

## **A critical evaluation of the nature of play in formal gathered worship in The Salvation Army.**

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### **Abstract**

Play is deemed essential for children's development, including their language skills, cognition and social interaction. Play in adulthood is lesser studied, but sport, leisure and creative hobbies are prevalent throughout all generations. This article looks at play from a Christian perspective, drawing on child development, the work of Messy Play and Godly Play in order to consider play in gathered worship within The Salvation Army.

### **Introduction**

A definition of play is difficult to construct because of the fluidity associated with play. It is often defined by attitudes and feelings rather than by physical activity. First and foremost play is 'joyful and pleasurable' (Charlesworth 2017:59). It is also engaging and motivating, interactive and experiential and embraces creativity (Neaum 2016:120). It is generally agreed that play does not have an external goal or an obvious end, but it can involve actions familiar in other contexts, such as handling objects (Smith, Cowie and Blades 2015:235). As such there is no wrong way to play but rather the player can 'explore and investigate...in a safe and secure way' (Neaum 2016:120).

It is widely accepted that play is essential to the development of children. Therefore, spiritual development and Biblical teaching is often delivered within a playful environment, such as Sunday School (Lamont 2007:82). Within The Salvation Army, there are often opportunities for children to engage with play, usually combined with the teaching of Bible stories or other activities. However, The Salvation Army has many congregations, which are all diverse in their composition. Whilst congregations that have many children may already offer play experiences during their formal gathered worship, this essay seeks to evaluate how play can engage a broad demographic. A formal gathered worshipping congregation will typically take the form of a regular congregation local to a specific context. The gathering is assumed to incorporate prayer, Scripture reading, singing and preaching, led by a designated person from the front, but it will not necessarily include explicit play.

This essay explores the nature of play and its theological relevance across one's lifespan; from childhood to adulthood. Recognising the research and development of Messy Church and Godly Play, this essay draws out principles from each which could be applied to formal gathered worship within existing congregations in The Salvation Army.

Around the UK, The Salvation Army has sought to start Fresh Expressions of church such as Messy Church, as an additional or new congregation, and Godly Play, as a child specific programme of spiritual education. However, in many places there are existing congregations that need something fresh, rather than a whole new congregation. Therefore, this essay will seek to take some of the guiding principles of Messy Church and Godly Play and identify ways in which they could be used in an existing congregation.

### **Playing through life**

Much of the analysis of play has been through the observation of children. Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) was an early German educator who believed children should learn through play (Payne 2016:84). Initially play was supported and encouraged by adults, but he observed that the children did not require such leading by the adults (Bruce 2017:9). Subsequently, children have been viewed as experts in play. By playing with everyday objects, animals, books and toys a child develops their cognition, language and social understanding, enabling them to learn about the world (Buckley 2012:18). As children grow, their play changes as their skills develop, including their language, because there is limited pressure in their interactions.

Through the formal education system, particularly in adolescence, play is substituted for a didactic process where information is given by direct instruction of a more knowledgeable person. This information is analysed, compartmentalised, organised and memorised (McClain 2017:11). Therefore, as one ages, information takes precedence over play.

In the Victorian era, adults only played sports, and psychology restricted itself from studying adult play. However, today leisure is important and no longer applies only to sports. The assumption seems to be that play prepares us for adult life, rather than being a part of life, and therefore there is little in the way of an adult theory of play. However, David Cohen identifies the need for play in adulthood to help in coping with 'the stresses of industrial [and] post-industrial life' (2006:36). Winnicott (in Cohen 2006:161) also linked play to health, and suggests there are significant correlations between childhood play and adult creativity.

There are various well-being courses, books and conversations written to enable people to deal with the stresses of everyday life. When coupled together with the escapism of television, film and games it appears to show people are looking for non-work activities. In adulthood there is a clear distinction between work and play. Both require energy, but playing is fun, relaxing and an end in itself, done for oneself rather than for others (DeKoster 2010:27). However, Butler and Orbach point out that for some, their career and creativity coincide, sometimes making it difficult to distinguish between play and work (1993:41).

Calvin Colarusso agrees that play is a lifelong activity, but that it changes as a person's physical and mental capacities change. Games that involve mental exercise rather than physical tend to become the norm (Colarusso 1992:178).

Roger Callois defines play in two ways. The first is *paidia*, 'which is characterised by improvisation and freedom', and *ludus*, 'which is characterised by rules and orderly regulations' (Miller 2013, chapter 2). *Paidia* has been further described as 'active, tumultuous, exuberant, and spontaneous', which might be observed as running or imitation, whilst *ludus* represents 'calculation, contrivance, and subordination to rules', and might be observed in constructing and completing puzzles (Evans 2010:46). It can be hypothesised that play elicits one of two responses in people; either they join in, affirming its validity, or they reject it as inappropriate and foolish (Evans 2010:46). However, I would add a third option that play can be observed, encouraged and affirmed, without active involvement.

When talking about play and children, it is perhaps incorrectly assumed that we always speak of *paidia*. Children's 'joyous expression of physical and mental competence' (Colarusso 1992:178) leads us to consider play to be active and exuberant. However, children also participate in *ludus*, particularly as their social and communication skills develop.

Within the church it should be considered what forms of play are offered to our children, and to our adults. When adults and children play together there is often evidence of imagination and combined curiosity. It may be that the playfulness of childhood is shifted aside in adulthood by other pressing matters, but in retirement there is time to explore in a playful attitude once more (Butler and Orbach 1993:39).

## **Theology of Play**

Jürgen Moltmann was one of the first to write a 'Theology of Play' and takes the view that play is an expression of freedom. As an adult, play is freedom from work. As a Christian, play is an expression of freedom in Christ (Moltmann 1972:16). This freedom should be celebrated, and Easter is the pinnacle of this celebration. The liberation that comes from Christ's death and resurrection enables freedom from guilt and, as such, offers spontaneity, which is demonstrated in play (Moltmann 1972:30-32). Moltmann draws on the image of God as creator, and creation being the realm in which he displays his glory (Moltmann 1972:17). Therefore, Christians play when they experience the joy of creation (Moltmann 1972:23). Joy can also be found in attending church, particularly when there is fellowship with others. He describes fellowship as 'the free play of the human spirit in conversation, in the arts, in productive imagination, and in the rejoicing...[with others]' (Moltmann 1972:68). One of his key texts is Mark 10:15 'Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.' (Moltmann 1972:18)

More recently James Evans has written about the importance of play in our everyday life and faith experiences. He acknowledges the breadth of play activities, and how play in some contexts is embraced, but is dismissed as being disrespectful in others (Evans 2010:xx). Like Moltmann, Evans draws on the importance of freedom in play, arguing 'the fact that we were created with free will suggests that we were created to play', although he does recognise the essential nature of work too (Evans 2010:70). On discussing the church, Evans identifies that the Holy Spirit and church activity are rarely associated with play, but rather it tends to be a serious and sensible affair (Evans 2010:73).

### **Formal Gathered Worship in The Salvation Army**

Within The Salvation Army, formal gathered worship might also be described as a serious and sensible affair. It is typically on a Sunday morning, led from the front, often by an officer 'to co-ordinate worship, directing the congregation to the principal purpose of the gathering' (The Salvation Army 1997:42). The primary purpose is to worship God, and lead people either to salvation or deeper into holiness (The Salvation Army 1997:73). There is no set order of service from week-to-week, however each meeting should contain prayer, Bible reading, testimony, Bible message, music and offering (The Salvation Army 1997:77-78). The style of these components is dependent upon the leader of the gathering. Whilst this offers a significant amount of freedom and opportunity for innovation, it depends on the leader and the time and energy they have to spend on making it so. In many Salvation Army meetings a 'playful' item might be a few minutes directed at the children present, but this essay seeks to

challenge this approach particularly when a corps is multigenerational. It is assumed that more elements of Salvation Army formal gathered worship can be playful and intergenerational.

Sam and Sara Hargreaves (2017) outline the importance of whole life worship, where gathering together on Sunday is not the only, or best, way to worship God, but rather reminds the congregation they are part of a wider Christian community who can worship God when they are scattered outside the church walls in their everyday lives (Hargreaves and Hargreaves 2017:13-14, 20). However, what happens within gathered worship influences how people worship when scattered. Therefore, if play is not demonstrated as a valuable way of worshipping God within a gathered setting, it is unlikely that play will be used to worship when scattered mid-week.

There is an expectation that any Salvation Army meeting will challenge people to continue worshipping and serving God through their personal lives, away from the gathered congregation (The Salvation Army 1997:42). Whole life worship is demonstrated and practiced in gathered worship, therefore play must be incorporated to become an accepted everyday activity.

A vital element to Salvation Army gathered worship is that of being multi-generational; that is, any and all age groups may be present. James Woodward sees that 'many older people express their delight in children' and goes on to ask the question, 'is it possible to encourage interaction between older people and children during worship and afterwards?' (2008:87). It is imperative that the topic of play is considered from an intergenerational perspective; that is, of all ages worshipping together rather than simply alongside one another. This intergenerational approach is one of the key values of Messy Church.

### **Messy Church**

Messy Church was established to reach 'non-churched families (those with little or no experience of church)...families on the fringe (who turn up occasionally) or de-churched families (who used to come to church services, but stopped)' (Moore 2013:16). Every session follows the same format of 'a warm welcome, an hour of hands-on activities around a Bible theme, a short gathered celebration (worship time), and a meal around tables' (Moore and Leadbetter 2017:2). The five values are celebration, intergenerational, Christ-centred, hospitality and creativity (Moore and Leadbetter 2017:45). It could be described as being

*paidia* in nature due to the energy expelled within the activities but with elements of *ludus*, particularly in activities that are more contemplative.

The very specific order of each session still allows for flexibility within the activities. Depending on the theme, the activities will vary and the elements of the celebration can be adjusted to the needs of the people present. The celebration time is not dissimilar in content to Salvation Army gathered worship, but it is likely to be different in style. Within fifteen minutes there is 'praise, interactive Bible storytelling, reflection and prayer' (Moore 2013:11-12), which is participative, tied completely to the theme, and full of creativity (Moore and Leadbetter 2017:30-1). Another similarity to Salvation Army worship is the importance of a 'whole-life response to God' which may have its roots in gathered worship but continues to be vital when one leaves the building (Payne 2016:88).

Messy Church is an advocate of church being all-age. For thousands of years Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices were passed down between generations through sharing stories, experience and life within the same space (Payne 2016:22). Just as children learn their mother tongue from listening to those around them and imitating them, so too are matters of faith when they are lived and shared (Moore 2013:36). Through play those words and experiences become personal to the child and they gain confidence. Whilst recognising it can be helpful to have some age-specific learning, Messy Church does not stream people within its monthly gatherings. However, the intergenerational approach brings its own challenges, particularly avoiding being too child-centred or speaking only to the adults (Payne 2017:19-20).

In planning the components of craft or worship Moore and Leadbetter (2017:42) acknowledge the challenge of finding activities that work for all ages. The variations in attention span and interests are part of the challenge. However, they do not consider the variations within the age groups which stem from additional learning needs and disabilities. Therefore, in addition to their offered material, the leader needs to carefully consider their congregation's needs during the planning stage.

Creativity is one of the five values of Messy Church described as 'allowing space...for the God-spark in each of us to come to life as we get our hands into the stuff of the earth and play together' (Moore and Leadbetter 2017:2). God is identified as creator, filling the void (Genesis 1:2) with life (Genesis 1:20-30). Therefore, as humans made in the image of God

(Genesis 1:27), it can only be expected that creativity is important in the way we live and worship (Bayes 2013:102). Creating something playfully enables a person to echo God's playful creativity, of star fish and asymmetrical trees (Moore and Leadbetter 2017:17, 45). This raises difficulties, however, for people who do not enjoy arts and crafts. Moore and Leadbetter (2017:51-55) suggest other 'intergenerational, messy approaches' including gardening, sports, music, photography and mechanics. Within an existing congregation, it is vital to consider a broad range of creativity and not to simply assume that arts and crafts will be suitable for everyone present. For some, the issue is less about being creative and more about the mess being created. It may be 'tolerated as something for the children' or as a hook to engage people before getting to the important part of worship as it has always been done. Within Messy Church the creative activities are as important as the time of celebration for the building of intergenerational worship and learning (Payne 2016:85). Additionally, it supports the view that creativity and mess is not solely the domain of children (Bayes 2013:102).

Biblical worship was rarely neat and tidy. The sacrifices made throughout the Old Testament would have been messy, but repeatedly the emphasis is on the importance of the attitude of the worshipper towards God. This means supporting others who are worshipping perhaps for the first time, to be as 'genuine, relevant, living and Christ-centred' as possible, and having 'the graciousness to exercise our ministry of cleaning afterwards' (Moore and Leadbetter 2017:34).

One of the significant differences between Salvation Army formal gathered worship and Messy Church is its frequency. It is estimated that an hour of Messy Church requires around fifteen hours of preparation (Paulsen 2013:88), and therefore Messy Church meets once a month. However, it is my personal experience that planning a Sunday morning service can take around 15 hours, and yet meets every week. The difference, perhaps, is in the nature of the leadership of Messy Church which is typically shared by four people but supported by many others, who are all volunteers, whereas the Officer has sole responsibility for formal gathered worship and can set-aside adequate time in the week for preparation (Moore and Leadbetter 2017:62). The infrequent meeting of Messy Church can also inhibit the forming of substantive relationships, unless significant time is given to contact the attendees in between the sessions.

Due to the intended audience of Messy Church there is an assumption that many will not have explored issues of faith or have had deep spiritual experiences previously. However,

due to the nature of any Messy Church's conception, it is likely that many of the leaders and volunteers do have a more mature faith. Therefore, there is a challenge to offer suitable stimulus for people on a faith spectrum. Comparing Messy Church to a forest is a useful analogy; 'just as a mature forest must contain immature trees if it is to continue to grow, so a mature church must continually be incorporating new members' (Moore 2013a:257). With this analogy it is not difficult to see that this should be a challenge for every church if it desires to grow and keep growing. It should be expected, therefore, that every church has an element of messiness as it juggles with diversity and yet strives to discover more about God and his love for a messy world.

As with Moltmann's theology of play, the biblical mandate for Messy Church is found in Mark 10:15. However, rather than assuming being childlike is being playful, Bayes asks a further question of what Jesus meant when he invited us to become as little children. Perhaps it was the 'no-crying child of 'Away in a manger'' or the weaned child of Psalm 131 'calmly...feeding or gurgling' or the children 'we actually know, with their endless questioning, squabbling...refusing ever to take 'Just because!' for an answer' (Bayes 2013:101-2).

Within Messy Church it is likely to be the latter as families share life together. However, Godly Play may reflect more closely the child of Psalm 131 due to the nature of the programme and the expectations made of the participants.

### **Godly Play**

Jerome Berryman has made it his life's work to find a way for children to experience and describe God (Berryman 2009:14). After having encountered the Montessori education approach, Berryman began developing Godly Play as a child specific method for learning the language of the Christian faith (Berryman 2013:76). Montessori discovered that 'when children are secure in an appropriate environment they reveal a love of learning, the ability for self-direction and a deeply spiritual nature' (Berryman 2009:23). Godly Play is a specific method of spiritual education using storytelling and creative response aimed at discovering 'our deep identity as Godly creatures, created in the image of God' (Berryman 1991:7). Through a set structure of welcome, quietness, storytelling and response, the aim is to discover one's own identity as a being created in the image of God. Godly Play is intended to happen in a specific room, to allow it to be set up permanently. There is a focal shelf with stories of great importance displayed at all times, including the birth and resurrection of Jesus. There are materials in boxes telling the stories of the Old Testament, the New Testament and

gold boxes containing the parables Jesus taught. There are also response materials including many different craft materials, rugs or cushions for the children to sit and work on, and books to read (Berryman 1991:19-21). It could be described as *ludus* in nature as the play is more thoughtful.

The theory is that children already know and perceive God, but need to develop the language of faith in order to express what they know, discover and wonder. As demonstrated in other academic subjects, children learn language through play. Therefore, Godly Play offers children an opportunity to play with God, and with the support of two adults in the room, learn the language of Scripture (Berryman 2009:14). There are four areas of Christian language that Godly Play seeks to address; identity making through the sacred story, stimulating exploration of Christian meaning through parables, making redemption available to the community through liturgical action and opening the way to experience the presence of the mystery of God directly through contemplative silence. The aim is that children will begin to construct their own understanding of God through playing with the Christian language, primarily through storytelling and creative response (Berryman 2009:14-5).

It may be perceived that Godly Play in a carefully constructed environment is not akin to real living or playing, however, Berryman would argue that the children bring their own experiences into the room with them, and therefore they can take what they learn through Godly Play back into their everyday play (2009:18).

Godly Play, as with Messy Church, draws on the creativity of God as play, and as humanity is made in his image, we are therefore to be creative in play. Additionally, the image of men, women, boys and girls playing on the streets when God dwells in Jerusalem (Zechariah 8:4-5) is important in making play normative (Berryman 2009:18).

The difference between Godly Play and traditional Sunday School is that the story and materials are offered as tools to make meaning, rather than there being an aim or objective for the child to learn (Berryman 2009:41). However, there is a vital role for the adults present, which involves a genuine excitement and enjoyment of the process of Godly Play which demonstrates 'the love of playing seriously with the sacred stories, parables, liturgical action and silence' (Berryman 2009:49). Story telling is critical in Godly Play, as is the need for the child to be actively listening (Berryman 2013:77). This happens through a calming process, allowing each child to enter the space when they are ready to listen and to play (Berryman

2009:29). For some children this is a difficult process, and whilst Berryman acknowledges it takes longer for some children than others, there is little in his material regarding children with additional needs, which is vitally important when considering the range of people who could be involved in Godly Play.

A criticism of Godly Play is that it is primarily the work of Jerome Berryman and his wife. Whilst others such as Dr. Rebecca Nye have contributed further to the work around spirituality in childhood (2009), and Rebecca McClain (2017) has looked at using Godly Play with adults, it remains Berryman's programme. Messy Church has a significantly bigger team working on the material, but it also gives autonomy to local leadership to decide how it will work best in their specific context.

Another criticism is that there is little mention of the work of the Holy Spirit. Colleen Derr, in a review of Berryman's writing, outlines the formula for spiritual guidance to involve suitable adults, exposure to Christian language with biblical narrative, and a beneficial environment. 'The role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual formation of the child is implicit but not explicit' (Derr 2015:192). This is also evident in other Godly Play writings such as Nye's chapter on children and prayer where it is suggested children develop an insight into prayer through the influence of the surrounding community and environment, without explicit mention of the Holy Spirit (Nye 2009:57-65).

There are some who are beginning to look at how Godly Play can be used in adult settings (Nye 2019). Rebecca McClain is one such writer, who identifies that the method of Godly Play 'builds a spiritual framework for an integrated life...of action and contemplation...of communion and reflection' (McClain 2017:v). She advocates that Godly Play is 'the most graceful way to nurture the children of God at every age' (McClain 2017:xi). Her development of Godly Play for use amongst adults takes slightly different themes and offers additional responses to the usual craft activities for children, such as pictures and poems to look at (McClain 2017:28). She highlights the need to encourage adults to use their imagination and therefore, often, it takes more prompting for adults to wonder about the story (McClain 2017:4-5). However, this is vitally important as creativity is the outward expression of imagination.

Part of using Godly Play with adults involves having to challenge the didactic teaching methods that they will have previously experienced in order to try different ways of learning,

including through the senses with physical items, and through the spirit with contemplation (McClain 2017:11-2). When playing, pleasure comes from the act of playing itself. It makes 'us young when we are old and matures us when we are young' (Berryman 1991:1). Therefore, there is a place for Godly Play across generations. However, the focus tends to be on people learning about, or experiencing, faith for the first time. Careful management would be needed when using Godly Play in a varied setting such as formal gathered worship. Without clear explanation the adults may feel condescended to, or the children feel that they are being segregated.

In formal gathered worship there is a greater opportunity for individuals to engage 'with God's word within a supportive, safe community of friends' (Nye 2019). Therefore, Godly Play can be used with all ages, but there is still a question mark as to whether this kind of community can be developed intergenerationally.

In recent years Godly Play has been introduced by The Salvation Army through its Enabling Mission Department (The Salvation Army 2019) with training offered and materials specially designed for The Salvation Army context (The Salvation Army 2017). They include the story of the flag, the founders and dedication services, but specifically geared towards children.

## **Conclusion**

The two models are very different to one another. Messy Church is intergenerational, full of *paidia* type activity and a stand-alone church. Godly Play is age-specific, emphasises *ludus* in its thoughtful responses and wondering, and is a specific education system within a wider church.

There are contradictions between the two, with Messy Church often having specific crafts or activities for a person to do, and Godly Play inviting the person to respond to the story however they wish.

However, there are distinct similarities. Both approaches desire for people to discover more of who God is and who they are, made in his image. There is a 'subversive curiosity of children' which will make the most of any play situation, regardless of the chosen method (Bayes 2013:101). Both allow for times of wondering, encouraging those present to use their imaginations to engage personally with the story presented (Payne 2016:94).

Both methods offer clear theological rationale for play, particularly drawing on the concept of all believers being 'like children' in order 'to receive the Kingdom' (Mark 10:15). Therefore, there is theological importance to play, and not simply for the children present in the church. Whilst it may take time for adults to adjust to the idea of playing as part of formal gathered worship, it could be just the thing needed for busy adults, with endless to-do lists; to come and worship God with freedom and joy through play.

Salvation Army formal gathered worship should include prayer, Scripture reading, testimony, singing and preaching, with the aim of worshipping God and leading those present to salvation or holiness (The Salvation Army 1997:73). Utilising key principles from Messy Church and Godly Play, a greater sense of playfulness could be implemented in an existing congregation, although it will have its challenges. Firstly, there is an expectation that a Salvation Army meeting will be led from the front. Both models steer away from single leadership; Messy Church emphasises the collaborative effort of a team, whilst those guiding Godly Play seek to blend into the background and support participants rather than leading them in a specific direction. However, there is an expectation that the officer, or person leading, will actively encourage others to participate in the meeting, meaning leadership of playful components could be shared with others (The Salvation Army 1997:73).

As Salvation Army meetings are typically multigenerational, there is a need to be deliberately intergenerational. Whilst this is supported by Messy Church, there is an opportunity for age-specific teaching to be offered at another time, as Godly Play advocates. There are wonderful opportunities for old and young to worship together and learn from one another, but there are also challenges around individual limitations. Whilst young children may have plenty of energy, older people may struggle with mobility, sight or hearing loss (Butler and Orbach 1993:63). However, with careful planning and support from within the fellowship, everyone should be able to participate if they desire, and not be excluded if they choose to observe instead (Woodward 2008:86).

There will continue to be people who do not wish to entertain the concept of play within formal gathered worship, and the nature of play being that of freedom, means no-one should feel it is compulsory to take part. Indeed, there may be times when we ask 'how can we laugh and rejoice when there are still so many tears to be wiped away?' (Moltmann 1972:2) There will be occasions when play must give way to serious conversations. Additionally, whilst play fills

the life of many children, it cannot become the overarching theme of gathered worship. Adults must still work, and this cannot be ignored in the context of worship.

A final challenge is that of resources. Establishing a Messy Church or Godly Play requires specific resources. In implementing elements of each into an existing congregation, it may be that some creative items need to be purchased. However, incorporating wondering questions, interactive Bible stories and varied prayer activities in a playful manner simply requires an alternative type of planning by the meeting leader (Leadbetter 2015:43-5).

Resources such as pens, paper, building blocks and printed images to look at could be used in any The Salvation Army meeting, with their value to play and the nature of play being determined by both the officer and the congregation. A meeting planned with creative components for people to participate in requires collaboration between both parties; and the willingness from all to have fun!

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