

CHILDREN'S  
MINISTRY ▶

▲ Godly Play is a method of spiritual formation that allows children to draw their own conclusions about Christian stories, such as the parable of the mustard seed.

IMAGE: PIM/SHUTTERSTOCK

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IN A ROOM in the basement of St. George's-on-the-Hill, in Etobicoke, Ont., Canon Andrew Sheldon carefully opens a gold-coloured box before a group of children. He takes out pieces of yellow and green felt, and unrolls the green felt on the yellow, until a trunk and branches appear. As he does, he tells the parable of the mustard seed.

Sheldon invites the children to help place little wooden birds among the branches. Then he invites them to reflect. "I wonder if this bird is happy?" he asks. "I wonder who this person is who planted the seed?"

"Joseph?" says one child. "Any of the prophets?" volunteers another. Sheldon asks, "And what could the seeds really be?"

Maybe people, because people get bigger as they grow, says another child.

Anybody expecting Sheldon to explain to the children what they ought to make of the parable would be disappointed. That's because this morning, like every Sunday morning at St. George's, the children are doing Godly Play—a method of spiritual formation that encourages children to draw their own conclusions about Christian stories, based on the knowledge of God they are believed to already possess. Since 2003, when it first arrived in Canada, Godly Play has slowly been spreading across the Anglican and other churches, and now forms the basis of children's ministry in a number of parishes across the country.

At the heart of Godly Play, Sheldon says, is the idea that children have an innate sense of God.

"They're not empty vessels that need to be filled," he says. "They're actually full—full of God, full of spirit. They're fully formed spiritual beings."

Children lack only the language to express their spirituality, according to this theory. The aim of Godly Play, Sheldon says, is to provide them with the vocabulary they need. It does this using stories, which are told with the help of toy-like objects of wood, cloth and other materials.

The Godly Play room at St. George's is lined with shelves containing these materials. There's an ark, with wooden animals of all kinds standing beside it. A sand-filled tray lies ready to do duty as a desert for figurines to be marched across. Flat, gold-coloured boxes hold materials for parables.

These materials are essential to Godly Play, because they help listeners connect emotionally to the stories, Sheldon says.

Critical, too, says Sheldon, are the questions, which are designed to help listeners find their own meaning and identity in the stories. The storyteller might wonder aloud, for example, what part of the story the children liked the best; whether there's any part of the story that could be removed without the listener losing anything he or she needs; and what in the story is about the listener. There's no right or wrong answer.

Godly Play has been essentially the life's work of its creator, the Rev. Jerome Berryman, an Episcopalian priest who

# Godly Play sees child as 'full of God, full of spirit'



← Five-year-old Mila McKenzie explores materials used in the Godly Play program at St. George's-on-the-Hill, Etobicoke, Ont.

PHOTO: TALI FOLKINS



▲ Materials for teaching parables are kept in a gold-coloured box, to suggest that parables are both precious and can be hard to get into.

IMAGE: PHOTOGWIC/SHUTTERSTOCK

turns 80 this year. Berryman worked for close to two decades on developing a method of spiritual formation for children based on the innate knowledge he believed children to have, borrowing much from the Montessori approach to teaching. In the 1990s, he started travelling and training others in his method, and finally, in the early 2000s, Berryman began publishing his first instructional books in Godly Play.

From The Episcopal Church (TEC), based in the United States, Godly Play has been expanding in many countries around the world, Sheldon says. It spread, first from TEC, then to other mainline Protestant churches in the U.S., and then to Roman Catholic and evangelical denominations. As the Godly Play Foundation's advocate for international development, Sheldon has played a role in this expansion.

In the Anglican Church of Canada, Sheldon says, Godly Play has become popular in "pockets"—most noticeably on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts. In Newfoundland, the method has grown "like wildfire," and is popular in the Maritimes, too; it has also been heartily embraced by the diocese of New Westminster. St. George's is one of a number of churches in the Toronto area that have adopted it.

New Westminster Bishop Melissa Skelton says Godly Play deepened her own sense of engagement with Scripture, and her ability to wonder, when she used it in her parish work. This often seems to happen, she says.

"In places where it takes hold, we see a kind of vitality in children's formation as

well as the renewal of the spirituality of the adults involved in those programs, so we think it has a bit of a ripple effect."

Caitlin Beck, children and youth ministries co-ordinator for the diocese of New Westminster, says 18 parishes now use Godly Play, out of 66 in the diocese. Just over two years ago, the diocese created a grant program to help parishes fund it.

Apart from its foundation on a unique theology of childhood, Beck says, Godly Play also offers an impressive "support structure" to parishes that want to adopt it—not just books and other materials, but a foundation that provides training and a YouTube channel, for example.

Beck says she's amazed at the "profound engagement" children seem to have with Godly Play. She cautions, however, that children—especially those who have never encountered a Montessori approach to education—may find the open-endedness of Godly Play disorienting at first. Because of the training involved, it may also mean a considerable investment of time and energy for parish workers who want to try it, she adds.

Godly Play is now being used in more than a quarter of the diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador's 37 parishes, says Bishop Geoff Peddle. He says the method seems to work well with children because its Montessori-based approach helps them learn through all their senses. He also likes its emphasis on story, which, Peddle adds, seems to suit Newfoundland culture especially well.

"We're a very oral culture here, with stories and recitations and songs, and I think Godly Play taps into that," he says. ■

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