

# DEMENTIA AND GODLY PLAY

## 1 The authors

Richard Allen is an ordained Anglican priest, a whole-time mental health chaplain with an NHS mental health Trust. Within the Trust, he works a good deal with inpatients over the age of 75 who are experiencing a variety of organic conditions (e.g. dementia) and non-organic illnesses (e.g. clinical depression, bi-polar affective disorder, levels of high anxiety), as well as those with similar distress, living in the community and accessing day services.

Richard's work with people who live with dementia extends to all stages of their journeys, from those who retain sufficient cognitive skills (albeit often with some impairment) to live with a degree of independence through to those who display few signs of discernable cognition, retain little or no means of verbal communication and need extensive nursing care.

Alison Seaman is a freelance trainer, adviser and consultant in spiritual education. She works primarily alongside education professionals in primary and secondary schools advising on religious education, collective worship and spiritual development. In recent years much of her work has been with Local Authority and Diocesan education teams around the UK facilitating conferences, workshops and in-service training and working with groups wishing to reflect on their educational and working practice.

Both authors are trained Godly Play practitioners and operate in a variety of contexts, across the age spectrum. In his work as a mental health chaplain, Richard has employed Godly Play as a therapeutic tool with older people, using it to explore and articulate feelings of loss, depression and anxiety and to wrestle with spiritual issues arising from existential questions about life and personhood.

Alison's interests in spiritual education brought her into contact with Godly Play when it was first introduced in the UK ten years ago. She initially used Godly Play with children and young people in church groups and then became interested in the wider application of the approach with other age groups and in other contexts, both religious and secular. She directed a three year project that explored the use of Godly Play in religious education in schools and this continues to inform her working practice when training teachers and other education professionals. She now employs Godly Play with children in schools and churches and in adult learning groups and retreats for church communities.

Alison is a trainer for Godly Play UK ([www.godlyplay.org.uk](http://www.godlyplay.org.uk)) and was invited by Jerome Berryman, the originator of the Godly Play method, to be the UK representative on the Godly Play International Advisory Board of the *Godly Play Foundation* ([www.godlyplayfoundation.org](http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org) )

Alison has had personal experience of dementia with a close family member which prompted her interest in working on this project.

## **2      Background and context**

One of the hospitals within the Trust for which Richard works contains a specialist day facility, which provides respite nursing care for about 20 people each day, all of whom are 65 years of age or above and live with dementia. The pastoral & spiritual needs of staff, clients and their families are met by the chaplaincy team. Since 2003, part of this programme of care has been effected through a weekly act of Christian worship, for anything up to eight people at a time, most of whom are living with dementia.

The membership of the group remains generally consistent week by week. Such changes as occur tend to happen gradually as members move on to other parts of the social or health care services or, in a few cases, die. This steady attendance quickly led to a sense of permanence and confidence within the group, coupled with an expectation and anticipation of meeting each week. The trust that developed between the group members manifested itself in some reduction in dependence on the group leader as well as through acts of care and kindness shown from one member to another. The strong internal group bonds proved important, possibly essential, in enabling the group to agree to participate in the initiative of Godly Play.

## **3      Godly Play**

Godly Play is model of faith exploration, originating in Montessori principles, and developed for use with children by Jerome Berryman, an American Episcopalian priest. In its purest form, the Godly Play encounter is constructed each time from the raw material of those who attend the session. The group is formed by building a circle. Once formed, the session is built around the telling of a story, followed first by a period of reflection on it (known as ‘wondering’) and then by a time of free response to it in whatever form the participants choose. The session, which may last anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes, ends with a short communal time, the ‘feast’, in which food and drink is shared, before everyone says goodbye.

Two leaders are involved both of whom are in service to the group; a storyteller, who takes the lead in forming the circle, narrates the story, poses wondering questions, encourages the responses and leads the feast; and a doorperson who welcomes and helps participants to get ready for the session by slowing down the pace, aids in the selection of media for the response time, prepares the feast and bids farewell at the end. The roles are reciprocal and interdependent. Without one being aware of the other, the experience of Godly Play is diminished.

Most importantly, the reflective exploration of the material is deliberately non-directive, allowing participants to make their own choices and, in so doing, appropriate for themselves their own faith development.

## **4      Why Godly Play with those with dementia?**

As people age, they experience not only significant losses in their lives – death of partner, family, friends, loss of strength, energy, capacity etc – but they often experience these losses coming one on top of the other. This often leaves little space and time in which to explore the meaning of these

events and the feelings they generate. Yet because the end of life is approaching, it is both important and necessary for older people to explore their lives, what they have achieved, what might be their legacy, anything that requires resolution and, indeed, whether they remain of any continuing use to themselves and others. By their very existential nature, such questions are grounded in the field of spirituality, irrespective of whether they come from a particular faith tradition or none at all.

Because older people invariably have less to occupy their time than at earlier stages in their lives, the exploration of such questions is often done in a wondering, somewhat circuitous fashion, utilising past experiences as a backdrop and touchstone for reflection on their current situations. This form of deliberation often emerges in conversation with older people, where the spiritual exploration frequently takes a discursive form. This process emerged in the weekly act of worship, both during the time set aside for reflection following Scripture readings and also in the time set aside for prayer. However, in the 30 minutes that was only ever available for the whole ritual, there was never sufficient time to explore the issues that underlay the verbalised feelings. Invariably subsequent conversations were undertaken in a noisy, 'secular' context where the space was shared with other attendees at the day hospital.

Previous work with both children and adults suggested that Godly Play might offer a creative framework for exploring these spiritual questions at greater length. It was anticipated that Godly Play's ethos of open exploration might well suit older people who, despite some cognitive and physical impairment, were nonetheless able to access their feelings. With the aid of the visual materials from the story, gentle leadership from the storyteller and the creative use of the wondering questions at the completion of the story, it was hoped that such feelings could be identified and articulated in ways that normal conversation would not allow.

Moreover, much of the current generation of people in the Third and Fourth Ages of life learnt the language of faith in early childhood, probably used throughout their school days, and retained it through the adult years. Given that, in the experience of dementia, long-term memory invariably remains more accessible than its short term counterpart, it was considered likely that the vocabulary of Godly Play would form an acceptable *lingua franca*.

By its form, Godly Play requires a collaborative approach from those who use it. First, both storyteller and doorperson must understand and communicate their roles to the group if they are to be effective both individually and together. Second, the dynamics of the period of wondering that follows the story requires both storyteller and group to interact in what would be recognised in therapeutic circles as a psychodynamic model. Third, effective choice in the free response time depends quite significantly on the doorperson having been engaged with the story telling and the subsequent reflection.

Prior to this alliance, the authors knew each other through the context of Godly Play training and practice. However, neither had worked with the other in the context of Godly Play sessions involving third parties. Nevertheless both felt that, when brought together, their individual and very different experiences of dementia and Godly Play might offer a complementary basis for collaborative work.

## 5 Preparation

It was both important and necessary to invest time in the preparation stage of the project. There were practical considerations to be made about the use of time, space and materials. It was also essential to manage the transition from the weekly act of worship's usual pattern of gatherings to the Godly Play sessions. These would not only be different in content and pattern but there would also be a second, unfamiliar, facilitator.

Alison joined the act of worship for one of their services so that she could meet the participants, share in the activities and begin to build a relationship with the members of the group. Notwithstanding the short-term memory issues, it was hoped that some of the group would remember her and be less distracted in the Godly Play sessions by 'a new face'. It was also important for her to feel at ease with the group.

As part of the preparation, Richard began to introduce the subject of the Godly Play sessions in conversations after the weekly worship. He did this for several weeks, gradually building up the content as time progressed. Where dementia is concerned, verbal and non-verbal cues are essential as an aid to remembering. Alison's visit to the group prior to the start of the Godly Play programme proved to be one such non-verbal trigger, enabling her to be linked with the forthcoming sessions.

The Godly Play sessions were scheduled to take place at the same time and in the same room used for the worship, to enable the setting to be familiar. Sitting in a circle, traditional in a Godly Play setting, was also the tradition of the act of worship. The room, however, was very small and largely filled with big armchairs. Whilst these were comfortable, once arranged in a circle around the perimeter, they left very little additional room. Space, therefore, was at a premium and did not offer much flexibility.

Consideration had to be given to the way in which the storyteller would present the stories. Normally in Godly Play the storyteller works on the floor and the materials used to illustrate and support the storytelling are laid out in front of the storyteller. Most of the proposed group of participants were frail. Some had restricted mobility but there were no members with serious hearing or sight impairment.

It was therefore decided to explore the use of low tables in the centre of the room. Two coffee tables were found that gave the flexibility of creating, when put together, a square or oblong surface, around knee height, on which to present storytelling materials. It was also a good sized surface on which to work. This created an intimate atmosphere in which participants could be close to the materials, see them easily and clearly and begin to interact with them.

It was intended that the sessions, six in total, carried out monthly, should be as close to the original model of Godly Play as possible, attempting to follow through the whole process in the time available to us (approx 45 minutes). Each session would begin with informal conversation in order to 'build the circle'. The storyteller would then present a story using Godly Play materials followed by a time of 'wondering' together about the story. Art materials were available to use for free response. The day centre's well established routine of serving tea and biscuits seemed to be the natural way to end our sessions and this would fit with the Godly Play tradition of celebrating the 'feast' before going home.

The authors took the role of storyteller and doorperson in turn, Richard acting as storyteller in the first session because he was known to the group. In a traditional Godly Play session the doorperson would sit outside the group, literally near the door. This was impractical in our context because the room was small and so in these sessions the doorperson was located in the circle of participants.

## 6 The programme

Six stories were chosen, one for each session.

Session	Story	Description
1	Creation	Genesis 1.1 – 2.3 See <i>The Complete Guide to Godly Play – Book 2</i>
2	The Great Family	Genesis 12 – 15.24 See <i>The Complete Guide to Godly Play – Book 2</i>
3	The Parable of the Good Shepherd	Matthew 18.12-14; Luke 15.1-7 Themes from Psalm 23 and John 10 are also present See <i>The Complete Guide to Godly Play – Book 3</i>
4	The Parable of the Good Samaritan	Luke 10.30-35 See <i>The Complete Guide to Godly Play – Book 3</i>
5	The Parable of the Mustard Seed	Matthew 24.32; Mark 4.30-32; Luke 13.18-19 See <i>The Complete Guide to Godly Play – Book 3</i>
6	The Faces of Easter	The story of the life of Jesus from birth to death and resurrection. See <i>The Complete Guide to Godly Play – Book 4</i>

The stories were carefully selected. The authors felt that it would be appropriate, in a six session programme, for the ‘Lessons’ to be taken from both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and to have a sense of starting and ending in significant places in the metanarrative. In addition, it was felt that a strong story or narrative style would probably help to sustain the attention of those living with the experience of dementia. The choice of the first and last sessions was made as much for the graphic nature of the story telling materials as any theological reason.

## 7 What happened?

### Session 1 - Creation

The six participants (one male, five female) were shown into the room. After settling into chairs and completing the greetings, Richard began with the preliminary wondering for the creation story: “I wonder, what’s the biggest present you’ve ever been given?” The male participant began by talking about a motorbike he had been given for his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. One woman talked about her bicycle, whilst the others remained silent.

Richard began to unroll the long strip of black felt, the underlay for the story presentation. This engaged interest and all the participants became focused on the materials. Their eyes followed Richard's hands as he laid out the seven Creation pictures and told the story. Four participants remained engaged throughout the story, sometimes looking at the materials, sometimes at Richard's face. Two seemed lulled by the gentle sound of Richard's voice and after a while appeared to doze.

After the story came a series of wondering questions (see *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Book 2, page 48). Three of those who had remained engaged during the story contributed to the wondering. In particular, one person led, with two others adding a few comments. Nevertheless, irrespective of the verbal contributions, it appeared that all participants (including the ones who had been dozing) were engaged, sometimes nodding in agreement and signifying that they were following the discussion. At one point, one person expressed concern she did not go to church. When reassured that this did not matter, she relaxed and began to engage with the discussion.

There was not sufficient time in the session to allow for any free response before the sound of tea being offered outside the room broke the group's concentration and led to the end of the session. As participants left for the 'feast', the doorperson thanked them for attending and participating. The thanks were reciprocated by the participants.

## **Session 2 – The Great Family**

As planned, Alison and Richard reversed the roles of storyteller and doorperson. In order to reinforce the pattern of the session to those who were unfamiliar with it, each person was greeted as they came in and invited to choose the position in the circle that suited them best. Alison was already seated in the chair from which she would tell the story.

'The Great Family' is told from a desert box. Because of the space constraints in the room and the weight of a container of sand, it had already been placed on the table. The sight of a large object immediately engaged the attention of most of the participants.

Alison told the story in conventional fashion, utilising the script, figures and objects described in *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Book 2, pages 57 – 64. Her manner of delivery was clear but reserved, enabling the graphic nature and strong narrative of the story to come through. In this session, all participants remained awake and engaged with the story for most of its duration. This was significant, because the story element of 'The Great Family' is long and both Alison and Richard had wondered beforehand whether the attention spans of the participants would be able to cope with it. However, it was noticeable that, when Sarah was buried towards the end of the story (requiring a very specific and quite complicated action from the storyteller), several participants physically moved forward to see what was taking place.

Subsequently, one participant monopolised the wondering phase. She was a person of faith, though not known for saying much during the weekly acts of worship. Picking up on the narrative of the family saga, which is the form of 'The Great Family', she told the group the story of her sister and herself, from childhood, through adult years to the present day.

Like the account of Abraham and Sarah, it contained elements of journey and separation, joy and sadness. The others listened with respect but said almost nothing. In the telling, the participant became more animated than she had ever been during the weekly acts of worship.

Alison felt it was important to allow this story to be told for as long as necessary and thus, as at the previous week, no free response time was possible before afternoon tea began to be served.

### **Session 3 – Parable of the Good Shepherd**

Session 3 began in the same way as the previous two sessions. It was noticeable that there was now a greater recognition by participants of Alison, who again acted as doorperson.

Because this session was based around a parable, Richard had the gold parable box that he was going to use on the floor next to his chair. One person peeked into the box and Richard played along with this ‘game’ and it set a playful tone for the whole session, which had a child-like feel about it. For many, it seemed to recapture aspects of childhood enriched with the depth of a lifetime’s experience.

The whole group was engaged with this story. As soon as it began, one participant was taken back to her farm in the Isle of Man, saying “You’ve got to like sheep to be a good shepherd.” At one point she turned to Alison and said “What about your imagination? You can be anything you want to be with training... with imagination...”

As the story progressed, two other participants became animated and engaged. Because the identity of the good shepherd is not revealed by the story, they both asked “Is it Jesus?” As Richard took the story into the dangerous places to rescue the lost sheep, a degree of tension and anxiety pervaded the group. When the sheep is found, one person said “Oh good”, with a deep sigh of relief.

During the wondering process, the grass and water raised familiar echoes of Psalm 23 and one person quoted the Christmas carol ‘While Shepherds watched their Flocks by Night’. The main discussion however, led by a self-confident regular attendee at the act of worship, revolved around the identification of the animals contained within the sheepfold. For her, one of the animals looked different to the others and should not be in the fold. So she removed it. Another person, however, felt it should be retained and something of a ‘robust discussion’ ensued. It remained unresolved at the end, a position usually quite difficult for those with dementia to cope with. It was summed up by further participant who concluded “I don’t want to be anything... I want to be me.”

### **Session 4 - Parable of the Good Samaritan**

It was not possible for Alison to be present at this session, so Richard continued as storyteller for a second successive month. He recruited the day hospital manager (herself a person of faith) to act as doorperson and offered background and instruction to ensure a

level of consistency. Several people asked where ‘the other woman’ (ie Alison) was and seemed disappointed that she was not able to be present.

The group contained a number of those who had come to the previous session and had thus experienced the parabolic format. One or two seemed to recall that the story emerged from a gold box and immediately became engaged with the process. As the story progressed, several participants recognised it as the parable of the Good Samaritan and said so out loud to the group.

Within the wondering, there was a considerable discussion about what it was to be a neighbour. There was general consensus (as there often is) around the identity of the neighbour to the person who had been robbed. But the wider debate about neighbours led to one person talking about the relationship with her next door neighbour (with which others nodded in agreement) before it opened up to a reminiscence about the quality of friendship (an interpretation of neighbourliness) during the Second World War.

Richard tried asking wondering questions about different combinations of ‘neighbour’ (see *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Book 3, page 94) but the answers had a ‘concrete’ feel to them that seemed to close down discussion.

### **Session 5 - Parable of the Mustard Seed**

In this session, there was a real sense of anticipation, perhaps based on a growing confidence about what was to come. The group wanted to get on with it; they were full of anticipation. No settling down or getting ready was needed – they just wanted to go! As Alison began to tell the story, they physically moved forward, eyes focused on materials.

The colours of the materials in this story held a fascination. Someone looked at the yellow underlay and said “It’s shiny”, then turned it over and discovered the other side was shiny too!

Because the parable is a short one, the wondering time was quite extensive. Everyone was invited to place birds in the tree. They all chose to do this and placed them in very specific locations. One person noticed that some birds had been placed upside down and concluded that “they may be dead”. Another person, who had attended the previous sessions but generally remained in the background, became particularly involved with placing the birds and the sower.

During the wondering, two participants in particular kept looking at Alison for reassurance that it was OK to speak. On reflection, greater interaction to encourage them might have been helpful. Uncertainty about the world and appropriate responses to it are a common experience in dementia and thus specific permission is often sought before a commitment can be made.

In this session in particular, two participants wanted to touch the materials especially when getting out and putting away, again suggesting a growing confidence with the shape of the session and a liking of the parabolic format.

## **Session 6 - The Faces of Easter**

The final session produced the most unexpected response. The story, carefully selected before the programme began as a natural ending, seemed to get in the way.

There were many people in the sixth session group who were not familiar with the routine. One attendee was particularly anxious about missing the bus home. Although Alison persevered with the story despite the group becoming increasingly unsettled, by the middle of the session the participant could contain his anxiety no longer. He got up and left, taking another participant with him.

Levels of disquiet were very evident now and Alison, as the storyteller, was aware of and probably affected by it. However, she managed to get through to the end of the story, using the shortened version. But when she wondered “What do you like best...” a regular participant replied “I’m not religious” and got up and left.

The person concerned looked uncomfortable and cross. Because she had left the room, it was not possible to establish the source of these very strong feelings. She may have been anxious; the story might have been too explicit; it could have touched deep emotions which were unsettling. In the overall programme, the nature of this lesson in particular was the most ‘religious’ and this seemed to disconcert the group.

Two other people subsequently followed, one indicating that she wanted to go to the toilet and the other following behind. This left one person, someone with little English language, who was content to stay and ‘play’ with the Faces, before Alison drew the session to a close.

There was no formal free response time, although it is an open question whether leaving the group, as the participants did, was both an empowering gesture and an appropriate response to the story.

## **8      Reflections**

The authors have been able to reflect on the rich and varied experiences within this pilot project and offer the following thoughts, from their individual and shared perspectives. At this stage, they can only be provisional and care needs to be taken in drawing general conclusions from this one study. Comparison and contrast with other similar studies will be necessary before applying many of these ideas to other contexts.

### **a) Practicalities**

- ❖ Before planning anything, it is important to be clear about the context and purpose of offering Godly Play to those with dementia. Are the reasons primarily theological, spiritual, exploratory, an attempt to reconnect with instincts that have been ‘lost’, associated with reminiscence etc, or a combination of several of these and others?
- ❖ In the context of the session, it is important to take time to arrange the room in such a way that those who attend can manoeuvre and be comfortable, otherwise there will

be distractions from the focus of the group. This project had a small room but, like most Godly Play situations we have to work with what we've got. Consistency was important; the storyteller and doorperson always sat in the same places.

- ❖ Gather people in slowly and carefully. Those with dementia (who are likely to be aged 65 or above) will move slower than children with whom most Godly Play practitioners have experience. If you have 45 minutes for a session, plan 30 minutes' content! The time boundaries in this project were dictated by the routine of the day hospital. The session had to finish for tea. Rattling cups became a distraction for some and raised anxieties about missing tea and, worse still, being left behind by the ambulance transport home.
- ❖ The use of knee-level tables worked well. Materials could be handled during the story and it was easy for both storyteller and participants to engage with them.
- ❖ In the end, the authors did not use art materials. There was no opportunity for free response time. Did this matter? Perhaps it requires a second project that does incorporate the response time to act as a comparison.
- ❖ In traditional Godly Play settings the door person would sit outside the group. Given that the door person was within the group and not outside it, their role could usefully have expanded to help encourage wondering.
- ❖ The project would have benefited from a third person to take notes (although this would almost certainly have restricted the numbers of attendees in this pilot). It has proved difficult to remember enough details afterwards. The use of video would be even better, but there are significant issues around confidentiality associated with this.

#### b) The group

- ❖ In this project, the authors were dealing with a generation which was probably reasonably biblically literate and had a language of 'church'. As time progresses, this will change.
- ❖ The importance of routine cannot be overemphasised when working with those who live with dementia. The disease robs people of self-confidence, because so much of the experience of life changes from month to month, even week to week. So familiarity in terms of the environment and within the group is a great help. It was noticeable that, in the final session when familiar faces were missing, there was a very different atmosphere.
- ❖ With the exception of the last session, there was a therapeutic element to the project. In the main, participants appeared to enjoy the sessions in general and the stories in particular. They appeared to be 'having a good time', certainly as they became used to the format. This fed through into the dynamics of the group, as less confident members found a place for themselves within the group as time went by.

- ❖ The sessions offered a group of people, for whom social isolation is increasingly common, an opportunity to interact together.

**c) The content**

- ❖ The human stories worked well, whilst the Faces of Easter proved very challenging. It was the most ‘religious’ of all the stories selected, dealing with death. The authors can only note that an air of unease ran through the group and made participants uneasy. But difficult outcomes should not be avoided and one interpretation of the session was that the ethos of Godly Play had empowered and allowed participants to respond in a way that, in other contexts of their lives, they would be prevented from doing.
- ❖ For those with dementia, one of the great gifts of Godly Play lies in the various levels and means of communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Communication issues are ever present and thus multiple forms of interaction offer greater possibilities for engagement.
- ❖ There was a genuine sense of playing, at times for the sheer pleasure of it. This experience would be uncommon in adults, let alone those of older years with dementia.
- ❖ There was a sense of sacredness about the space as constituted for the sessions. The location, a room used for a variety of purposes, took on an atmosphere and presence during the session that its functional furniture and furnishings belied.

**d) The particularities of dementia**

- ❖ Dementia often brings with it a poor sense of self esteem and a growing lack of confidence. Reassurance is frequently required to assure participants that it is in order to speak. Compare this with children where we often hold back from actively encouraging them to speak.
- ❖ The session built around ‘The Great Family’ allowed a life story to be told by one of the participants. Where memories are slipping out of reach, such an opportunity has a deep spiritual dimension. Remembering and re-telling our own story is one way of keeping ourselves ‘alive’ as it were.
- ❖ Alongside the last point runs the place of significant events as existential and spiritual foci, which the underlying approach of Godly Play, and the choice of stories, can influence and help hold the person with dementia in the forefront of their and our imaginings.

The authors offer this study and these reflections as a contribution to the debate of the relevance and effectiveness of Godly Play.

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## **Books about Godly Play**

Berryman, Jerome W., *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Living the Good News, Denver, Colorado

Vol 1: <b><i>How to lead Godly Play Lessons</i></b>	ISBN 1-889108-95-2
Vol 2: <b><i>14 Presentations for Fall</i></b>	ISBN 1-889108-96-0
Vol 3: <b><i>17 Presentations for Winter</i></b>	ISBN 1-889108-97-9
Vol 4: <b><i>16 Presentations for Spring</i></b>	ISBN 1-889108-98-7
Vol 5: <b><i>Practical Help from Godly Play Trainers</i></b>	ISBN 1-931960-04-6
Vol 6: <b><i>15 Enrichment presentations for Fall</i></b>	ISBN 1-800-824-1813

Berryman, J.W., *Teaching Godly Play: how to mentor the spiritual development of children*, Morehouse Education Resources, 2009, ISBN 978-1-60674-048-4