

Quelle: <http://www.godlyplay.org.uk/About/Cultural%20Adaptation.htm>

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## **Godly Play:**

### **Cultural Adaptation Lessons learnt so far**

Adopting Godly Play usually means people working through issues about adapting it for their context.

Adaptation questions have been brought sharply into focus through recent work with groups in the UK, Finland and Germany who want to begin working with Godly Play, as developed in the USA, in rather different situations and Church cultures. Although every situation is specific and has its own cultural dimension to consider, there may be general lessons too about Godly Play developing in any context. Our experiences in Europe point out two interconnecting strands to Godly Play adoption-adaptation: issues at the practical level and issues of a more psychological nature. This means that in addition to pragmatic changes to accommodate to the local conditions, there's also some kind of emotional response that accompanies taking on Godly Play.

### **Psychological Issues**

It appears there's commonly experienced resistance to wholesale 'adoption' of all that Godly Play represents. All of us probably felt some of this, and perhaps still do in certain respects. Moreover, others we work with, or might wish to attract to working with us, may experience this too. So, it's wise to be aware of how natural, perhaps necessary, this response is and to understand some of the reasons behind it.

For a start, Godly Play is overwhelmingly comprehensive. It looks too much, though that's not surprising for something that has been developing for more than three decades. However it is daunting on first acquaintance that this offers an approach to everything : 'using the Bible', 'creative activities', 'behavior management', 'learning styles', 'teacher spirituality', 'praying with children' etc. Normally, each of these would be a separate workshop or book we'd need to read. Its rare, probably unique, in its scope. Added to which Godly Play suggests to many people that each of these areas merits a radically different approach to what they've been used to. That's disarming to say the least!

For some there is also suspicion that this looks 'too good to be true', and can also be irritation that so much has been already carefully thought through for us. In the UK at least, we're skeptical of 'packages' (especially foreign – 'that won't work here!'). And perhaps this is quite rightly based on a practitioner's wisdom that education is a dynamic and uncontainable kind of animal.

Its perfectly natural therefore for imaginative teachers to feel reluctant merely to 'adopt' Godly Play. Surely, we think, the job of the teacher is to make innovative, creative changes to what is suggested. The temptation is to treat Godly Play as a 'pick and mix counter' of ideas. But anxieties might arise in trying to pick and mix because we're aware of the aforementioned set of feelings around the daunting, even shaming, integrity and scope of the approach as a whole. You begin to wonder if therapy is necessary to get to grips with Godly Play?!

Usually it's an experience of Godly Play that stimulates our initial interest ; it seems almost impossible to describe convincingly in isolation. In fact, a sure way to create hostile resistance to Godly Play in others is probably to talk about it instead of offering it 'for real'! Our own first experience of a presentation might

itself be a source emotional obstacle-raising as we consider adopt or adapting Godly Play. As well as perhaps ‘unlearning’ (& undermining?) many of our familiar teaching techniques, our perception of that storyteller may represent too clearly what Christian education asks of us personally, spiritually. We doubt that we can ever be like them – so ‘holy’, so confident, so inspired, so encouraging.

Not all of these psychological elements to taking on Godly Play have easy solutions. Perhaps it simply helps to be honest about things you feel in the course of making Godly Play work, somehow, where you are. But, observing these various emotional paths and pitfalls in our work in the UK has taught us that ‘solutions’ often come through foolishly, playfully ‘having a go’ despite everything we may feel. In trying out the storyteller role, for example, despite feeling far from ‘holy enough’ (!) people discover that its not just the children who can feel embraced by the story and the overall structure of the session – that takes the storyteller to a different, more spiritually equipped place in themselves too!

The issue about feeling a need to be creative, hence to pick and mix or change Godly Play in order to justify being a proper teacher is also best ‘solved’ through experience of presenting some lessons. This experience will help to reassure there is plenty of call on teacher’s creativity, its just in a different place.

Rather than thinking up 101 ways of creatively changing the lesson in advance, or putting all your creative juice in templates for the children to work ‘creatively’ with (color in, paint, do collage with) , doing Godly Play redefines ‘creative teaching’. In other words, it puts creativity into the lesson time itself and into the interactions with the children, into our energy to respond to them and their creative work. And in a spiritual sense the teacher creates a respectful space for God’s creative energy in the process.

Lastly, for many of the reasons above, some feel simply incapable to take all this on. Although you may ‘like’ it enough to work through other emotional obstacles, you may feel whatever you do is never ‘proper’ Godly Play and suffer from a sense that this is a rather exclusive movement that you don’t deserve, or even want, to break into.

These feelings are again understandable. This approach has evoked powerful change in some people’s teaching and their own faith. There really is passion and loyalty around this that can appear like a fence to keep out those who seem just curious for the moment. And as the criteria for developing what Godly Play teaching involves have taken thirty years so far, there’s a real sense in which none of us can hope to do it ‘properly’ for a very long time if ever!

The good news is that with a little allowance for the emotional wobbles we and our co-workers may experience, there are plenty of ways of making Godly Play possible for your situation. Not as a lifeless perfect imitation of ‘the ideal’, but as a dynamic, vulnerable experiment the fruits of which you cannot predict.

## **Practical Adaptations**

At a practical level there may be all kinds of reasons for carefully altering what the 'core model' suggests. The scripts may be in the wrong language, or the liturgical lessons may not accurately represent your tradition. The teaching space may be shared and multi-purpose, oddly shaped or bizarrely decorated. The time available for the class may be far less than even the '45 minute hour'. The children may arrive with a need to expend some physical energy, or hungry and thirsty. The teachers may have different gifts, but perhaps not the confidence to learn stories easily without notes, or perhaps lack the perceptive qualities required to recognize and discuss children's spiritual work with their colleagues after the class.

Time and again people ask, if I leave out this, or if I change that, will it still be Godly Play, will it still

'work'?

In discerning whether or not making local adaptations amounts to losing something essential, i.e. the spirit of Godly Play's well-tested vision for children's spiritual nurture, it can be helpful to learn from settings and experiences quite different from the 'standard'. Rather than falling short of an 'ideal', seeing how practical obstacles have been negotiated in different places offers all of us encouragement. Successful adaptations can teach us that Godly Play is not a strict recipe for spiritual success in teaching, but an ongoing creative response to the particular situation and context we face each week.

## **Change for Change's Sake:**

When people need to make changes it can help to reflect on why the 'original' from which they are diverting was that way in the first place. Funnily enough, because Godly Play has been evolving for so long, there's nearly always a tried and tested reason for doing things 'that way'. So if the reason for making a practical change is simply because you think the suggested way is daft, reserve judgment and at least give it a go because its almost certainly derived from classroom experience.

This can even be quite playfully worked through, as the following example suggests.

In the UK it's the law that all children receive non-confessional, multi-faith religious education from age 4-16 at school. In addition schools are more generally charged to attend to the 'spiritual' dimension of education (in all subjects and school experiences) alongside the obvious cognitive, social and moral development of children. Understandably, it is a matter of ongoing debate how all these demands can be met. In a national project, directed by Alison Seaman, we've been exploring the extent to which Godly Play could inform ways this could be done.

The project's school teachers in the UK were initially skeptical of giving up 'eye contact' during storytelling - after all their children were so used to that in other lessons and the group size was often more than 30, so there was bound to be 'trouble'. So we schemed with them that they would try it without eye contact just to show what a silly idea that must surely be. They returned delightedly proved wrong!

This 'game' continued for many months as we set harder and harder tasks to surely test the limits of how far the traditional model could work - surely younger classes would lose interest with lessons using flat materials (can we change that?), surely it won't work to give 35 children brought up on worksheets, learning aims etc completely free choice to respond (can we have a few activity areas?), surely there's no point presenting a lesson about the anglican Church year to children who are not practicing Christians let alone anglican.

Rather than foisting 'this is the way it has to be done' on one another, we cheekily plotted to test it out 'as it was', expecting to collect real evidence of weaknesses and areas where our situations demanded radical adapting of the method. Of course, you have to be able to laugh at yourself to see this through! Every time our teachers 'tested out something they'd have preferred to change, they returned delighted to discover something new about teaching, it had 'worked' against their predictions' and now they wouldn't change the thing they'd been so 'against' even if we'd paid them!

Paradoxically, teacher's wisdom and experience can erode their very sense of vocation if it shuts down for them opportunities to learn and be surprised. Working with this group, as we playfully resisted making pre-emptive changes to Godly Play, it was clear that many vocations were re-fueled across all the subjects they taught. There was deep change here, in the teachers. However, their very different school contexts required very little changing of the Godly Play approach – in fact everyone become more and more

attracted to finding ways to fit in the whole 'orthodox' version.

## **Will change compromise Godly Play 'working' – what can be done to compensate?**

Of course there are many scenarios in which adapting the traditional model is necessary. And where it won't be possible to even try out first hand the unadulterated version. The trick here is to at least give thought to 'what might be lost' in needing to proceed some other way. And take that as a clue to the area in which practical compensation might be wise. Again, this is about asking - I wonder why it is recommended to do it that way, even though I really can't? And if you make a practical change, are there practical ways to attenuate the effect that could have?

For example, if a section of a script needs re-writing, or indeed, translating, it helps to remember what care and 'field-testing' went into the given words. In replacing sections every word, gesture and wisely omitted detail deserves our attention and being committed to on-going refinement in the light of how it goes in reality with the children.

Or if a change to the pattern of the session is needed - daring to leave out the feast for example - at least some of the functions of the feast might be attended to in other ways. This might mean providing some moments together before the session ends nevertheless. This could provide (like the feast) the children with at least a clear point of return from deeply private work into the domain of the class group, which in turn acts like a safe enough threshold back out into the collective mainstream beyond the classroom.

Or if you lack the opportunity to provide a specially laid out classroom, as many in older European Church buildings do, it may be helpful to list what disadvantages this has. These include probably restricting the children's connections and responses to the lesson of the day, and working without the 'safety net' of the surrounding master story. Rather than simply getting depressed about this, devise ways to maximize the sense of safety and sacred space and time together to compensate. A special carpet to sit on 'grounds' the group in more ways than we realize! Working without the unspoken lessons of a room with laid out shelves, perhaps even more time should be spent on building the circle of the children. This can serve to re-create the coherence and security of the workspace each week, and allowing time for their stories to fill up the room.

## **Real Examples: Adopting Godly Play In Challenging Contexts!**

### **Adapting Environment**

Many, probably most, English churches serve small rural communities in a single Church building built between 900 and 300 years ago. There's rarely running water, bathrooms or proper heating, let alone the possibility of a separate room for children's work. And as beautiful historic centerpieces of village life, there is no chance usually of new buildings or alterations. And yet, precisely because these are typically small congregations with less than a dozen children, Godly Play could serve them very well indeed.

WoodDitton Church in Cambridgeshire is a typical example of medieval Church building. The interior of the Church is one continuous space - no side rooms let alone doors for a door person to tend to! But having visited a model Godly Play room, the small group responsible for children's work looked again at their situation and noticed the area under the bell tower at the back of the Church. Over the years this had collected various bits of furniture stored there for no particular reason. They cleared it out and discovered a space big enough to sit in, and hung a large curtain to divide it from the rest of the Church. A carpet shop

gave them an off cut to lay on the floor, and villagers donated redundant shelves from their homes. A kitchen unit workshop on the outskirts of the village provided some spare wood pieces onto which an artist in the congregation painted a risen Christ, the faces of the journey and creation, and other materials were gradually made or bought.

Each week they have about 30 minutes with the children, during the first half of the main Sunday worship service that takes place in the main body of the Church space. There are in fact too many children to work comfortably in their new Godly Play space, so the older and younger children alternate each week over who gets to go behind the curtain! However, even when its not 'their turn' that group still does Godly Play in another corner of the Church as the service continues, seemingly holding in their minds all that is provided by the carefully set out space. For all that they 'don't have' in terms of the ideal, the implementation of Godly Play at WoodDitton has been transformative for them as well as a great inspiration for others like them.

Not having a suitable room, or enough rooms, for Godly Play is a commonly faced issue. Resolving to have at least one space for some of the children some of the time may be considerably better than nothing. In fact it could be a helpful way to sensitize both children and teachers to the assistance the dedicated space gives them, and the extra effort all need to expend when elsewhere.

(A personal experience helped me to see how well children can 'carry over' experience in a prepared Godly Play environment to other situations. My 6 year old daughter had enjoyed only about ten sessions in a 'proper' GodlyPlay room and there had since been a break of some months. In our kitchen at home, she flicked through volume two of the Complete Guide to Godly Play which had just arrived by post. A diagram of a Godly Play classroom caught her eye, and after a moment's study she began to describe how the diagram differed from 'our room' (yes, it does a bit!). 'Our parables are over here, our art things are there' and so on. I had no idea she had internalized this unspoken structure so well, and can only wonder at how helpful that structuring of the Christian 'picture' might have been to her on other occasions at home, school and elsewhere where something resonated with her unfolding awareness of religious language and story.)

## **Adapting Roles**

In a set of 3 village Churches in the UK, the really small, rather elderly congregations made it difficult to see how to realize the personal specifications of storyteller and door person. Sunday school in the UK takes place during part of the main service usually. Identifying both skilled storytellers and skilled door persons to run the sessions with the children seemed to point to a very tiny proportion of willing adults under 45 – the parents. As the vicar Rev Cheryl Minor put it, to remove them from the main service every week will push the average age left in the service through the roof! The older members felt unsuited to 'chasing after' lively children, especially on a permanent basis. They associated leading Sunday school with having to 'think up' lessons each week, and were shy of that level of responsibility.

The solution here was identifying that, in physical terms, the storyteller role is less active than the door person.'s, who also might expect to respond to children's behavioral needs. Furthermore, in Godly Play, there's no need to 'think up' lessons and activities. So a rota of more elderly storytellers has been put together - each prepared to learn a few stories and encouraged by the fact that a pattern of every class is meant to be the same, rather than each time an innovative concoction of educational activities to illustrate particular teaching points. In fact one might think of other advantages of perhaps more sedentary storytellers too, such as during 'work time'. Just one 'younger' adult acts as door person.– leaving at least 2 in each service!

In one school district in East London, the roles of door person. and story teller are divided between a peripatetic 'storyteller' (a methodist minster), who comes in to visit various classes in different schools

week by week. The local class teachers act as the door person. during these 'Godly Play' sessions. This has worked out well not least because of the very different vantage point it provides the class teachers on the children they teach. It also benefits the storyteller who, having put so much of himself into 'learning' a story, has many opportunities to present and master its telling before tackling something new. This peripatetic version of the storytelling role also had advantages in this case for the storyteller, Keith Underhill, as he learnt about what was similar and what was contrasting about responses to the same story from nursery children, school children, children at a 'special needs' school [handicapped – what word will make sense to all here, and be politically correct?] as well as adults in his usual ministry. Using Godly Play in these settings was a powerful experience of often reverse relationship between spiritual response capacity and intellectual and religious 'knowledge'.

On the surface, the door person role might have seemed the less obvious 'assistant' role for the professional teacher. However, teachers have relished the time to observe their class in a different light (noticing how absorbed in the story even the most fidgety pupils can be), and to reflect on individuals without being required to respond to them immediately (such as during 'wondering'). The insights provided by taking up this different position in their classroom have clearly demonstrated that the the door person role requires and provides just as much professional contribution, including provision of spiritual perspective with regard to the children and 'being the teacher'.

## **Adapting Time**

In contexts where often Sunday school/Godly Play takes place during just part of the main service of worship, time can be very short. The question arises, what kind of Godly Play is possible in 20-30 minutes?

The key to adapting time in Godly Play is, I think, to remain aware of liturgical shape and its function of taking people in, with sufficient time to prepare, arrive, enjoy, explore, and finally emerge from and leave sacred work. How you do that may need to vary, but leaving out one of these steps may fail to model the process basic to spiritual life entirely.

With children especially, the patterning of time associated with sacred material may leave a lifelong impression on their spiritual expectations and habits. If early experience unwittingly implies that all there is to it is 'just hearing/reading the Bible, working out or being told what it means with a bit of prayer tagged on at the beginning or end', then we may feel increasingly inadequate about our own prayer, Bible reading and theological reflection as we become aware that these activities are supposed to foster deeper spiritual engagement, yet when we 'do' these the experience can be rather thin. What's lacking is a spiritual protocol for making best use of time for sacred work – a sense of the need to get ready, to 'come in', to cross thresholds, to come closer, to speak, to listen and to be silent etc. How time is arranged with the children will help to establish personal 'protocols' for spiritual work for years to come and in very different contexts. We have to be sensitive to the fact that merely saying to children, for example, 'now its time to pray' (perhaps having just been involved in some entirely different, potentially opposing mental or physical activity) makes the task unnecessarily frustrating both now, and probably when they are older too. This is why Godly Play's traditional liturgical patterning of time makes spiritual sense at any age (and for any denomination). It is about far more than simply offering children a 'dummy run' of the stages of worship services, particularly the Eucharist so that 'when they go to Church it'll be similar'. Rather the liturgical pattern gives due attention to how, by giving time to different elements of the spiritual process, we can be helped to encounter God, respond, take leave and want to return again.

So, how can this liturgical pattern, this spiritual protocol operate in a much briefer time period? In some Churches in the UK where the children have already been greeted as they entered the church, and 'got ready' in the form of opening prayers with the whole congregation, that element might be curtailed in the Godly Play time. Equally, if the children join the congregation for communion, some places have decided

to omit Godly Play's feast per se.

In some anglican parishes, although children may rejoin the whole congregation for communion, they may not actually receive communion themselves, but a blessing instead. To 'swap' the Godly Play feast for such vicarious feasting is less than ideal, and so some congregations have elevated the significance of the 'coffee' period after the service as an opportunity to bring the children back together informally for their special feast of juice and cookies. In fact, when surveyed children often identify the post-worship fellowship ('when we get cookies!') as one of the best things about coming to Church, its only the adults for whom its taken an acquaintance with Godly Play to make sense of why this is properly significant to children's religious life! However time affects changes that are made, it is the sense of taking time that matters most of all perhaps - rather than exactly the way that time is filled.

The other piece of practical advice about adapting the timings of Godly Play sessions has appeared in earlier vols. Namely, if there's too little time for 'work' normally, have a 'work only' session on some occasions. Or if there's rarely time for a feast usually, devote one session entirely to having a feast from time to time. Places that have negotiated a way around very short periods with the children like this find that retaining the normal (for your context) way of beginning and ending the session is really helpful for both children and adults - there are always thresholds in and out of spiritual place and time.

This kind of adaptation can take things quite far –realizing that following Godly Play does not depend on 'doing a story' for example. It seems all too tempting when there are only 20-30 minutes to do 'just a story and a bit of wondering' every week. This really is not the balanced spiritual 'diet' Godly Play is so keen to provide as the foundation for lifelong spirituality . It's not 'Godly Play' if there's never time taken over entering the space, to building the circle as a community, to ways of becoming ready, individual work, sharing a feast and giving thanks and concluding blessings. Where time is short, each of these might be the extended focus instead of the story from time to time. Like the internalized picture of the room, this occasional attention to each part should help to provide children at least with relevant experience to refer to when those features of their session have to be drastically truncated.

School collective worship is another different context in which there is far from enough time to include the whole process suggested for Godly Play. In the UK all schools must provide a daily act of 'mainly Christian' worship regardless of the teacher's or children's faiths. The gentle, invitational and imaginative qualities of Godly Play have greatly appealed to many teachers here. They are aware that having a moment during the busy school timetable to stop, come together as a school or year group could be spiritually sustaining for both individuals and for the life of the community, if approached in an appropriately 'spiritual' way, though typically this has not been the case, and 'assembly' has meant storytelling with a view to moral point making, i.e. just more didactic teaching.

With as little as ten minutes, schools have successfully adapted Godly Play for collective worship for assemblies ranging from 35 to 350 children! Some of the structure is already there – for example moving into a different space (maybe the school hall) could be observed as an 'entering threshold'. Typically offering a 'godly play style assembly' has meant just presenting a story to the children (occasionally enlarging the materials for big groups), in the same focused, intimate style as one would with a small group. This is followed by suggesting some of the wondering questions, and offering quiet time for children (and the other staff) to reflect on these, either privately or in pairs. The opportunity to 'wonder aloud' and to develop personal responses in further ways (like art work) can then be either explicitly provided when the children return to their classrooms in smaller groups, or more implicitly by being a community that expects and respects that everyone has a voice and different ways of 'saying' throughout the school day how something has made them feel.

Ultimately 'adapting' to or 'adopting' Godly Play is as much about living out a respect for the children's

spiritual life, making time and space for them and for God, and trying to be spiritually present and prepared yourself. Without those features, no amount of materials, time management to include all the 'right' parts, or wondering questions will guarantee what's going on has the value we originally experienced for ourselves in Godly Play.

## **Adapting Scripts**

There is now sound advice available to anyone needing to create new scripts in the process suggested for the development of 'object boxes' [is this outlined in this volume somewhere?]. As these guidelines make clear, there's a lot more to this than imitating the style of Godly Play presentations. In fact well intentioned imitations can appear to have all the right ingredients (e.g. similar looking materials, a telescoped storyline, verbal and visual action, and invitations to wonder) yet end light years away from the definitive 'Godly Play' that produces spiritual depth and simple expression of truth that touches us right inside.

In Europe it was noticeable that, when Godly Play was first introduced, some people experienced a strong need to create new material, or significantly 'translate' it. Some of this may have been a psychological response, about needing to make this 'their own'. Some of this may have been cultural, since considerable value is placed in the UK on individual teachers putting creative talents and effort into planning original lesson material for Sunday school and in other contexts too. Merely following extant resources can feel like cheating. We also have tended to be fairly 'theme' driven, such that material, stories, and activities are gathered to fit a theme, resulting in a rather patchwork jumble of work and work styles whose coherence is the theme, a concept, which of course may be the least obvious aspect to the children!

In Ely diocese a 'themed' children's festival at the Cathedral occurred just as leaders began to learn about Godly Play. It seemed desirable to use Godly Play, but it wasn't obvious how the existing stories could be bent to accommodate the theme. It was agreed, new stories would be needed. The event, which involved more than 300 children and a team of specially inducted GodlyPlay style storytellers, was a clear success on many levels, and important lessons can be learnt from those attempts.

It was especially difficult to limit the amount that went into new scripts (or parts of existing ones). Intellectually knowing this was a quality to aim for was not enough. Writing material really does require spiritually discerning the heart of each story, which may involve unlearning years of other Sunday school versions thereof.

New writing could be tempted too much by including the 'exciting' parts of a story, at the expense of detracting from its central mood or theme. Despite at one level becoming aware of children's capacity and need for spirituality, decisions about what went in/was left out of scripts could easily retreat into old assumptions. For example, about what might be appealing in an entertaining kind of way, or what personal teaching points could be 'put across' (or that fitted with the general 'theme'), or what might be unsuitably dark for children.

These insights of trial and error in adapting and writing scripts can be a helpful adjunct exercise to learning and using the existing presentations for some people. For example, it became clearer why it was safer to offer the children language (verbal or visual) for 'the dark' corners, (e.g. Pharaoh's forbidding hand, Good Friday), than to make dealing with that all their own responsibility and inadvertently 'teach' that Christianity could deal only with what is 'lovely' and transparently explicable. Changing existing ones to 'leave out' the nasty bits, or new scripts that glossed over such things could lack the capacity to 'hold' the children and offer a safe place for their own negative experiences.

Trying to write scripts also helped some people to internalize the degree to which spiritual expression is

carried non-verbally wherever possible in Godly Play. This is to say its not just about getting the words right, and that even when our mouths are shut we may be ‘saying too much’, playing to an audience’s appetite for entertainment or excitement, or inserting explanations. In fact, perhaps there is the greatest danger of becoming unintentionally manipulating and spiritually stifling within the domain of ‘manipulatives’ (decisions about movements, lesson materials and imagery etc).

Crucially what’s been learnt is that Godly Play offers a fairly developed language in itself. In order to say something new in it (we need a presentation on ...for next week!), it helps to know that language as fully as possible already. This means there is more to writing than ‘getting the idea’ of Godly Play, which would be like having a grasp of the grammar and a passable accent in a new tongue. Rather, to communicate convincingly in this way, its invaluable to be familiar with its very local phrases and customs, which often evoke a narrative in themselves. Phrases like ‘God came so close to x, and came so close to God’ , gestures of lifting or giving, are just some of the ways scripts can tell much more than an isolated story, but hint at the integrity to be discovered in the whole.

Introducing Godly Play in non-English speaking contexts, in Finland and Germany, raises our awareness of issues around adapting scripts even more. Working with live translation is far from ideal though it may be how one begins– there is twice as much talking for a start! And speaking extra slowly to compensate, with sufficient pauses for people of any age to imaginatively enter the story for themselves created grammatical problems for Finnish language in which the end of English sentences would normally come first!

Added to which there are many interesting decisions about translating the particular sense of the words – for example, should ‘I wonder what you like..’ take the plural or singular form of ‘you like’? Currently in western English speaking settings ‘wonder’ is a word that has both meaning at a childlike as well as theological level in English, but it may be hard to identify such a term in other languages or contexts.

However, it was revealing how little all the problems over the words really mattered – in a kindergarten setting where a storyteller presented in English with some German translation for the children, and where occasional translation was offered to adult Finnish speakers, it was apparent that people were able to respond to the story which they had seen and been present within, and not only what they had ‘heard’ and ‘understood’. Indeed, the experience of watching a Godly Play presentation in a language we barely know should perhaps be mandatory for adults learning this art . Such an experience would give us the insight of a child’s perspective with regard to language and religious language in particular. It would help us to appreciate the ‘louder volume’ at which small children perceive the non-verbal and the degree to which the spiritual coherence is communicated through that!

There are useful insights about the process of changing scripts offered by Finnish colleagues faced with literally translating presentations. Having worked intensively for more than a week to translate the Good Shepherd, when Juha Luodeslampi came to experience the story (not for the first time) as part of a class, he was struck by how utterly fresh it seemed. And yet he found translating it, and inevitable debates about what word to use here and what ‘sense’ is intended there, deeply spiritual work of a kind too. In both instances, there was considerable, but different, personal response to the material. Those of us who aren’t required to wrestle with the meanings in each presentation, because they appear to be in a language we already speak fluently, might do well to admit we could be missing out.

It was also curious that Finns, unlike British, expressed no thought of wanting to write additional new material. Their first task was to divide out the core scripts for initial translation and resolve to meet again to share critical, as well as spiritual, responses to how these stories spoke to them in their native tongue. Perhaps both trying to write in ‘Godly Play’ and trying to translate ‘Godly Play’ are two different routes (and there may be yet others) in learning to ‘speak Godly Play’ as teachers? In both cases its about needing to spend time with the language ( all kinds- verbal and non verbal) and working on it for oneself, before or

at least separately from learning through presenting.

## **Adapting for Culture?**

Working in the varied contexts of the Finnish Lutheran Church, German Lutheran Church, English evangelical anglicanism, English anglo-catholicism, the British and Northern Irish Salvation Army and even some Jewish traditions in the UK has naturally raises questions about how far Godly Play offers something 'one size fits all'.

There are obvious changes that different traditions can think about making, for example to reflect the worship environment in which the religious community as a whole worships. There's little purpose of a sacristy for a Salvationist children's room, but flags might be essential additions. Decisions about how different traditions amplify the central images of the focal shelf are also important – though sometimes people decide to adopt something 'outside' their tradition on the grounds that its too helpful to the children to leave out after all, such as marking the season's of the Church year through color.

More subtle questions about adapting arise around theological emphasis, and often an associated tradition about the value and function of 'teaching'. For some, Godly Play seems theologically incomplete – I've been asked where the 'sin materials and presentations' are, for example. Others would like to give a more prominent visual position to 'a Bible'. What is exciting about these questions and issues is how they call people to revisit their theological principles, and also their educational values. It calls us to consider our responsibilities for children's spiritual education in new ways . Does our view of 'faith' necessitate a comparably dogmatic/liberal teaching style, or might a different teaching style in fact better serve the kind of faith we'd like for our children? What is our theology of the child – where do we stand both intellectually and practically on the extent to which children are made in the image of God versus the extent to which they need to be molded into our image. Why do children matter to our faith? What is the Church for? What is education for? Who is God and how do we learn that?

Questions like these bubble up easily in the course of becoming acquainted with Godly Play, and all that is 'different' about it. This inspires creative searches for information and debates that all too often have been neglected as people have just 'done' religious education. How people resolve the 'issues' they may have with the basic Godly Play model is much less significant than the fuel this provides for taking children's spiritual foundations seriously and discerning what that means for each tradition.