter – and sometimes it stays closed. But no one should be discouraged; anyone can keep coming back to it again and again, and one day it will open up for them.

Formational and transformational

So, what does Godly Play make when we put it all together? Andrew Sheldon speaks of The Godly Play Way (Godly Play Scotland 2023). In his words, 'It is a way of doing liturgy

and worship, faith formation, pastoral care, hospitality, and even governance, that is informed by the principles and practices that are at the heart of Godly Play.' He was describing what he had done to move his church from a 'church that does Godly Play' into a 'Godly Play church.' We were privileged – and inspired – at this year's Godly Play UK conference in Gloucester, to hear Daniel Norris, Head of St Jérôme Church of England Primary School in Harrow, share how he has done the same with his school. Godly Play is both formational and transformational. As teachers, our focus should not be on delivering Godly Play, but playing the game ourselves. In the language of

education, it is not a 'stand and deliver' approach, nor a 'guide from the side', but rather a 'rebound from around'. When we live Godly Play, it becomes a way of being, so that we 'may have

When we live Godly Play, it becomes a way of being, so that we may have life in all its fullness.

life in all its fullness.' As a way of spiritual nourishment, there is no Godly Play 'Lite'! What a wonderful opportunity lies in that Synod request for a 10-minute Godly Play style opening worship, to plant a seed that would eventually transform the Synod from one that doesn't just want to 'do' Godly Play into one that is a Godly Play Synod!

Taking your wondering further...

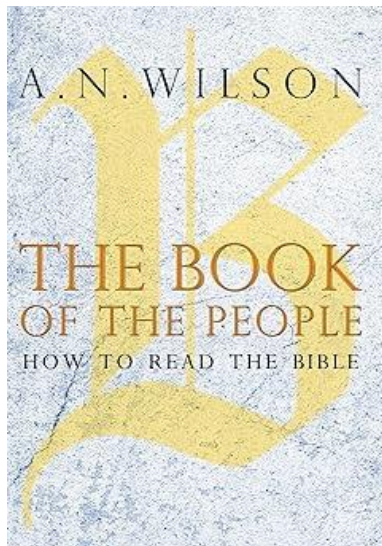
Books

We often include book reviews in this magazine – both books for adults about children’s spirituality, and books for children which you might want to provide as ‘response materials’ in a Godly Play session. Do you have a book which you would recommend to someone who uses Godly Play? Have you seen a new title which has been published, and you would like to review (we can send you a copy of the book)? Please email cona@godlyplay.uk with your suggestions.

Below is a testimony to a summer read – not a review exactly, but something to look out for.

The Book of the People: How to read the Bible, A. N. Wilson, 2015, Atlantic Books London

By Tom and Gill Ambrose



We both read this book over the summer, after it was commended to us by a friend in a group we attend, and from our different perspectives, we each found it helpful.

A. N. Wilson is prolific author of both fiction and non-fiction. A celebrated biographer of the good, the bad and the ugly, who has met controversy both intentionally and unintentionally, Wilson very publicly embraced atheism before slowly and thoughtfully returning to a life of faith.

The sub-title, *How to read the Bible*, makes a bold claim which could appear off-putting, and Wilson is well-known for being provocative. But he is also a master storyteller, and immediately captures the reader’s attention by introducing a mysterious lady known only as ‘L’. She appears as companion and guide throughout Wilson’s exploration which increasingly feels like a pilgrimage, as he comes to an appreciation of what kind of book the Bible is. On this path we are introduced to writers who have contributed their understanding of God, and readers who have built on what they have read. With this, Wilson powerfully argues the Bible’s relevance for people today.

Wilson studied literature at university, but he rejects a simple literary approach to the Bible. Words in his final chapter resonated for me, Gill, with Godly Play (cf. *An Imaginative Approach to Christian Education*), for the Bible unlocks a life of imagination and of faith.

‘The Bible reminds us that all human language is metaphor, all expressions of metaphysical truth, or scientific truth, are in one sense mythological. The Bible does not compete with the metaphors of Science or Literature or Philosophy, but its own metaphors can inform life.... The Book mysteriously remains, and whether we hear it used in liturgy or read in private, it retains its undying luminosity. (p.191)’

The Feast

A chance to meet



Godly Play Trainer Jeanny Wang met Pastor Waddle Tong from the Reading Chinese Christian Church in March 2024 to hear about his journey towards sharing Godly Play with children from a multilingual congregation.



JW: Please tell me a little about yourself and your journey from Hong Kong to Reading.

WT: After a new security law had passed in Hong Kong, the UK launched a new visa for the British National Overseas passport holders. It led our family and extended family to consider immigrating to England. After some discernment we were able to come to Reading in 2021. I attended the Reading Chinese Christian Church (RCCC) which meets in a Baptist church for a year before they offered me the post to be one of the pastors. My wife who is also a Godly Player and I have a 12-year-old daughter.

JW: Tell me a bit about The Chinese Church in Reading.

WT: There are three Chinese congregations in Reading. Two of them are Cantonese speaking and ours is bilingual in Mandarin-Cantonese (Cantonese is the language spoken by most Hong Kong Chinese, while Mandarin is the official language of the People's Republic of China). Roughly, we have about 70 adults for Sunday worship, approximately 40% are from China, 40% are from Hong Kong who have settled in UK for many years or the second-generation children who are born in UK. 20% are a mixture of other Southeast Asian countries: Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia or partners from non-Southeast Asian countries like Britain, also including newly immigrated people with British National Overseas passports from Hong Kong.

There are two pastors, and we have a nine-person working committee. There are between five and ten children who come to Sunday school, aged 5-11 years old.

JW: How did you come across Godly Play?

WT: It's a complicated story! In 2015 I was a research assistant for two years in the Christian Faith Centre at the Education University of Hong Kong. This is where I met Kevin Ma who invited kindergarten teachers to an open Godly Play session. Kevin had not long returned from England having completed training in Godly Play. As the research assistant, I was tasked with organising the 'odds and ends' for this open Godly Play session at the University.

My first reaction was this is not going to work! Hong Kong children are used to such a high level of entertainment and excitement. They are used to a very speedy digital world, that's so competitive and highly active. There's no way they will be able to sit still in a circle and listen to a slow story. Then my supervisor suggested



that we make a research proposal, a study to find out if Godly Play 'works' (for children.) This afforded me the opportunity to immerse myself in quite extensive research into the theory of Godly Play and I began to understand the background and development of fourth generation Montessori. I was intrigued.

By the second time Kevin led a Godly Play session, this time for children, my eyes were opened. I witnessed the strong spiritual nurture and connection the children experienced in the

session. I could feel the peace and stillness of God in the space and in the children. I have been doing Godly Play ever since.

JW: Have the stories been translated into Cantonese?

WT: Yes, in Hong Kong all the Godly Play stories are told in Cantonese.

I witnessed the strong spiritual nurture and connection the children experienced in the session. I could feel the peace and stillness of God in the space and in the children.

Here in Reading we use English because it's the common language most understand for the British-born Chinese. Of course, Cantonese is much easier and fluent for me, but Godly Play still works despite language on two levels, despite my English and also some of the

children's level of understanding English too.

Some children when they first arrived from Hong Kong, those who didn't attend international schools or may not have had English language exposure, struggled to fully understand the stories. I will usually fill in with Cantonese words after the story for those who need it. But there is another language in Godly Play and their experience of God is unchanged and the spiritual nurture is evident and so is the stillness and God's presence.

JW: What do you like about Godly Play as a way of working with children in church?

WT: I like the spiritual nurture and the way it bridges language, and whether a child is from a Christian home or not, once they enter the circle, they can experience God for themselves without prior knowledge of church. I find it so

intriguing that children will sit and follow the others in the circle, observing how behaviour is modelled, and it works!

Recently, after I told the story of the Faces of Easter 1, a five- or six-year-old child chose to work with the Holy Family for her response time. Our sessions are one and half hours long and this child played with the Holy Family for 40 minutes!



JW: Are there any challenges meeting as a multilingual congregation?

WT: We are ok for now. We speak bilingual in Mandarin-Cantonese in our services and use English for Godly Play which happens every other week, with my wife and I, also a newly trained teacher. We are the only trained Godly Players so far but there is a possibility more people from our church to train in Godly Play and my hope is we can have Godly Play every week.

Would you like to be Associated with Godly Play UK?

Godly Play Associates have a vital role in helping eyes to be opened to new ways of untangling the human and holy story.

Over the years, contributions from our Godly Play Associates have enabled us to reach more people and make training accessible in more places. We are indebted to them for their loyal support. We would like to sow more seeds, support more practitioners, and grow a rich harvest of spiritually nurtured children and adults.

Godly Play Associates commit to giving a minimum of £5 a month to enable the ministry and work of Godly Play UK to flourish and grow. This allows us to:

- offer bursaries to churches and individuals who otherwise would not be able to access training
- develop new enrichment events for Godly Play practitioners
- publish the biannual Godly Play magazine featuring in-depth articles reflecting more deeply on Godly Play and children's spirituality, news from the Godly Play community, book reviews, training opportunities and more.

If you would like to become a Godly Play Associate, fill in the Direct Debit form, which you can find here www.godlyplay.uk/join/ and return it to Sheila Rogers, Administrator, GPUK, 18 Waring Way, Dunchurch, Rugby, Warwickshire CV22 6PH, or sign up at www.godlyplay.uk.

Bite-sized news

European Trainers' Conference



Six Godly Play UK trainers were among 75 trainers from 20 countries at the Godly Play European Trainers Conference in Edinburgh this month. Hosted by our friends in Godly Play Scotland, the conference was an opportunity for trainers to share their experiences of training others, and go deeper in their own Godly Play practice. There was time to remember and give thanks for the life and work of Jerome Berryman. Canon Peter Moger gave keynote talks on 'Resonance in Godly Play'. We enjoyed workshops on the theology of play and childhood; Godly Play and

Instagram; Advanced Training in Godly Play and more. There was, of course, plenty of time for stories and we heard some familiar Godly Play stories told in French, Portuguese, German and Afrikaans, as well as getting a sneak preview of the new stories which will appear in the revised Volume 8 of the *Complete Guide to Godly Play*.

We marked the retirement of the Rev'd Dr Andrew Sheldon with gifts and cards. Andrew has been Godly Play Advocate for International Development since 2015 and leaves a legacy of Godly Play in 69 countries, roughly half of which now have local trainers and some kind of structure to support the organisation.

Saint Michael's Workshop, Bowthorpe: a thankful retrospective



For more than twenty years Saint Michael's workshop based in Bowthorpe in the city of Norwich were the suppliers of Godly Play materials in the UK, and, at times, far beyond. Sadly, in June 2024 they sent out their last orders.

The workshop was founded by people at Bowthorpe church, an ecumenical congregation on the edge of Norwich. When Godly Play first came to the UK, we were looking for a way of supplying the materials so that people could get

started. Liz Cannon, who became one of the Godly Play trustees, worshipped at Bowthorpe Church at that time, and through her connection with Rebecca Nye suggested that the workshop for adults with learning disabilities might become a place where Godly Play materials could be made.

And so it all began. Jerome Berryman and his brother, Tom, who ran the United States suppliers, visited Bowthorpe and helped to ensure the designs were correct. Arrangements were made and the workshop flourished as a supplier of Godly Play materials.

For a long time, people delighted in what Bowthorpe was able to supply. But times change, and become more challenging: the pandemic, Brexit, a huge rise in timber prices, and a decline in social services funding all contributed to things becoming just too difficult. The workshop had to close.

We pray for all its trainees for whom the workshop community had been a lifeline for so long. Many had attended for its whole lifetime. We pray, also, for the staff who had worked so hard to adapt and pursue new possibilities over such a long period. They had found new markets across Europe and were constantly trying out new methods of manufacture and new tools. We shall ever be thankful to the Bowthorpe Community Trust, its contributions to the flourishing of its trainees, and everything that it gave to Godly Play, not just in the UK but across the world.



Sending out: Events and Training Opportunities

Online Introduction to Godly Play

Wednesday 6 November and then every Wednesday until 27 November

2.00 pm – 3.30pm 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-18/>

Three-day Training

Hull, 4-6 November 2024

This course is now very close but there may be an odd space available. Enquire at admin@godlyplay.uk.

Cuddesdon, near Oxford, 29-31 March and 25-27 October 2025

These courses are in the early planning stage but if you would like to know more, please register your interest by emailing admin@godlyplay.uk.

Cambridge, early Spring 2025

No dates for this yet, but if you would like to know more, please register your interest by emailing admin@godlyplay.uk.

Bursaries to attend three-day training

Godly Play UK makes 10% of its annual gain available to subsidise the costs of attending training, subject to applicants fulfilling the requirements outlined below and adequate funds being available.

- Applicants must be from churches and/or areas where resources are scarce.
- Joint funding with other bodies to cover accommodation and travel costs is preferable.
- Ideally two applicants are preferable. This is to ensure mutual support as Godly Play is developed and established in the applicants' setting after the course.
- Areas and/or denominations where Godly Play is not yet established.
- A thought-out strategy to disseminate Godly Play within their setting.
- A positive and supportive reference from a church leader.
- At least one – and preferably two – further referees who can positively support the application. Apply using the form on the website: www.godlyplay.uk/training/



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.