

Opening the Circle: nobody left behind

By *Wolfhard Schweiker*

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‘Sometimes someone comes to read the very words of the Good Shepherd, and to give us the bread and the wine. And sometimes the people of the world come to the table – and of course, the children come.’³

What a wonderful world community. The people of the world build a circle around the table of the Good Shepherd, a picture of paradise touching our soul. World and church community at their best. People of all colours, from East and West, North and South stand side by side: young and old from all cultures and nations. In this circle, while different, we celebrate diversity.

Depicting diversity

In Germany, when we reviewed the materials for the story of the Good Shepherd and World Communion, we found the aspect of dis/ability was missing. Designing new figures to add to the set, the Godly Play Trainer and performing artist Hans-Jürgen Hinnecke also tried to illustrate the socio-economic gaps between rich and poor. He drew a child in a wheelchair and a blind man with a white stick. However, the differences in bodies are much more diverse than this circle of the world communion is able to show. In real life, for example, there is a whole spectrum of gender. But how can you depict different sexual orientations or gender identities?



And what about different religions and world views? Will these bodies find a safe space at the Christian table of the Good Shepherd? Will they be served? At least this is sure: the Good Shepherd knows each of his sheep by name and will seek every lost one around the globe and bring them back to the green grass. And sometimes someone comes and reads the words of the Good Shepherd: ‘This is my body given for you!’ This is a universal call. This very word invites everybody around the globe. And Jerome Berryman underlines this call: ‘A Godly Play community begins right here, by building a circle where each and every participant is warmly welcomed’⁴.

So far, we have thought about the Godly Play story with its theological aspirations. Now, let’s think about the real world. How diverse are your Godly Play circles? Everybody is warmly welcomed, but does everybody feel comfortable and able to come? What about those with different disabilities and special needs? Will they be able to move in, sit on the floor, stay quiet and understand the very words? In the Godly Play Quarterly *The Circle* (May 2017) I wrote about some of my ideas and experiences of removing barriers. Welcoming involves more than greeting people with a smile. We should also prepare our hearts and environments in an inclusive manner, always sensitive to diversity. A group of

³ Berryman, J.W. *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Vol. 4.* Morehouse Education Resources 2008. p. 97.

⁴ Berryman, J. W.: *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, Vol 1: How to Lead Godly Play Lessons.* Denver: Living the Good News 2002. P.

us in Germany are currently working on an 'Inclusive Religious Education in Diversity'. We realised that the geometry of a circle encompasses all differences at once, but our eyes and brains do not work like that. For that reason, we have developed the ability to zoom in. Like a photographer, you try to focus on one detail, which may be an aspect of a special need or an intersectional knot of differences. Looking sharply at reality helps us to bridge barriers.

A Godly Play session already offers opportunities to do this. You have plenty of time to observe the participants during their creative work, and to notice individual preferences when you greet and say goodbye to each person in the circle. And yet, we should be aware that we may be holding a blinkered view of our somewhat closed 'church-y' bubble. What about those who are members of the church but never come? Does your offer fit their fundamental needs? Zooming in on the bodies outside the Godly Play room might help us more realistically to prepare and get ready to welcome and include new members. Comparing our circles with the picture of paradise around the table of the Good Shepherd, we recognize the fundamental discrepancies. The world is ragged and broken by rival parties. Countries are divided and wars go on. It is not in our hands to gather them peacefully around the table. However, we are able to read the very words of the Good Shepherd: 'This is my body given for you!' And we may share the bread and the wine.



Too different

The handicapped American theologian Nancy Eiesland (1964–2009) was convinced that there is no common human experience. Bodies are too different. Therefore, there is hardly any universal sense of being at home, even in church. Yet, when Eiesland looked at the body of Christ she noticed the body as a crucial locus of theological reflection. It is Christ who represents and shares our diversity. In his body, she recognized the wounds in his hands and his side. When Thomas wanted proof of his suffering and resurrection, the risen Christ still showed him his wounds from the cross. Eiesland derived comfort from this discovery, and called her book *The Disabled God* (1994)⁵. God himself bridges all differences. Looking at the trinitarian God we see God's colourful diversity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So the Divinity him:herself is the spring which reconciles painful differences and the well which celebrates diversity.

This might be quite exhausting if we set out to provide equal access, design welcoming settings, and remove barriers. However, if we go back to the spring, share bread and wine and listen to the very words of the Good Shepherd, we receive the power to go on. Many Godly Play stories encourage us to deal with plurality and become more inclusive-minded. The Holy Family on the focus shelf presents us with a non-average, patchwork family. It reminds us of two quite different stories of Christ's birth, in Matthew and Luke. The Circle of the Church Year on the shelf beneath highlights various colours, mirroring multifarious liturgical actions. In the Creation stories we enjoy God's rich gifts of life and think about human beings eating from the tree of differences. Noah's Ark delights us with all sorts of bio-diverse animals. These sacred stories tell us about the unconditional positive regard of all creatures. And there was once someone who invited everybody who was weary and burdened (Matthew 11.28). And he went to them. He visited the humble,

⁵ Eiesland, Nancy L.: *The Disabled God. Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*. Nashville: Abington Press 1994.

the outcasts, the little ones and even the super-rich. Crossing borders is a benchmark of the kingdom of heaven. The Good Samaritan transgressed his cultural and religious borders. And the seeds of the sower fell on a variety of different grounds.



Another touching story points out that even the Good Shepherd stepped beyond the frontiers of his mind and religious realm. A foreign woman from Canaan came to him. She asked him for help, but at first, he rejected her request: 'I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15.24). This shows that it is not only we who find it difficult to open the circle. Even for the Good Shepherd, this is hard work. It seems that transgressing religious borders is one of the biggest challenges in the field of managing diversity. The hard confessional fights between Catholics, Protestant, Anglicans and Orthodox seem to be widely a matter of the past. In the German materials for the Godly Play story of the World Communion we have a Catholic priest and a female protestant pastor. And in ecumenical services both will stand behind the table of the Good Shepherd. But what about the challenge of interreligious communication?

Religious diversity

In 2015, many refugees came to Germany. The gym opposite my workplace was filled with Syrians. I decided to take my desert bag over there and told them the story of the Exodus. The children understood very little German language, but they discovered: 'We know that story. It's also in the Quran!' Meanwhile Godly Play has also crossed the threshold of the Christian community, probably in many places. Rabbi Dr Michael Shire introduced Torah Play to his Jewish congregation in Boston, USA. And it seems further steps are ahead. A Muslim RE teacher from Innsbruck, Austria attended a Godly Play core training. She was fascinated and started to write stories from the Quran in the style of Godly Play. In 2020 I had the pleasure of introducing Godly Play at an interreligious theological seminar at the University of Tübingen. Professor Dr Fahimah Ulfat and the Muslim students were delighted. So, we proceeded to cooperate in interfaith studies. In the summer semester of 2022, the students of Islamic and Protestant Theology were wondering about the Yunus story in Islamic tradition and the Jonah story in Judean-Christian tradition. We will report on this in a workshop at the European Godly Play Conference at Mechelen, Belgium this September.

I wonder how we can open the circle to one another. How can we learn from each other by regarding commonalities and respecting differences? I am sure that representatives of different religions will enrich the circle of storytelling. This specific circle is not a common Eucharist, nor a liturgical action, but an interreligious sharing of precious stories.

Finally, I wonder what you think about this. I wonder what the Good Shepherd would say. And I wonder if he will join these circles.