

A Grownup's Guide to Godly Play

North Church is excited to offer Godly Play on Sunday mornings. We offer this unique ministry of Christian formation for 1st-5th graders. Since it is important for all adults in the church to understand what happens in a Godly Play classroom, here are some answers to frequently asked questions about Godly Play. All parents are welcome to experience a full Sunday morning Godly Play session with the children! Let us know ahead of time when you would like to visit.

What is Godly Play?

Godly Play is a method of Christian education and spiritual direction for children ages three-twelve. The goal of Godly Play is to teach children the art of using religious language - parable, sacred story, silence and liturgical action - to help them become more fully aware of the mystery of God's presence and direction in their lives.

Godly Play has been developed and classroom tested since 1972 by Jerome Berryman, an Episcopal priest, author, and teacher. The Godly Play method is currently being used in churches of many denominations throughout the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada.

Jerome Berryman and Sonja Stewart, a Presbyterian seminary professor, worked together to publish the first book of stories, *Young Children and Worship* in 1984. Each author began to publish other stories and companies began to make the materials for each of their stories. At North Church we tell stories written by Berryman and Stewart, incorporating concepts and ideas from each educator. First graders hear only the stories from this first book! Each grade level adds stories to these foundational ones they learn in first grade. In the winter and spring, older children hear many "Jesus" stories found in Stewart's book, *Following Jesus*.

Parents and children are greeted at the door by a teacher called a door person or greeter. When the greeter determines the child is ready, the child enters the sacred space of the classroom and joins a circle of children sitting on the floor. Another teacher, the storyteller, will present a lesson to the children in the circle. The lessons presented are either "sacred stories," lessons about liturgy, or parables. After every presentation, the storytellers and the children take time to wonder about the materials and the stories they have used together. Then, the children are asked to respond to the presentation by creating an art response, or using lesson materials in the classroom. Children re-convene in the circle for

prayers and to light the Christ Candle before the greeter lets them know a parent or guardian is waiting at the door for them.

What makes Godly Play distinctive?

In Godly Play, we tell Bible stories to children to encourage them to enter in to the stories and relate them to their personal experience. Godly Play is concerned with the spiritual development of each child as an individual and with modeling the appropriate moral behaviors expected of people living within a Christian community. In Godly Play, each Sunday school class follows the pattern of the four fold order of worship: gathering in God's name, proclaiming the Word, giving thanks, and going out to serve. Children will also learn the etiquette of being in church, understand liturgy and religious language, and what we do together as we worship together in the sanctuary.

Why are children asked to "get ready" before entering a Godly Play classroom?

The Godly Play classroom is sacred space for children. It is a place where children are encouraged to engage in "deep play" with scriptural materials. It is a place of silence, mystery and wonder. Children are always helped to "get ready" before entering. Usually this means they calm themselves, talk softly, walk slowly, and enter the classroom with intention. A greeter or door person waits at the door to help each child become ready to enter the room quietly. This helps them participate fully with the community of children in the classroom. A child who arrives late will be admitted as soon as this can be accomplished without disturbing the circle of children.

Why do parents leave their children at the door?

Parents do not enter the classroom so the community of children inside the classroom will not be disturbed. It is easy to overwhelm the children (and the teachers!) with the presence of too many adults in the classroom. Please speak to the greeter if you need to see your child after he or she enters the classroom.

What happens if the children are not ready to enter the classroom?

The greeter assists the children and parents at the door.

Who are the two teachers in each classroom?

Each of the two co-teachers has a different role, and both are vital to the smooth functioning of the classroom. The greeter acts as a host or hostess for the classroom, ensures children are ready to enter and supports them in their work.

The storyteller presents the lesson, supports the circle of children in their wondering and choosing their work, and blesses each child before he or she leaves. Children with special needs enjoy Godly play and join our circle with a buddy, oftentimes a teenager.

Why does the classroom look different from many other church school classrooms?

The classroom surrounds and immerses the children in religious language. When a child enters a Godly Play classroom, they are surrounded by physical representations of the stories of the People of God. Everything in the classroom is beautiful and inviting, and designed for the children to use.

Why don't the students work at tables and chairs?

The Godly Play rooms contain shelves full of objects for the children to use-objects that make the images of our religious language come alive. In most churches using Godly Play, it is customary for the children and story teller to sit in a circle on the floor, literally surrounded by our religious language system. The multi-sensory materials used to help in telling the Bible story of the day can then be placed in the center of the circle, symbolizing the fact that God can be present and accessible to everyone-both the students and the teacher. Working in a circle also helps us emphasize many aspects of being together in a Christian community.

At North Church our older students, especially 4th-5th graders, may choose to do research, a service project, or a group project at a table.

Why don't children bring home pictures or craft items from Godly Play?

Godly Play is not product-oriented: we do not ask children to produce something for display. The art responses that the children create are treated as very personal spiritual records. Each Godly play classroom holds a variety of art supplies for the children to use as they respond to the stories they hear. Because each child may be wrestling with different existential issues, each student will bring a different perspective and a different response to the Bible stories told in class. Some student may want to work with one Bible story for several weeks. For this reason, we do not assign crafts or give out take-home sheets as a part of the Godly Play program.

What "existential issues" do children face?

Existential issues are simply issues that have always bothered people. Aloneness, what to do with freedom, fear of death, and the search for meaning in life are four of the existential issues that even young children wonder about.

How can I help my child participate fully in his or her Godly Play classroom?

In an ideal world, we would start the process of "getting ready" at home by maintaining a calm, relaxed atmosphere on the way to church! This isn't always possible! As you enter the church building and come upstairs, talk to your child about getting ready. It helps, too, to bring your child 5 minutes early to class - it takes a while for all of the children to get settled, and we have a very short time period in which to work. Take advantage of opportunities for your child to tell you about their experiences. Don't worry if it seems that your child isn't processing information - the goal of Godly Play is to help children develop a relationship with the Living God, and that takes time and patience.

If you have any questions about the Godly Play program at North Church, or would like to become a storyteller or greeter, please contact Janet Wanner (924-2612 or jwanner@northchurchindy.com)

For more info, check out www.godlyplay.org