

Building the Circle with Each Other

By WOLFHAND SCHWEIKER

“I am the Good Shepherd. I know each one of the sheep by name. When I take them from the sheepfold they follow me.” That is how the story goes. The story does not mention any deaf, lame, blind, or special needs sheep. I wonder how the story would change if some of the sheep were disabled to hear, see, or follow the Good Shepherd? How would he meet this challenge?

When I listened to the Parable of the Good Shepherd as it was told the very first time in Germany by Rebecca Nye, I was teaching Religious Education (RE) in a special school for physically and mentally disabled students. They loved the Godly Play stories. Most of them were not able to sit on the floor, so we built the circle around a low table being able to include the children sitting in wheel chairs. The visual materials helped to support understanding for the children with learning difficulties. Nevertheless, some words and sentences had to be transferred into so-called Simple German Language. The very first story I told in a group of mentally disabled children turned out to be tremendously playful. One boy tested the Good Shepherd by taking—without anyone’s notice—a sheep from the sheepfold while the shepherd was on his way to seek the lost one. Would he also seek the next sheep and all the next ones?

When I became an educator for RE-teachers in my local Protestant Church and was charged with nine different types of special schools at the Institute for Religious Education in Stuttgart-Birkach, Godly Play turned out to be a new and helpful approach in special education. Together with experienced teachers, we developed some ideas to help the blind, deaf, and lame to follow the stories more easily. We developed two-dimensional boards for the Creation story so the blind children could “look” at it by touching them. However, for children having been blind since birth, we were in need of three-dimensional materials: for instance, a light switch for the first day, soil and water for the second, and so on. These materials were presented synchronously to the blind child in a seven-sectioned board along with the story telling.

We discovered that for the deaf children, the unspoken language of Godly Play was a facilitating factor. In addition to the spoken language, a translation into sign language by the storyteller (or a person sitting aside) enriched and deepened the understanding even to the hearing-abled. Especially in the creative phase, different auxiliary means and specific creative materials needed to be provided: an anti-skid underlay, special scissors, and personal communication equipment.

In RE teacher education and Godly Play trainings, I sometimes use self-experience methods. What is it like to listen to a Godly Play story without hearing, to watch while being blind or partially sighted, or to sit in the circle with a stiff leg? These experiences help not just teachers to become more sensitive to various situations children with special needs are challenged to cope with in their everyday life. In a workshop at the 2008 Godly Play Conference in California, USA, we tried out several experiments: What does it feel like to only understand every second word? What does it feel like sitting in the circle while your body hurts?

When Germany ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in March 2009, the former integration question

started to become urgent in a new way: How can each and every person participate fully and effectively in the circle? I started to introduce Godly Play as an inclusive approach in instructional courses for special education teachers. A first task was to move barriers in minds and hearts. The new approach seemed to provide a central key: “A Godly Play community begins right here, by building a circle where each and every participant is warmly welcomed” (Jerome Berryman 2002). Welcoming warmly is obviously more than a smile. It also means ensuring that everyone is able to gain access, to participate and to take part in the circle in an active manner. The open sheepfold can be seen as a meaningful symbol. It might be frightening not to have a locked gate while the Good Shepard is absent seeking the lost; however, the open gate stands for the freedom to walk in and out without any steps, walls, and barriers.

Physical, motor, or social-emotional needs of children make different adaptive supports inevitable. This is the first part of the latest empirical findings assessed in a second class of primary school which I presented on an academic poster in Riga, Latvia. The findings show a shift in perspective: Special needs children greatly enrich the circle. They are precious gifted children. The findings underscore that their special life story promotes and deepens the wondering process. For example, the presence of a girl in a wheel chair brought up the question of what it means to communicate on the same eye level physically and metaphorically. We recognized a precious treasure in Godly Play: Building the circle is not just a short period right before the story begins. It is an ongoing process which ensures everyone inclusively is warmly welcomed by the one who knows each of us by name.



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