

CULTIVATING A PLAYFUL AND IMAGINATIVE CONGREGATION: STORIES,
WONDER, CURIOSITY, AND CREATIVITY IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

by

John Rhode Callaway

A DOCTORAL PAPER

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

2024

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	3
INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER ONE	5
CHAPTER TWO	17
CHAPTER THREE	43
CHAPTER FOUR	56
APPENDIX	76
WORKS CITED	94

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Katie, for continuing to be my best friend, lover, partner, fellow dissenter, and favorite theologian.

To Sophie, for sharing your playful wisdom with me every day.

To Shan, for always challenging me to dig deeper and to follow the birds.

To Denise Thorpe and Ramona Spencer, for making me feel prepared for and cared for on this journey.

To the staff of Christian Temple for helping me every step of the way.

To Christian Temple, for teaching me to play again.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is written to explore the possibilities that a playful mindset might offer a congregation. The goal of this work is to use storytelling in the time of Advent to see if it can help elicit experiences of wonder, curiosity, and imagination. For the sake of the paper, that is also how the word play is being defined—that which elicits wonder, curiosity, and imagination.

PRIMARY QUESTION:

In what ways does a focus on story during Advent spark playfulness as marked by wonder, curiosity, and imagination encourage the congregation to explore their own experiences of curiosity in ways that have not been previously accessible?

THESIS STATEMENT:

The use of diverse methods of storytelling in worship creates congregational accessibility to imagination, wonder, and curiosity therefore cultivating a playful spirituality that transcends worship.

WORKING HYPOTHESIS:

The use of playful storytelling elements in worship will help elicit wonder, curiosity, and imagination.

CHAPTER ONE

PLAY: WONDER, CURIOSITY, AND IMAGINATION

Play is the opportunity for creativity and innovation.
Play is the spontaneous act resulting from curiosity and wonder.
Play is both free and structured, both behavior and mindset.¹

Each time I have interviewed for a pastoral role, I have asked the committee a simple question: How does your church have fun together? Time after time, I've witnessed something amazing happen. The committee members sitting before me go on and on about being a community for one another. When a congregation does something just for the opportunity to have fun with each other, it allows a community to truly be a community. Play brings the walls dividing us down and helps unite a community together. If a congregation does not know how to have fun together, how would they ever know how to get through the trials of life together?

In Rob Bell's novel, *Where'd You Park Your Spaceship*, he writes of the Earth's demise, "Their view of the universe had become so saturated in separateness...that they had lost their grasp of the unity and one substance that is how things truly are..."² Though this line is said in a fictional time on a fictional planet critiquing human beings on Earth, the problem named is very real. The world is indeed saturated in separateness, and it causes humanity to lose sight of our united essence. A lack of play and playfulness contributes to the separateness that ails our world on a macro scale and our communities

¹ Julie Jones and Jed Dearybury, *The Playful Life: Creating a Better Life Through Play* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2023), 1.

² Rob Bell, *Where'd You Park Your Spaceship?: An Interplanetary Tale of Love, Loss, and Bread* (BackHouse Books, 2023), location 1047.

on a micro scale. “In a similar vein, the pragmatist philosopher and early psychologist William James (1842–1910) emphasized the importance of a broad range of spiritual and cognitive needs for human flourishing.”³

In this project, we will focus on the opportunities to play during the season of Advent through storytelling. We will play⁴ with the liturgy to incorporate new items that we hope will elicit wonder, curiosity, and imagination that invite congregants to engage with their inner child, the child that has been buried by rationalism and ritual. By focusing this project on Advent, arguably one of the church’s most holy seasons, we can create a roadmap of recommendations for other times of the liturgical year that will engage congregants in play that heals and inspires.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

PLAY

In order to proceed with this study, we must first lay the foundation of definitions of the terms that will guide our path. There are many understandings of the word “play.” For the sake of this work, play will be defined as anything that elicits wonder, curiosity, and imagination. We will particularly focus on the playful aspects of storytelling, leaning

³ Helen De Cruz, *Wonderstruck: How Wonder and Awe Shape the Way We Think* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024), 237.

⁴ Yes, I did use the word “play” intentionally here. In play, there must be an element of freedom as well to elicit that wonder, curiosity, and imagination. It might be helpful to think about play as more of a noun in the elements incorporated and play as a verb in the ways that elements and norms are tweaked. After all, one cannot write a doctoral project on play and not playfully push the edges here and there.

heavily on the fact that storytelling—both orally and through the printed word—is a central mode of learning in the Christian Tradition.

In this effort to incorporate play into the worshipping life of a congregation, Fred Rogers’ philosophy and theology will help guide us: “Play allows us a safe distance as we work on what’s close to our hearts.”⁵ Rogers continues, “It’s the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives.”⁶ Play, according to Rogers, is some of the most important work an individual can do because, through play, we can access parts of our stories and souls that are otherwise inaccessible.

Play therapists have known this for years. The Association for Play Therapy defines their work as “the systematic use of a theoretical model to establish an interpersonal process wherein trained play therapists use the therapeutic powers of play to help clients prevent or resolve psychosocial difficulties and achieve optimal growth and development.”⁷ In play therapy, children are offered the opportunity to engage with their stories as onlookers and then use playful interventions to find healing. While play therapy is not possible on the communal level in a church setting, this project will engage with the learnings from play therapists to apply to our particular setting. One recent study notes that play as “a free and effortless expression of life, is of vital importance for children, because they can develop their imagination through it. They are also guided to

⁵ Fred Rogers, *You Are Special: Words of Wisdom from America’s Most Beloved Neighbor* (New York, NY: Viking, 1994), 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷ JP Lilly, Kevin O’Connor, and Terri Krull, “Play Therapy Makes a Difference,” Association for Play Therapy, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://www.a4pt.org/page/PTMakesADifference/Play-Therapy-Makes-a-Difference.htm>.

new ways of viewing everyday life. It is a way of exploring and getting to know both the interior and the outside world.”⁸ “But play isn’t just for children. It’s important for all mammals — dogs, dolphins, lions, tigers, bears, and human adults too. We all need to play.”⁹ According to Berryman,

Play was formally identified as a fundamental human quality by the distinguished Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga. He called our species Homo Ludens (playing creatures) to contrast with the views much debated at the time, that we are fundamentally Homo Sapiens (thinking creatures) or, perhaps, Homo Faber (tool makers). His book, *Homo Ludens*, originally published in Dutch in 1938, not only argued that play is a basic activity for human beings, but that culture is play.¹⁰

For the extent of this project, the term play will be used to refer to the free and effortless expressions of life that encourage congregants to engage and develop their imaginations to explore the interior and outside world.

WONDER

One goal of this project is to find elements in and beyond worship that elicit the experience of wonder.¹¹ Adults and children alike need to have experiences of wonder to

⁸ Konstantinos Koukourikos et al., “An Overview of Play Therapy,” *Materia socio-medica*, December 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8812369/>.

⁹ Laurel Felt, “Play Is the Work of Childhood: Four Reasons Why Parents Need It Too,” PBS SoCal, October 3, 2022, <https://www.pbssocal.org/play-work-childhood-four-reasons-parents-need>.

¹⁰ Jerome Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children* (Denver, CO: Morehouse Pub. , 2009), 18.

¹¹ The phrase “worship and beyond” will be used throughout this paper and project as a way to try to define experiences before the designated time of worship, during the time of worship, and even the questions and learnings that arise after a congregant exits the door of the church. Worship, of course, cannot be limited simply to the timeframe boundaries we as church leaders impose.

ground their place in the universe and to help them feel that they are part of something much bigger. For the sake of this project, we will be engaging with wonder through the Godly Play pedagogy that aligns the word wonder closely with awe. Helen De Cruz shares definitions of awe and wonder that will be helpful:

Awe is the emotion we sense when we perceive or conceptualize vastness, combined with a need for cognitive accommodation. Wonder is the emotion that arises from a glimpse at the unknown terrain which lies just beyond the fringes of our current understanding.”¹²

While these are experiential words that are hard to grasp fully, they move an individual beyond themselves. The experience of wonder is often accompanied by a question, and the deeper experiences keep leading toward more questions. Godly Play typically ends storytelling sessions with a series of “I wonder” questions. In Godly Play, the facilitator is encouraged not to transfer knowledge to the circle of participants, but to allow them to enter into it through their wonder. Jerome Berryman, the founder of Godly Play, writes, “Wondering opens the creative process and draws both the lesson and the child’s life experience into the personal creation of meaning.”¹³

CURIOSITY

Experiences of wonder and awe open the proverbial doors, while curiosity allows for learning and growth. The phrase, “curiosity killed that cat,” has hindered much growth and learning over the years. It is curiosity that allows the individual and the

¹² De Cruz, *Wonderstruck: How Wonder and Awe Shape the Way We Think*, 129-133.

¹³ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, 45.

congregation to ask “what if” questions. What if we try singing a song that is out of the ordinary? What if we try reading this type of book as a congregation? What if we let children plan a worship experience? It is curiosity that creates those types of learning experiences that help congregations test, push, fail, grow, and try again. There is always a possibility that curiosity will lead to negative results, but a playful posture can allow for negative results to provide room for learning and growth. The possibility for exploration allows congregations the opportunity to move away from rigidity and toward exploration.

For this project, wonder will function as a vehicle for discovery, an opening through which participants and congregants may choose to walk to create a depth of meaning that weaves the Biblical narratives with one’s own life and communal narratives.

IMAGINATION

Worship can be an egalitarian act of imagination and curiosity in which we pray for, sing about, and study the radical imagination of God—an imagination that created aardvarks and the Amazon, an imagination that nurtured in humanity a curiosity that would be the driver in our growth, learning, and storytelling for ages to come.

Imagination is this project's primary vehicle for change because it enables individuals to picture how the world could and should be ordered. By engaging with their imagination, individuals are invited to expand their own singular story and to live a more united multiplicity of stories that build the world into what it could and should be. This is traditionally called the kingdom of God, though years ago, the language of the kindom

began to take hold in the progressive Christian world. This departure moves away from the feudal language of the kingdom and toward something more inclusive. After all, we are called to treat each other like kin. Throughout the New Testament, phrases like kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are used to describe a place where things are as they could and should be. The kingdom of God is just that, a realm where things are in the right relationship and all of creation are treated as kin. Imagination allows the individual to truly explore what this kingdom could be like while taking the next action step to find ways to bring it to fruition. Fred Rogers would say, “Anything that is human is mentionable and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable.”¹⁴ Following that line, if one can imagine a more just world where all are treated as kin, one can find ways to work toward making it happen.

This project is built upon the conviction that the God we worship is a God of imagination, a God who instilled in us an unmatched curiosity and creativity. We believe this gift has been under-engaged during worship, especially given how Covid-19 has changed our practices. Play is needed in our congregational lives to revive our wonder, curiosity, and imagination. It moves each of us toward a more just interpretation of the world around us. Play opens the door for making those interpretations come to life; play heals. In short, we need to play.

¹⁴ Joanne Rogers, Gregg Behr, and Ryan Rydzewski, *When You Wonder, You're Learning: Mister Rogers' Enduring Lessons for Raising Creative, Curious, Caring Kids* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2023), 78.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

In the early parts of the last decade, David Kinnaman of the Barna Group and Kenda Creasy Dean, practical theology professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote books engaging with similar themes around the same time: *UnChristian* (Kinnaman) and *Almost Christian* (Dean). Both authors studied youth culture and came to different conclusions about the faith of teenagers at that time. The two authors saw the generational changes in church involvement on the horizon. Millennials and early members of Gen Z are part of a growing group moving away from church involvement. Kinnaman found that those who were leaving experienced rigidity in church, prompting him to continue to study and survey these individuals. He found that young adults find the church to be homophobic, hypocritical, and stuck in their ways.¹⁵ Neither author focuses on play, but both focus on rigidity and institutional maintenance that run rampant in churches. They each mention the tired arguments over the color of the carpet, removing the pews¹⁶ from the sanctuary, and arguments over who can take communion. These arguments over tradition have bored the next generation of church-goers. Tradition, however, can be a blessing and a curse. Traditions can be grounding, sustaining, and life-giving. Traditions can also become an idol and pull focus away from the purpose. Thus, as we engage with play and playfulness, we will also answer a long-sought-after question

¹⁵ David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 20.

¹⁶ Think, here, about the room itself. In many Mainline settings, the emptiness of the sanctuaries is made more pronounced by the static arrangement of the pews.

of how to treat tradition. It is time for churches to be equipped to hold traditional practices and policies loosely while their congregations are given permission to play in order to determine who they are going to be for the next generation and who they want to be in the present.

Somewhere along the way, many congregations have forgotten that one of the most influential experiences of our childhood was in play. Think about the lessons of teamwork, the freedom of the imagination, and the endless possibilities children experience in open and organized play. It is my belief that children and adults alike would benefit from a playful posture in church. Holding the structure loosely allows for creativity in wonder, curiosity, and imagination.

K. Brynolf Lyon and Dan P. Mosely are two seminary professors who have written a book together called *How to Lead in Church Conflict: Healing Ungrieved Loss*. Within their joint project, they include a whole section on play, saying:

“The playful spirit of imagination is essential if a congregation is going to emerge from the pain of its significant losses to discover the new life that is seeded in the womb of its own congregational life. They can be surprised by the gifts of grace in the future.”¹⁷

The Covid-19 pandemic forced massive changes in worship practices around the world. It was a shift for survival, comfort, and connection. In returning to in-person worship, the service and liturgy have changed significantly. It is now far more sterile, in part because of residual fear and trauma associated with the

¹⁷ K. Brynolf Lyon and Dan Moseley, *How to Lead in Church Conflict: Healing Ungrieved Loss* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 119.

pandemic. The sterilized elements of worship, illustrated best in individually wrapped and sealed communion packets, have led to a less engaged congregation in other aspects of the life of the church. Worship is the lifeblood of the church, and when the nature of worship changes, so does the church. The pandemic created pain and trauma for worshipping communities because of the way it depersonalized and sterilized worship, thereby removing many preexistent engagements with wonder, curiosity, and imagination at a time when those were most necessary.

The losses will come, and matters will always churn disagreement and change within congregations. This playful spirit is, however, like a muscle that needs to be exercised. Churches need a way to practice that playful spirit and prepare one another for the peaks and valleys. Churches that play well together, grieve well together, participate in breaking down systems of injustice together, and are prepared for the celebrations and challenges of life together.

As Mr. Rogers says, “Playing is a way to solve problems and to express feelings. In fact, play is the real work of childhood.”¹⁸ It is real work to allow our imaginations to roam, to pause to be astonished by wonder and to use our creativity at any age. We are creatures of routine and habit, and those childhood experiences of play often get lost in formal settings. The church is certainly no stranger to this. Over time, adults have made

¹⁸ Rogers, *You Are Special: Words of Wisdom from America's Most Beloved Neighbor*, 47

some of the most mysterious and playful stories ever shared into a checklist item on the to-do list.¹⁹

What is it about play that is so needed? Adult congregants need a safe place to explore their faith in the same manner that children do. Every moderate to progressive congregation I have experienced has emphasized that we are all on a faith journey without an arrival destination. Yet, they simultaneously invest most of Christian education dollars in providing opportunities for children alone. We will only learn and grow by intentionally providing opportunities that stretch and make room for wonder, curiosity, and imagination, regardless of age.

Church consultant Bill Ireland says, “We wouldn’t be anywhere without our dreams. Whatever our dreams and whatever our visions—well, they motivate us and get us going...What’s true for individuals is also true for churches—dreams and visions keep us alive. Thriving congregations are always asking, ‘What’s next?’”²⁰ In other words, a church’s collective imagination—their willingness to play—keeps the community alive and thriving. Though Christian Temple is alive and well, this project will keep pushing the congregation to use our collective imagination, inviting us to lean into our curiosities and creativity, playfully asking, “What’s next?”

¹⁹ I will do the work of locating myself contextually later in this project and recognize that I’m speaking from a certain white, Mainline Protestant point of view. Further exploration should be done on the need for places of curiosity and wonder in the most Spirit-filled of traditions because those often seem to operate with more authoritative leadership than individual faith exploration. Of course, these are generalizations and not a rule. Middle Collegiate Church in New York City led by Pastor Jacqui Lewis is a great exception to these generalizations. Her book *Fierce Love* is a testament to using storytelling as a tool to elicit wonder, curiosity, and imagination.

²⁰ Mark Tidsworth, “Dreams and Visions,” Pinnacle Leadership Associates, January 3, 2023, <https://www.pinnlead.com/blog/2023/1/3/dreams-and-visions>.

Several hopeful trends were noted in the 2020 Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. A growing number of congregations identified as being “spiritually vital and alive.”²¹ One of the attributes connected to being considered spiritually vital and alive is “whether a congregation affirms it is ‘willing to change to meet new challenges.’”²² In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, more congregations identified as being spiritually vital and alive because they were willing to change and meet new challenges. If anything, the pandemic taught churches how to be nimble and the necessity of being creative and playful. The FACT survey shows that spiritual vitality does not necessarily rely on numbers but on a willingness to meet challenges with creativity, curiosity, and imagination. Perhaps playfulness is a way forward for congregations seeking to establish relevance and depth well into the 21st century.

²¹ A growth of 6% from the 2015 survey shows that more congregants believe their congregations to be spiritually vital and alive. While perception is not an objectively quantifiable figure, it is important in the ethnographic research of a community.

²² Scott Thumma, “Faith Communities Today’s 2020 Report,” Faith Communities Today, 2021, <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>, 26.

CHAPTER TWO

FRED ROGERS: A THEOLOGICAL EMBODIMENT OF OF CHRIST-LIKE STORIES

A WALK THROUGH MISTER ROGERS' NEIGHBORHOOD

Fred Rogers was a masterful storyteller who relied heavily on play to invite his audience into the story. This strategy made space for decades of children to reflect on the mundane and the profound. However, it would have been impossible without the intentionality of every piece of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

CREATING THE THRESHOLD

The year was 1983, and Fred Rogers can be seen with dark, perfectly slicked-back hair in episode 1521. Fred invites his audience—“television neighbors—to a local music store because in the back of the store is an antique collection of note. Walking through the usual music store, Fred enters a new room with displays of little figurines. This is a friendly neighbor’s bank collection that is used to collect coins. Always moving slowly and methodically, Rogers points out interesting notes about individual banks. The television audience says goodbye to the collection, and the camera pans to the model neighborhood seen at every show's beginning. Zooming close to one house, the cross-dissolve transition shows a smiling Rogers walking through the door inside. He says, “I remember when I was a little boy, I used to put coins in my little bank, and then I’d take them out and put them in again and take them out and put them again. I like banks.” He

calmly sits down by the bay window, and along comes a little red trolley, aptly named Trolley, with its clickety-clackety jazz theme song. “I used to like to play with trains too,” he says, “well, let’s make believe that there is plenty of money in King Friday’s bank, and he’s thinking of using it to buy something for the school or someplace else.” Just as quickly as the Trolley appeared, the television audience is whisked away with their faithful transport, the Trolley, into the Neighborhood of Make-Believe.²³ The transition was seamless and yet there is a clear threshold of differentiation, made possible by the trolley:

His trolley, too, serves as a device, ferrying viewers from the living room to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe and back, helping young children learn to cope with comings and goings—which, as we’ve seen, helps them relax and feel comfortable enough to be curious. Once familiarity—and with it, a sense of safety and warmth—has been established, Rogers adds curiosity’s other ingredient: mystery.²⁴

The Neighborhood of Make-Believe is a different place altogether. Rogers knew that there had to be a proper threshold-crossing each time the television neighbors went there. The trolley’s entrance to and eventual exit from Mr. Rogers’ living room mark the moment and escort the television neighbors over the threshold, setting the Neighborhood of Make-Believe apart from everyday life. Every good story needs an on-ramp, and for Rogers, the Neighborhood of Make-Believe was another place where children could enter the story.

²³ Fred Rogers, “1521: Conflict,” episode, Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood, November 7, 1983.

²⁴ Rogers, Behr, and Rydzewski, *When You Wonder You’re Learning: Mister Rogers’ Enduring Lessons for Raising Creative, Curious, Caring Kids*, 32.

As with everything on Roger’s television show, intentionality was put into every detail of make-believe time. Although he is responsible for many of the voices, Mr. Rogers never appears as himself on camera in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe as an intentional way to maintain the threshold between reality and the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. The mix of human and puppet characters is intended to be just that: characters. This fictional world is a safe place for children to explore their curiosity, wonder, and imagination.²⁵ It is a safe place where Daniel the Tiger, Prince Wednesday, and O the Owl can play and also problem-solve. With an ego-driven character like King Friday present, there are always going to be problems to solve. This fictional place is not all roses and butterflies, but it is always a place of safety. Even when talking about heavy subjects like conflicts and war, it is a clear place where children can play safely and experiment with their feelings and imagination. It is, after all, a place that elicits wonder, curiosity, and imagination.

His pedagogy, though simple, is quite profound. He said, “The opening reality of the show, we deal with the stuff that dreams are made of. And then in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, we deal with it as if it were a dream. And then when it comes back to me, we deal with the simple interpretation of the dream.”²⁶ In this process, he names a quandary then gives the audience an opportunity to experiment and play with it, and finally returns to the original quandary to create meaning. Though it seems repetitive, the question-action-reflection model of teaching is effective and welcoming.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁶ Gavin Edwards and R. Sikoryak, *Kindness and Wonder: Why Mister Rogers Matters Now More Than Ever* (New York: Dey Street, an imprint of William Morrow, 2019)., 76

THE CONFLICT SERIES

During one week of episodes, the tension builds throughout the throughout the week. These episodes, entitled “Conflict,” use real-life conflicts to reflect on conflict resolution in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. In episode 1521, the television neighbors are moved through the threshold into the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. King Friday, the narcissistic ruler of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, is speaking to Handyman Negri about how many coins he has and how he would like to purchase something for the school. What appears initially to be altruism transforms into suspicion when a box full of money is delivered to the character Corny. Why all this money coming from the next town over, the perpetual foil, Westwood? It turns out that Westwood is purchasing mysterious items from Corny. King Friday quickly forgets about his gift-giving and demands the handyman to purchase whatever Westwood is purchasing from Corny. Upon further inspection, King Friday surmises that the pieces Corny provides to Westwood must be parts for bombs. That’s right. In this children’s show, in the middle of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, there is the making of a Cold War. It makes a lot of sense in 1983. Rogers could effectively bring this up because of his question-action-reflection model of teaching.

As it unfolds over the course of 5 episodes, the people of Westwood are not actually building bombs. All of the suspicion, panic, and fear experienced by everyone—including the children of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe—is all for naught. The fine people of Westwood are building a bridge. On the last episode of the “Conflict” series,

Rogers is viewed on his porch signing a sweet song called “Peace and Quiet.” Before the credits roll, these words are placed on the screen:

"And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning forks;
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war any more."²⁷

This text from Isaiah 2:4 explicitly shows the pastoral side of Mr. Rogers, but it is also clearly a message for the adults watching the program.

What Fred Rogers has so masterfully done is provide a safe place within a land of fiction for children and adults alike to approach extremely difficult topics playfully. Even topics like conflict, which children are going to experience, are given a space to hold loosely and to grapple with wonder, curiosity, and imagination through the question-action-reflection method.

When children identify with fictional characters, they share in those characters’ feelings, vicariously experiencing joys and struggles from a safe vantage point. ‘Precisely because [fiction] is make-believe and has no immediate real-world consequences,’ writes psychologist Peter Gray, children ‘can experience the challenges and difficulties more clearly, think about them more rationally, and develop more insight about them than we might from real-world experience.’²⁸

There is power in a story, and Rogers harnessed that power in a way that provided an open invitation that gave an example for adults. Adults need play in our lives, too. Fred Rogers, as a minister and storyteller, was focused on children in his work, but he encouraged parents to watch along as a support. Not only was this an important tool for

²⁷ Fred Rogers, “1525: Conflict,” episode, Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood, November 11, 1983.

²⁸ Edwards and Sikoryak, *Kindness and Wonder: Why Mister Rogers Matters Now More Than Ever*, 34.

parents to use for unpacking the experiences of a child, whether intended or not, but these stories also opened adults to curiosity, wonder, and imagination.²⁹

There is power in story and Fred recognized this at an early age. Notice that he says “when I was a boy” in almost every episode. Fred shares memories in story form. Of course, every one of these stories is parabolic. The events that unfold in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe are particularly parabolic given their hyperbole and mysterious nature.

Parables open the listener or reader to moral or ethical understandings, but parables also give agency. The listener or reader is allowed to create their own meaning through wonder, curiosity, and imagination. “He creates a sanctuary for children, a place where they feel safe to be themselves, to express their wonderings and fears, or even to be allowed to be shy about them.”³⁰ The parables told during the time of make-believe are essential to the creation of a sanctuary.

This was the work of Jesus; it was the work of Fred Rogers, and it must be the continued work of congregational leaders. As leaders, we have to do the work of creating safe places for agency to thrive. It is, after all, their church. We must equip congregants to create their own faith rather than adopt ours. A playful start to this work congregational agency is storytelling. It is fitting that Fred told parables because if Jesus is the teacher — or Rabbi, as he was called by the Disciples—then Rogers is the practitioner.

²⁹ Though Fred Rogers did not cater his show to adults, they still found meaning in it. The only show that was catered to an adult audience was months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Rogers did a prime time episode for adults to help them process their grief, but also to talk about the importance of them tending to the grief of the children in their lives.

³⁰ Edwards and Sikoryak, *Kindness and Wonder: Why Mister Rogers Matters Now More Than Ever*, 36.

GODLY PLAY: A ROGERS-ESQUE PEDAGOGY

Creating the Threshold

An adult is standing at the door, the threshold. Perhaps, you have just experienced the rush of getting to church as a family. Maybe there was an argument about what clothing to wear. Maybe there was a lengthy discussion about the importance of eating breakfast. Maybe the dog threw up in the living room. Maybe all of those things happened right before you just barely made it to church that morning. The adult smiles and says, “Take a big deep breath. Wait for just a moment to calm yourself.” With both of the adults’ hands on your shoulders, you feel at ease. The adult calmly asks, “Are you ready for Godly Play?”

You walk through the door, over the threshold, and see another adult smiling as she sits at in an open circle on the floor. This adult who is seated on the carpet invites you to sit down and gently points to a place to sit saying, “You are welcome to sit here. There are cushions available right over there for you to bring or you can carry a chair over if you prefer.”³¹ You wait for others to sit around the circle, and then you listen as if you are invited into the story.

This process of entering the room is a threshold crossing. According to Berryman, “A threshold *sets apart* but it also provides *a way into* a different space.”³² It is an

³¹ The Doorperson in a Godly Play room serves as the essential second-adult. However, they are so much more than another warm body in the room. The Doorperson sets the tone for the room, creates the threshold moment, and helps support the circle of learners through their attentiveness to the story.

³² Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, 27

essential part of the Godly Play liturgy because it creates the environment—the container—where sacred wondering can occur.

The storyteller begins, “It is good to see all of you here this morning. Take a big, deep breath with me. Around this circle, we have all of the time we need. I’m going to tell you a story this morning. So, let’s go see what I need to tell this story. These stories on this side of the room are our core stories. These are important to help us understand where we have been and learn more about the people of God. But today, we aren’t going to tell one of these stories. At the front of the room are our liturgical action stories. They provide a space for us to understand what we do in church in why we do it, like during the season of Advent. They help us to think about how God might be calling us right now. But today, we aren’t going to tell one of these stories. This area of the room has all of these gold boxes. I think there might be a story for us in one of these. Let’s look and see.

“Ah, yes. Here it is.” The storyteller picks up a gold wooden box and holds it up to her ear listening to it, as if the box is telling her a secret. “I think our story is inside this box. I’ll bring it back to the circle, but remember where I found this box in case you would like to work with it today.” Everything in the Godly Play room is available for children to work with during the time of response. The storyteller reclaims her seat in the circle, crosses her leg and holds out the box so all the kids can see it.

She knocks on the box’s lid. “This box is hard, and it makes a loud sound when I knock on it. I wonder what is inside this box. I wonder if it could be a parable. You know, this box is hard it is a little difficult to open. Parables are like that.” She continues with a slow, gentle tone, not unlike Mr. Rogers, “We keep coming back to parables and opening

the lid again and again to see if the parable itself will open for us. This box is a gold color. Gold is a very valuable metal that indicates something is precious. With this box being gold, I wonder if something valuable might be in this box. Parables are valuable and precious. They are stories that teach us about Jesus and how we might be able to act today like Jesus. Let me take a peak in this box...I think there is a parable in here.” She sets the golden box to her side, opening the lid so that only she can see into the box. Then, she removes the box’s contents, slowly and deliberately.

“Here is a large brown piece of material. I wonder what this could be. Is this dirt? Is this land? Could this be a road? Yes, I think maybe this is a road. These two pieces look similar I wonder if these two could be towns or even a city and a town. Here are some rocks beside the road that sort of make a ditch. Look, a person is lying in that ditch. I wonder what happened? There are a few more people in this box. A couple are dressed in nice robes. Two of these figures look pretty gruff and are carrying away goods. This person is walking beside a donkey. I wonder what all of this means. There is nothing left in the box. I guess there is nothing left to do except begin.”³³³⁴

Of course, this story is often called the Parable of the Good Samaritan and is found in the tenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel. This is how each parable begins in Godly Play. Parable stories like this one aren’t easily understood, but when told in the Godly Play format, the space is given for the listener to grow into the story. Godly Play is a

33 Godly Play Good Samaritan Story - footnote from Leader Guide

³⁴ There is a very particular intended language to be used with each Godly Play story. Depending upon the Godly Play trainer or facilitator, this language can be modified to fit certain theological viewpoints. When telling a Godly Play story, I often change parts of the story to make it even more applicable or fitting or relevant to the current moment. This has been shared to resemble what was taught at Christian Temple.

Christian education tool started by Rev. Dr. Jerome Berryman that uses storytelling with a Montessori-like approach to allow children and adults to enter the Christian stories with wonder, curiosity, and imagination. Berryman created Godly Play to equip children with the language of faith, making them fluent enough to create their own faith. He said,

The goal of Godly Play is for children to move through the spiral curriculum during early, middle and late childhood in such a way that they will enter adolescence with an inner working model of the classical Christian language system to root them deeply in the Tradition and at the same time allow them to be open to the future.³⁵

Although designed for children, Godly Play has been a meaningful experience for adults alike. The story-based approach provides a safe place for wonder to roam. It also adds a playful approach to Christian education, allowing the participant to experience wonder, curiosity, and imagination while playing with the Divine. This playful approach to education is expressed in four different types of stories in the Godly Play room: core stories, parables, liturgical action, and silence. Berryman asks, “What are the ways that one can be at play with God?”

With a touch of whimsy, the Holy Trinity can be thought of as a “playgroup” that invites us to play in three ways. First, we are invited to play with God by participating in the play of God’s creation. Second, we are invited to play with God’s Son by participating in the gospels and in the worship and life of the church. Such play can result in redemption. Third, we are invited to play with God within, where we meet the Holy Spirit, to create, with God’s grace, a meaningful life that adds beauty to God’s creation. Godly Play encourages play with God in all three ways, all the time. In fact, it is centered around the experience of God as the Holy Trinity.”³⁶

³⁵ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

Each type of story reveals a different part of the life of God. Core stories revolve around the stories of the People of God and the creation of their identities. These include the The Exodus, Exile and Return, and the Ark and the Tabernacle. All of the manipulatives in core stories are three dimensional to implicitly help children differentiate between stories that happened in reality and mythical stories that take on two dimensions, like parables. Secondly, the Christ invites all people to participate in the stories of redemption. These stories are the parables and stories of the Apostles. Liturgical action stories invite participants to play with the sacraments and symbols of the faith, including baptism, Lord's Supper, and even the story of the church. Finally, the Spirit meets participants in silence, the third place of grace, in which participants are invited to reflect and respond to the story they heard. Over the course of several years, participants will go through the cycle of stories many times, but each time, their engagement with the stories will deepen based on their life experiences and deepened spirituality.

Core Stories

Once all of the participants are sitting in the sacred circle, the storyteller says, "I wonder what our story might be today." She walks around the room to a long shelf with cubby-holes for story materials and picks up a box in the shape of a heart, a basket of wooden figurines, and a box of sand. "I think we have everything that we need. There is nothing left to do except to begin," she says as she sits down with the sand just in front of her.

She begins, “The desert can be a dangerous place. Watch as I move my hands through the desert sand. Most of the time, people do not go into the desert unless they have to. The wind blows in the desert and it makes the sands shift. People can become lost in the desert because the path changes as the sands move. There is very little water in the desert so people have to bring everything they need with them. It gets so hot in the daytime with the sun beating down and with the winds blowing the sand, people have to wear special clothing to cover up. At night it becomes really cold in the desert and people need to have special clothing to stay warm. The desert can be a dangerous place and people usually only go into the desert if they have to.” As she sets up the story in the desert, she smooths her hand across the sand. The children resist the urge to touch the story materials, knowing they will have time to work with it later if they wish. Instead, they are mesmerized by the invitation they have received.

The storyteller picks up the wooden figurines, draws a line in the sand to represent the Red Sea, and continues, “The people of God crossed through the Red Sea and escaped from Egypt. When they made it to the other side, the people of God celebrated, and Miriam led the dancing with her tambourine.” The storyteller brings the figurines across the line. One figurine bounces in the sand to represent Miriam’s dancing.

The story continues, “As they moved away from Egypt, they began a journey through the desert; they wondered which way they should go. They wondered what they should do. They wondered which ways were the best ways. God provided smoke by day to guide them, and guide provided fire by night to light their way. When the people became really thirsty, some complained and said that they wanted to go back to Egypt.

But, God provided water from a rock in the desert. The journey was really long, and multiple times, people complained and thought that they might be better off back in bondage in Egypt.” While it might seem odd to tell children about the Hebrew people yearning for the days of bondage, it is essential in the Godly Play pedagogy. Treating children as spiritual seekers, including taking them to their existential limits, is a core part of Godly Play. This empowers the children to have to grapple with their curiosity in ways children are rarely encouraged to do.

The story continues, chronicling the Hebrew people’s reception of manna and then subsequent arrival at Horeb. The storyteller says, “Eventually, the people of God looked up and saw that the mountain was covered in fire and smoke. The people were afraid to walk up to the mountain, but Moses walked up to Horeb and began to climb the mountain. It was on top of this mountain that Moses came so very close to God and God came so very close to Moses. It was on this mountain that God gave Moses tablets with the ten best ways.”³⁷³⁸

The Godly Play facilitator goes on to show and tell the listeners about what are most commonly called the Ten Commandments by opening the heart-shaped box she picked up earlier. Inside are the Ten Commandments, written on heart-shaped pieces of wood. The storyteller draws each of them out of the box and places them in the sand slowly and deliberately. The story ends with, “God gave the ten best ways to Moses.

³⁷ Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: An Imaginative Method for Nurturing the Spiritual Lives of Children*, ed. Cheryl V. Minor and Rosemary Beales, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017), 105.

³⁸ Once again, this work has been edited to closely match what was taught to the Godly Play participants at Christian Temple.

Moses gave them to the people. The people passed them along generation after generation until you came along, and they were passed to you.”

At the end of each core story, the storyteller invites participants to wonder with the following open-ended questions that allow the participants to share their explorations aloud:

I wonder which of the Ten Best Ways you like the best?
I wonder which one is most important?
I wonder which one is especially for you?
I wonder if there are any we can leave out and still have all that we need.
I wonder which of the ten best ways is most meaningful to you.
Now let’s go back again to the story. I wonder what part of the story you like best?
I wonder what part of the story is the most important?
I wonder where you are in the story or what part of the story is about you?
I wonder if there is any part of the story we can leave out and still have all the story we need?³⁹

After a time of wondering in which participants can respond to the questions above, they are invited to sit in silence as they choose what their *work* might be. Every Godly Play room is equipped with supplies to empower the children to choose whatever they need to process the story in silence. This is the work of silence. As Fred Rogers said, “Play allows us a safe distance as we work on what’s close to our hearts.”⁴⁰ This opportunity to respond is where the magic happens. In silence, participants are asked to choose their work, which can be responding with art supplies, reading a script, manipulating the story, or using a finger labyrinth. In the Christian Temple Godly Play room, participants can go

³⁹ Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: An Imaginative Method for Nurturing the Spiritual Lives of Children*, ed. Cheryl V. Minor and Rosemary Beales, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017), 122.

⁴⁰ Rogers, *You Are Special: Words of Wisdom from America’s Most Beloved Neighbor*, 59.

to mats for yoga poses and even find a previous story that piques their interest. During this time, children are working on more than just art or yoga. They are playing out their reality in a safe way. This play “contributes to creativity, the learning of languages and preparing for social roles. It seems to be everywhere because it can’t be confined to one kind of activity. Anything that can be done—even one’s work—can be done in a playful way.”⁴¹ In every session, participants receive the gift of an intentional time for a playful response, allowing the participants an opportunity to fully embrace their wonder, imagination, and curiosity.

Liturgical Action

The last type of story is a liturgical action story, which includes stories that are used in particular liturgical seasons but also stories about the sacraments and ordinances of the church. These stories acclimate children to the sights and symbols of the church throughout the year. Berryman writes, “[Children] need to meet the people who care for the liturgical objects. They need to notice, name, and value the colors and find their symbolic places in relation to each other in the church and to discover their role in worship.”⁴² This is the work of the liturgical action stories: to help children make meaning of their surroundings on any given Sunday in worship.

The Advent story in Godly Play is built during the four Sundays in Advent, preparing for the birth of Christ's child. This liturgical action story will be referenced later

⁴¹ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 52.

in this project, but it shows the intentionality of language in storytelling and the uniqueness of this particular season.

“Prophets are people who come so close to God, and God comes so close to them, that they know what is most important. They pointed the way to Bethlehem. They didn’t know exactly what was going to happen there, but they knew this was the place. Here is the hand of a prophet pointing the way to Bethlehem, showing us the way, too.

Stop. Watch. Pay attention. Something incredible is going to happen in Bethlehem.

This is the card of the Holy Family. Do you see Bethlehem on the card, and the road? The Holy Family is on the way to Bethlehem and are going with them. Here is the Mother Mary. Here is the Father Joseph. Here is the Donkey.

Mary was about to have a baby. It is very hard to walk when you are about to have a baby. Sometimes she could not take another step. Then she rode on the donkey. She rode and she walked. Joseph was with her. We hear in the Gospel today that he listened to the angel and said yes to looking after Mary. These two must have been the last people coming up the road to Bethlehem that night.

On the third Sunday in Advent we remember the shepherds who were standing in the fields around Bethlehem keeping their sheep. They were trying to stay awake so the wolves could not come and get the sheep. Suddenly there was so much light in the sky that it hurt their eyes. They were afraid. Their hearts were beating so loudly. When they could hear something besides their own hearts, they thought they heard singing in the sky! That also scared them until they heard the words of the song. The angels were singing “Don’t be afraid”. Angels often say that because it is scary to have a messenger of God come to you. The angels singing sounded something like this: ‘Don’t be afraid. We bring you tidings of great joy. Peace on earth and good will to everyone. A child is born. Go. Hurry. Run to Bethlehem to see the Child who will change everything’

On the fourth Sunday we look at the card of the wise men. This is the Sunday in Advent we remember the three kings, the Magi, the wise men. They came from far in the East, and they were so wise that people thought they were magic. We get our word magic from the name they were called in their own language, “the Magi”.

Of all the things they knew, they knew the most about the stars. They knew where each star was supposed to be at each time of year, so they could tell people when it was time to plant their crops or take a trip on the ocean, or cross the high mountain passes when the snow wasn't too deep.

Suddenly they saw a wild star. It was not on any of their star maps. It went where it wanted to go. It did not stay put. They decided to follow the wild star to see where it was going and what it wanted to show them.

They followed the star all the way to Bethlehem, but they came from so far away that they got there after the baby was born. They are always late it seems. Every year they are late. They usually don't arrive until January 6th, but we remember them anyway because, like us they too are on the way to Bethlehem.

Here is the candle of the prophets. This is the candle of the Holy Family. Here is the candle of the shepherds, Here is the candle of the wise men.

Let's enjoy the light.

Look! When you come to the mystery of Christmas, everything changes. It becomes the color of pure celebration. This is when the baby is born, the one we have been waiting for. Emmanuel was his name – a name meaning God is with us

Here is the Christ Child, here is Emmanuel, the mystery of Christmas. This is amazing, but of all the creatures there that night, perhaps the most amazed was the old cow. When the old cow came up to the feed box in the morning to eat some straw it found a baby lying in the manger. Someone had put a soft cover over the straw. The manger had become a bed, All the old cow could do was look and look at the baby with its big brown eyes.

Wait! Something is missing! I wonder what it could be? This is the Christ candle. Now, let's enjoy its light, too. Now watch. I am going to change the light.

Now I am going to change the light of the Christ candle. Look. It too is spreading out to fill up the room. As it spreads out, it gets thinner and thinner until you can't see it at all. That doesn't mean that it's gone. It only means that you can't see it. You can still feel the Christmas light. It is

filling up the room with the prophets, the Holy Family, the shepherds and the three kings. Anywhere you go, you can come close to them.”⁴³

ADVENT

The readings of Advent in their various ways invite us into the presence of God. As we listen to those voices of old, we make a courageous trek in memory. For memory in faith is not some static repetition; rather, it is an active discovery of the possibilities of hope. Those words, images, scenes, and passages that hallow our past open pathways to the mystery in our midst.⁴⁴

With the exception of Easter, it is hard to think of another season or time in the Christian calendar that elicits such wonder, curiosity, and imagination. Each year, churches around the world retell the stories leading up to the birth narrative of Jesus and gather together to hear these familiar stories told once again. These stories delve into the context of the Ancient Near East and compare that particular context to a more universal context of the contemporary moment. “Moreover, because of the cultural and commercial importance of Christmas in Western culture and beyond, it is observed by many non-Christians as well. Indeed, no other religious holiday is so widely commemorated by people who are outside of the tradition that originated it.”⁴⁵ The stories of Christmas are powerful and, as Godly Play would teach, we need time to prepare ourselves for these stories.⁴⁶

⁴³ Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: An Imaginative Method for Nurturing the Spiritual Lives of Children*, ed. Cheryl V. Minor and Rosemary Beales, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017), 51.

⁴⁴ Arthur J. Dewey, *Advent/Christmas: Interpreting the Lesson of the Church Year*, of *The Proclamation Series* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 7.

⁴⁵ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Birth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 29.

⁴⁶ Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: An Imaginative Method for Nurturing the Spiritual Lives of Children*, ed. Cheryl V. Minor and Rosemary Beales, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017), 27.

“The time for getting ready to come close to the mystery of Christmas is called “Advent.”⁴⁷ Advent is the season of preparation for Christmas, but even more, a preparation for the Incarnation to burst forth into the world. “Advent’s origins are obscure. The season seems to come from Spain or Gaul with an original Gallican fast of six weeks going back to November 11 (later called “St. Martin’s Lent”). This was gradually reduced to a five-, then a four-Sunday observance.”⁴⁸ With the known celebration that is Christmas, this work will move back and forth describing the season of Advent and Christmas together. Depth and mystery surround this time and it opens Christians to another world. In other words, it is steeped in opportunities for play. Wonder, curiosity, and imagination are mixed with nostalgia creating an openness that can’t be replicated at any other time in the Christian calendar.

Now the days are really short. It gets dark very early. It looks as if the light is just about to go out. Right at that time, when light seems to be coming to an end, we reach Advent. The year ends, and it begins again. It is time to get ready to enter the mystery of Christmas.⁴⁹

Many Christians practice a season of preparation for Easter called Lent. Easter, without a doubt, is one of the most holy and mysterious times in the life of the church. But, I want to be careful here and not allow the ending to overshadow the beginning. With the end in mind, one can theologize that, “Jesus was thus born in Bethlehem that he might die on

⁴⁷ Berryman, *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*, 28.

⁴⁸ Gerard S. Sloyan, *Proclamation 3; AIDS for Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year. Series C*, ed. Elizabeth Achtemeier (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 10.

⁴⁹ Jerome Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, vol. 2* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 31.

Calvary.”⁵⁰ But is it time to talk about death and debate substitutionary atonement at the birth of a child? No! This is a time to revel in absolute mystery and to celebrate the inconceivable miraculousness that is life and the incomprehensible act of God with us taking on flesh. Even *Godly Play* comes close to pitting Christmas against Easter. “Look, there are one, two, three, four, five, six weeks for getting ready for Easter. It is an even greater mystery than Christmas, so it takes longer to get ready to enter in.”⁵¹ Yes, Christians wouldn’t even worship on Sundays or have the message spread around the world like it did without something happening on that resurrection Sunday, but there is no end without a beginning. And it just so happens that this beginning is the most celebrated religious holiday around the world. It is recognized and celebrated around the world even amongst non-Christians.⁵² The start of the story can and should be valued without the end in sight, especially when beginning and the ending are so saturated with mystery that it is hard to tell when the beginning starts and closing ends. “The season of Advent traditionally signals a return to the beginning.” but the Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy for a reason.⁵³ Where exactly did these stories begin?

The infancy narratives found in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew are the foundation of this project, both in the undergirding philosophy and in the stories shared among the congregation. These birth accounts differ in significant ways, showing the

⁵⁰ Gerard S. Sloyan, *Proclamation 3; AIDS for Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year. Series C*, ed. Elizabeth Achtemeier (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985), 10.

⁵¹ Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 2, 30.

⁵² Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Birth*, 28.

⁵³ Dewey, *Advent/Christmas: Interpreting the Lesson of the Church Year*, 7.

need for multiple stories to create a more complete picture. The Gospel of Luke gives the most detailed account of the birth narrative which includes wondrous elements like the angels, while the Gospel of Matthew includes the later visitation of the Magi who followed the star and let a dream guide their journey. By retelling these stories again in new, intentional ways, this project aims to help our congregants deepen that playful sense of wonder, curiosity, and imagination during this time—a time that is already a thin or thinner place in Celtic Spirituality. In the chill of winter, these stories provide comfort and curiosity for their hearers. Call it nostalgia, the Spirit, or the search for meaning; they hold meaning in the lives of those who seek them out.

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan’s book, *The First Christmas*, has been formational in comparing and contrasting the two infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke’s Gospels with particular attention to their relevance for storytelling to elicit wonder, curiosity, and imagination. These two theologians point out that “we do not have a story of the first Christmas, but two,” showing the importance of multiple stories, storytellers, and perspectives to be offered in order to truly immerse a community in a narrative. Borg and Crossan conclude that the infancy narratives are parabolic overtures, saying, “It is all that follows in miniature and microcosm.”⁵⁴ These stories are windows into the entire Christian story, capturing the essence and intricacies of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Given this, the birth narratives and Advent stories are the best stories to engage with for this project to experiment with playfulness.

⁵⁴ Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Birth*, 38.

In applying this interpretive lens, the focus can turn to creatively exploring these stories for meaning, rather than focusing on their factuality. When viewed as parables, they point toward a life of mystery, prolific storytelling, and a proclivity for play. Jesus can be read in the Gospels as extremely serious, but does point toward welcoming the innocence of children. What are children if not naturally playful? Jesus' life was spent pushing against the religious systems that limited the Spirit and playfully inviting others to see all human beings as beloved children of God—even tax collectors!

The two infancy narratives found in Matthew and Luke, when viewed through a parabolic lens, will help shine a light on the wonder, curiosity, and creativity at work in the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Although many would claim these stories to be foundational for Christianity today, these narratives were being developed in the 80s or 90s of the Common Era. The early direct Pauline letters and the Gospel of Mark, which came decades before these infancy narratives, make no mention of an extraordinary birth. It is reasonable then to surmise that the birth narratives of Jesus were not developed yet and, therefore, not essential to the earliest Christian communities who established religious practice.

Matthew's Version

Matthew's version of the birth of Christ occurs in just thirty-one verses, representing a mere 2.8% of the entire Gospel. Given that it is such a small part of the gospel's entirety, one can assume that there was no emphatic meaning associated with the infancy narrative in the earliest Christian communities. This could mean a number of

things, but relevant to this project, could contribute to the idea of these stories being underdeveloped at the time of the Gospel writing.

After the genealogy, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, reassuring him that Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit and instructing him to take Mary as his wife. Joseph obeys, and they name the child Jesus, as instructed by the angel. The story then shifts to the visit of the Magi, who come from the East following a star, seeking the newborn King of the Jews. King Herod, troubled by this news, asks the Magi to report back to him after they find the child, claiming he wants to worship him. However, warned in a dream, the Magi return home by a different route.

Meanwhile, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt with Mary and the infant Jesus, as Herod intends to kill the child. They stay in Egypt until Herod's death.

The main characters in Matthew's version of the birth are two men, as Mary does not speak.⁵⁵ Joseph begins the action in chapter one, receiving the angel's foretelling of Jesus' birth, while Herod continues the action in chapter two, pursuing knowledge of the Christ child's location. The Magi play an interesting role in Matthew's version of the infancy narrative in how they rout Herod's apprehension of Jesus by going home by another way.

Luke's Version

The Infancy Narrative in the Gospel of Luke offers a complementary account to Matthew's, focusing on different aspects of Jesus' birth and early life. The narrative

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

begins with the announcement of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel appears first to Zechariah, a priest, foretelling the birth of his son, John, who will prepare the way for the coming Messiah. However, Zechariah doubts the message and is struck mute until the birth of John.

Gabriel then appears to Mary, a young woman betrothed to Joseph, announcing that she will conceive and bear a son by the Holy Spirit, whom she should name Jesus. Mary proclaiming herself as the "handmaid of the Lord," consents to this plan and immediately takes off to her cousin Elizabeth's home. When Mary greets Elizabeth, John leaps in her womb, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, recognizing Mary as the mother of her Lord.

Luke's version is unique here in capturing the jubilant voice of Mary as she sings of the defeat of the Empire through the birth of this baby. She sings:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.⁵⁶

This song is not the mild Mother Mary history would remember. Mary is fierce and prophetic. Barclay says, "There is loveliness in the Magnificat but in that loveliness there

⁵⁶ Luke 1:46b-55 (NRSV)

is dynamite.”⁵⁷ This prophetic fire would soon be tamed by the patriarchal history, but it was a fire that can never fully be quenched.

The narrative progresses with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, where there was no room for them in the inn. Jesus is laid in a manger, and nearby shepherds receive the announcement of his birth from a multitude of angels. They go to Bethlehem and find the baby, just as the angels had told them.

After eight days, Jesus is circumcised and named, fulfilling Jewish custom. Then, Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for the purification ritual. There, they encounter Simeon and Anna, who recognize Jesus as the Messiah and praise God for his arrival.

The narrative concludes with a brief mention of Jesus' childhood, emphasizing his growth and development in wisdom and favor with God and man.

Matthew and Luke in Conversation

The discrepancies between the two infancy narratives show that when these narratives were written, there was no tradition built around the birth of Jesus, and neither was there prominence to Jesus' birth by early Christians in early churches.⁵⁸ These early Christians were not interested in telling stories for their factuality; they were searching for meaning, and it is no wonder that they found meaning in the mysterious stories of Jesus that made them approach with curiosity, wonder, and imagination. Borg says,

⁵⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke, of The Daily Study Bible Series* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1956), 10.

⁵⁸ Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth*, 26

“Many of us have a childhood memory of hearing the birth stories this way. Most of us who grew up Christian took their factuality for granted when we were young children, just as people in the premodern Christian world did.”⁵⁹

The question that must be explored is how we ended up with these infancy narratives. In speaking particularly about Matthew, Joel Marcus writes:

This sort of question, of course, arises with regard to all of the miracles recounted by Matthew and the other Gospel writers, but, with regard to most of the others, scholars of an apologetic bent have an “out”; they can claim that the Gospel writers took on faith the stories they received from tradition. But if there was no tradition, the question of the way in which its creator (in this case, Matthew) understood the story he had created becomes much more complicated and interesting.⁶⁰

Although this passage is talking about Matthew with earthquakes, the same can be argued with the infancy narrative there. There may have been stories and prophecies, but there was no set tradition at the time of Matthew’s version of the infancy narrative and, therefore, no standard for storytelling. The same can be said of Luke’s version as well. Perhaps these infancy narratives were added later and included not just to add to the story of Jesus, but also to show the value of storytelling to elicit wonder, curiosity, and creativity. After all, these infancy narratives have been doing just that for almost 2,000 years.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁰ Joel Marcus, “Did Matthew Believe His Myths?,” essay, in *An Early Reader of Mark and Q* (Bristol, CT: Peters, 2016), 243.

CHAPTER THREE

CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS: CHRISTIAN TEMPLE, CHRISTIAN CHURCH, AND THE CO-PASTORS

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

This project is shaped by and implemented at the intersection of several identities and contexts. As a minister, I have journeyed through different denominational traditions and congregations, each leaving its mark on my spiritual and vocational identity. I carry with me stories of my past—spiritually, vocationally, and contextually—to join my stories with those at Christian Temple Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The intersection of personal and communal contexts shapes this experimentation with playfulness as the project shapes the contexts themselves. In this journey, there is a profound recognition of the needs for adults, myself included, to relearn the art of play and grant ourselves permission to engage with it.

Since the 1980s, the Southern Baptist Convention has been embroiled in a fundamentalist movement that has shifted the largest Protestant denomination in the world away from its historical and foundational values, including but limiting the autonomy of the local church, the priesthood of all believers, and the recognition of individual conscience. During the fundamentalist takeover, any dissenting ministers, professors, or churches that did not ascribe and affirm their particular brand of Christianity were kicked out of the SBC. In the time since the takeover began, Southern Baptists lost their diversity in thought and have aligned with white Christian nationalism

which has no room for women ministers, individuals identifying as LGBTQ+, inclusivity, diversity, or any person not willing to ascribe to certain beliefs they deem to be “orthodox.” Individual conscience be damned!

Growing up in the South as a cis-gendered, heterosexual, white, Baptist male, I experienced firsthand the tumultuous shift within the Southern Baptist Convention during the fundamentalist takeover of the late 1980s. This pivotal movement, marked by doctrinal rigidity and exclusionary practices, prompted my family’s departure and opened my worldview to broader theological horizons. As a twelve-year-old, I experienced my church split over the inclusion of women in ministry. My family chose to leave the Southern Baptists in support of women in ministry, and I have never looked back.

My Co-Pastor spouse and I were ordained in churches that are part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a denomination established in response to the fundamentalist takeover. Many of the exiled ministers, professors, and churches were a part of the nascent years of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. With its own historical baggage forged in battle with the Southern Baptists, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has naturally formed around a negative identity. An unofficial maxim among Cooperative Baptists was, “We’re not like them [the Southern Baptists].” While that was true and could be seen in the Cooperative Baptists’ embrace of historic Baptist principles, the break between the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Southern Baptist Convention was not as clean as some experienced. Today, there are still hundreds of churches that identify as “dually aligned,” in which they benefit—or suffer— from relationships with both the Southern Baptists and Cooperative Baptists.

To fully understand the converging contexts, it is necessary to understand my own history and current perspective. In 2022, I changed denominations when I was called to serve, along with my wife and Co-Pastor, at Christian Temple. As a newcomer to the church and denomination, I have the unique opportunity to view both with fresh eyes. I can bring fresh perspectives and practices from other traditions and contexts. An important observation has been the need for intentional play in both the congregational and denominational communities. Christian Temple needs permission to call what is happening playful, and as denominations decline around the United States, the Disciples of Christ need to experience playfulness to keep from clinging too tightly to what was—whether real or imagined.

In immersing myself in my new denominational identity, I observe two major differences in polity and practices. Among Baptists, each congregation determines its own practices for communion, typically gathering around the table quarterly or monthly. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) practices communion every time it gathers for worship, and in this gathering, intentionally finds a connection with the earliest of New Testament churches.⁶¹ The practice of partaking in the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis creates a type of community identity that was not present among the Baptists. This identity revolves around the community that is shaped at the table, which will be discussed below.

Secondly, in the Disciples of Christ, each church is part of a region that can offer guidance, fellowship, partnerships, and support without overstepping local church

⁶¹ D. Duane Cummins, *A Handbook for Today's Disciples: In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, Fifth (St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 2017), 36.

autonomy. Baptists typically form larger associations, pooling resources solely for missional efforts. As will be discussed in another section, the Disciples of Christ denomination would not exist without Baptists in the United States or without Baptist principles.⁶²

Within this context, my role as Co-Pastor also plays a significant part in my location. Christian Temple is our fifth church serving together and second in the roles of Co-Pastors. Our service to the church is fluidly distributed among the two of us according to our gifts. However, both of us preach each Sunday, offering two, ten-minute homilies that create a third experience at their intersection.

It is difficult to be an objective researcher and a supportive pastoral presence for congregants at the same time. The latter, of course, is also my full-time employment. Special care was taken in this project to offer some experiential and experimental differences rooted in storytelling within worship and then ask only about attendees' responses. The subject matter of playfulness as wonder, curiosity, and imagination is not a contentious issue within the congregation or denomination so there are no undue

⁶² My Baptist contextual view has been clearly displayed here. Having been baptized in a Southern Baptist Church at the age of 7 and then experiencing the forceful separation from women in ministry at the age of 12, my Baptist experiences run deep. It was at the age of 12 the my family left our familial church to find a home church that more clearly matched our values for equality. Fighting over these differences at an early age and then finding a place that also found value in fighting for equality—Fernwood Baptist Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina a church in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship greatly shaped my views. It also prepared me for all of the Baptist fighting that I was to experience as a college student, teacher, and minister. My wife and Co-Pastor married into these fights and was ordained in a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship church as well. We have both shared that the experience of finding a fit that is not a constant fight has been freeing and life-giving. That is also why having the only real pushbacks being due to our Baptist background from the regional level were so frustrating. I will end up writing about my Baptist contextual lens more than my Disciples of Christ lens because the Baptist lens is so ingrained. It shapes my experiential lens and it is worth mentioning as a major factor in my experiences within this project. With her background being rooted in multiple traditions and Mainline denominations we are a good fit for the makeup of the particular congregation which will be discussed in detail in later sections.

pressures or high stakes accompanying this type of work. The main difficulty in this work involves time management by me, the researcher, and the pastor. When writing, one thing to keep in mind when talking about the movement of Spirit in wonder, curiosity, and imagination is that my background and congregational background both create in me an understanding of Spirit which is limited but not harnessed; meaning, we share a toned-down view of Spirit in experiential expression in comparison to some more Pentecostal movements and even our own predominately Black Disciples of Christ Churches.

DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

In the annals of church history, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a testament to the enduring legacy of the Restoration Movement. Barton Stone, the revival Presbyterian evangelist, and Alexander Campbell, the former trained Presbyterian minister, met to form the Cambellite⁶³ movement that would eventually evolve into the Christian Church. Stone and Campbell and their fellow dissenters established new traditions as found their way into the newly established United States. In forging a new path, the Restoration Movement revived the centuries-old quest to restore the Early

⁶³ When looking up the correct spelling of “Campbellite,” I discovered through a Merriam-Webster entry that the term is considered “often offensive.” In a 1985 article in Truth Magazine entitled, “Why I Am Not a Campbellite,” Weldon E. Warnock makes the argument that this term is incorrect because Disciples of Christ and members of the Churches of Christ have made the distinct move to only be called Christian. It is Jesus Christ who we follow and not Alexander Campbell. I learned of this divide only in writing this project and will be mindful from this point on. It is interesting to me that Warnock takes a dig at Baptists and Lutherans in his article to pay attention to this difference. This is amusing to me since Baptists do not follow John the Baptist, rather it is the practice of immersion that originated the name.

Church or New Testament Church unencumbered by the doctrinal disputes and organizational complexities that had plagued the global Church for centuries.⁶⁴

Their vision of restoring Christianity to its New Testament roots birthed a denomination grounded in simplicity, scriptural authority, and inclusive communion practices. It was disagreement and an honoring of both founders' wishes that would lead to the "Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)" joined title.⁶⁵ Having joined in communion with Presbyterians on the frontier and then with an actual Baptist Association, Barton and Stone laid the groundwork for a church movement that recognized Christ as the head of the church, viewed the Bible as the sole authority—emphasizing the New Testament—practiced baptism by immersion, celebrated communion weekly, incorporated a polity that has little difference between clergy and laity, and recognized all Christians in union with one another.⁶⁶

The Search for the Early Church

The Disciples of Christ is a denomination built upon powerful stories. In particular, the Restoration Movement tells the story of an original church with certain practices. As any one of the epistles in the New Testament will attest, there was not one monolithic theology or ecclesiology in the early church period. In fact, most of the New Testament epistles address conflict that arises over the perceived right way of doing

⁶⁴ It can be argued that every denominational split or new denomination comes out of a desire to "get back" to New Testament practices and beliefs.

⁶⁵ D. Duane Cummins, *A Handbook for Today's Disciples: In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, Fifth (St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 2017), 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

things. Pauline works would commend one church for leading in a certain way and another church for leading in a different way. These were extremely contextual and it is helpful to read them in the context of offering advice to one particular congregation rather than a mythical Early Church.

Disagreements about practice and acceptance were evident throughout early churches, but are rarely acknowledged in modern theological reflection such as that which birthed the Restoration Movement. The singular early church narrative is a powerful myth that is still influential today, but it is a false myth. These early churches were figuring out practices and acceptance like the early frontier American churches. Both were dealing with questions of land ownership and what to do with the people who called these lands home for many years, as was often the case in early Christianity and always the case in early American Christianity.

There have been many stories of movements to restore or plant churches that mirror this mythical, monolithic “early church.” The impulse for a restorative movement is one that is birthed from a place of golden-aged thinking. “Newspaper columnist Franklin Pierce Adams, who himself was writing during the roaring 20s, once remarked, ‘Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory.’” This is not included as a critique but rather a cautionary tale to show the need for my own tradition to continue evolving with playfulness.

Calling upon restoring early church practices and beliefs can be valuable, but we must first acknowledge that history is not the singular story that our memory would have us believe. It also shows splits and disagreements despite our perception of a monolithic

category. Restoring something to a past version of itself differs from evolving and moving where the Spirit leads in the present. Although the two of us have experienced some institutional gatekeeping, it revolved around a misunderstanding of Baptist backgrounds and a desire to continue to live into the justice-minded movements the denomination began in earnest in the 1950s and 1960s among predominately Black and predominately white congregations.

The Design

It was 1968, one of the most treacherous yet formative years in the history of the United States, that saw the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) formally merge to create a denomination.⁶⁷ Amidst the injustice and turmoil of the Civil Rights Era, Black and white Campbellite congregations joined to form a unified body, transcending racial barriers and modeling the vision of a beloved community. Black Christian Churches led to the merger in the midst of desegregation efforts nationwide by expressing a desire to join together for mutual benefit.⁶⁸ Despite this, many white leaders today still claim that the formation was due to a select number of white ministers and efforts of more progressive-minded churches; the Black Christian Churches had more agency than recalled in the story, and the white savior complex must be critiqued.⁶⁹ **[SAY MORE]**

⁶⁷ Sandhya R. Jha, *Room at the Table: The Struggle for Unity and Equality in Disciple's History* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009), 103.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁶⁹ D. Duane Cummins, *A Handbook for Today's Disciples: In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Fifth* (St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 2017), 14.

Contemporary Disciples

The early days of the Disciples of Christ required grit and rigidity. However, the stick-to-it-iveness that developed among those who would claim the tradition left little room for play. When Jim Jones was ordained by the Disciples of Christ in 1964, few could have predicted his impact on the movement. Attracted to the movement for its tolerance and the autonomy granted to local churches, Jones used his platform as an ordained minister to build a cult following, eventually leading to a mass murder-suicide responsible for the lives of over 900 people.⁷⁰ Disciples' General Counsel at the time, Wade Rubick said, "Every church has strange bedfellows. We just have to have one stranger than others." Denominational leaders pledged to "err on the side of inclusivity," while simultaneously offering to revisit policies and procedures for seeking ordination with the Disciples of Christ.⁷¹ When a denomination has revival ministers in its DNA along with stories of a narcissist cult leader, it certainly paves the way for good stories.

The Disciples of Christ can also claim Fred Craddock, the master storyteller and preacher, as well as William Barber III, the storytelling justice advocate who most resembles a present-day Martin Luther King, Jr.⁷²

⁷⁰ George Vecsey, "Parent Church Is Chagrined By Evolution of Jones's Cult," *The New York City*, November 29, 1978, sec. A, 16.

⁷¹ The New York Times article is absolutely fascinating. After having the Disciples of Christ name loosely attached to a mass suicide by a cult leader, their response was "Every church has strange bedfellows. We just happened to have one stranger than others." They stood firm in saying that they would still err on the side of inclusivity. It is interesting to me that the gatekeeping was difficult for two ministers identified with the "B-word" (Baptist) and yet an extremely charismatic minister with a Pentecostal background with multiple reports made was welcomed quickly into the fold. I don't often compare myself with Jim Jones, but something seems amiss here.

⁷² It just so happens the Rev. William Barber's uncle is a member of Christian Temple.

While studying the Disciples of Christ, the names Stone and Campbell can be viewed repeatedly from the Disciples' early history. But, if one reads any documentation of the Disciples between the years 1890 and 1930, the name Peter Ainslie will appear with great frequency.⁷³ The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions is said to be the unofficial birthplace of the interfaith movement. Every movement needs a leader, and Dr. Ainslie was central to introducing the Disciples of Christ to the interfaith movement at the turn of the century, paving the way for a the 20th century to be defined by progress. Peter Ainslie was honored to represent all United States Protestant denominations in the 1910 World Conference on Faith and Order and just about every ecumenical national and international council around at that time.⁷⁴ Peter Ainslie was the founding pastor of Christian Temple and served the congregation for over twenty years. This church was the only congregation he formally pastored and his interfaith and racial reconciliation work happened right in the heart of Baltimore. That is quite a legacy, and many stories are worth telling about the roots of the Christian Temple.

CHRISTIAN TEMPLE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

Nestled into the line between Baltimore City and Baltimore County on the corner of Edmondson Avenue and Academy Road sits Christian Temple Church. Originally located in downtown Baltimore, Christian Temple got its name from its architecture that

⁷³ D. Duane Cummins, *A Handbook for Today's Disciples: In the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, Fifth (St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 2017), 47.

⁷⁴ Biographical sketch of Peter Ainslie III, accessed March 4, 2024, https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/wmoore/tnlpb/AINSLIE.HTM.

resembled a Corinthian temple. Today, it serves as a gathering place for individuals and families from downtown Baltimore to the surrounding counties.⁷⁵

When the congregation moved to the county, the Corinthian temple architecture was left behind for a more modest brick structure that matched the traditional church buildings of the 50s(?). Until 2008, the church Sanctuary featured a center aisle with two equal sets of pews surrounding that aisle. The choir sang in a split-nave and everything was orderly. In 2008, things changed. In a congregation-led project by some long-time elders of the church, there was an intentional process entered that allowed the church family to dream and to create a building that fit the current needs. The hallway entrances were left behind for a more modern welcome area with plenty of light, an open floor plan, and clear main entrance that was ADA-compliant. The new welcome is beautiful but unassuming and opens into a large room called, “The Gathering.”

Before the project, the Chapel area matched the Sanctuary with pews and a center aisle leading up to a full-sized baptismal pool. Very few could gather in the Chapel for baptisms. A new baptismal pool was placed in the Sanctuary, and a new orientation was set up to match the more contemporary feel of the space. The Sanctuary’s traditional design was turned to the side at an angle. The center aisle now moves directly toward the table, but the pews surrounding it are asymmetrical. The choir loft is now open and almost spills out into the pews in the congregational area. Changing the orientation,

⁷⁵ There isn’t a church history book published by a historian written about Christian Temple Church, but in writing this stories shared have made some questions well up to the surface. Why did Christian Temple leave the City of Baltimore to move out to the county line and give their church building to a Black Disciples of Christ church? Was this the typical white flight of the 50s and 60s? Even so, this congregation is becoming more and more multi-cultural and matching the diverse neighborhood surrounding the church campus.

adding the baptismal, installing new electronics including a screen, removing some of the pews and rearranging all of the pews, led the Sanctuary to seat fewer people and created a sense of conflict in the congregation at the time. Their playfulness with the space paid off and today's worshippers are gifted with a beautiful space. The upgrades from 2008 gave Christian Temple an opportunity to capitalize more on the room's beautiful acoustics, make seating more inclusive, and offer a less hierarchical feel to the whole sanctuary. This willingness to change the most sacred spaces within the church building says a lot about the congregation's willingness to experiment and resist the standard way of operating.

In the title of this work, I used the phrase "cultivating a playful congregation," very intentionally. This is already a playful community and I truly feel that one of my roles here is to tend that playfulness and cultivate it to continue to grow and blossom. The people gathered at Christian Temple are products of an area that has been so steeped in Catholic tradition. With Baltimore as the home to the first Catholic Archdiocese in the United States, it makes sense that Catholic practices and traditions are always somehow in the background. As one guest proclaimer shared, there is something about that background that opens spiritual receptiveness and possibilities. That is a glowing positive. The rigidity of traditional Catholic practices is also an influence. Sometimes it is hard for this congregation to differentiate what is an autonomous local church practice, a practice common to the Disciples of Christ, and what is a practice that the area's Catholicism has influenced. That can be difficult at times but what is abundantly clear is people find safety, openness, and camaraderie in this congregation. At its best, it acts

playfully and finds the simple enjoyment of being in the company of one another. It is a congregation that has minor scuffles but has stuck together through the large divisive moments. As an open and affirming congregation that has had ministry leaders openly identifying as LGBTQ+ for almost three decades, it seems to me that this group has learned that inclusion is the Gospel and although the knee-jerk reaction is often a clinging mentality, further reflection leads to openness and life. This group of saints is teaching me over and over again how to play and I couldn't be more grateful.

The foundation set by Dr. Peter Ainslie has been one of inclusion and outreach. That is in the very DNA of this church. The congregation led ecumenical movements and interfaith dialogue before those were even terms known in mainstream Christianity. This church has benefitted from steady leadership from only 5 pastors in its ministry for over a century before the hiring of their current co-pastors. There is something about those lengthy tenures that has kept the congregation from getting caught up in drama and choosing paths of division that aren't following the social gospel. Although there is a pressure there that feels daunting at times to be in this role for decades, there is also a freedom in knowing that this church has been through a century of societal turmoil and has not only survived but thrived. This is a congregation that has faced every challenge and remained playful and open to the possibilities. Cultivating and learning from playfulness is the proper way to describe leadership with these valued children of God.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PROJECT

CULTIVATING

The congregation of Christian Temple is already a playful group of people. They have experienced a camaraderie that goes beyond gathering to worship the same God or to follow in the steps of Jesus. This group of people recognizes the God-breathed life in every human being and gathers on Sundays and beyond just to celebrate life together. In all of the differences of opinion and diversity of experience, this group loves to gather simply as human beings who recognize their need for community. As said previously, there is no need to teach this group how to be playful, this project sought to cultivate playfulness and allow congregants to write their own playful permission slips.⁷⁶ As Godly Play states, “Even if it is very serious to get ready to come close to the mystery of Christmas, you can’t be serious all of the time as you get ready.”⁷⁷

The former pastor and his ordained and theologically educated spouse served as unofficial co-pastors at Christian Temple. They brought with them a flare for the arts and dramatic presentations. One of their endeavors in this area was creating a walk-through live nativity scene called “Journey to Bethlehem.” Congregants often call this “Journey” for short. Though an official start date for this endeavor is unavailable, Journey has been

⁷⁶ Although this phrase is metaphorical, it would be a wonderful exercise borrowed from Rob Bell for congregants to physically write themselves a permission slip. I think back to the eternal childhood question, “Can I go play?” Yes! Go Play!

⁷⁷ Jerome Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, vol. 3 (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 51.

a staple at Christian Temple for over a decade. Even during the pandemic, Christian Temple rallied and created a Journey to Bethlehem video experience complete with the same ornery tax collector, angelic messenger, and live animals at the stable. After multiple area churches saw what was happening at Christian Temple, they created their own live nativity presentations. However, as of Christmas 2024, only one other area live nativity made it through the pandemic.

Around Christian Temple, Journey has become a drain on energy for those who help out.⁷⁸ As Co-Pastors, having only experienced one other Christmas and Journey to Bethlehem, we recognized that volunteer energy for this endeavor was low but that it was a sacred activity to a large group of people. This event needed help, and it felt like it carried enough weight to anchor a project. We received a grant earlier in the year to study play as a congregation, and it allowed us to purchase a full Godly Play set and training for volunteers. Using the grant, we helped the congregation open to a posture of playfulness when it came to considering changes for Journey: Why not open our big event for new possibilities? Journey to Bethlehem and Godly Play helped to guide the conversation, but the overarching question was and continues to be: how can we be playful in worship?

Although there was a natural energy and excitement the first year of a new pastorate brings that helped things remain playful, there was also a strong sense of nostalgia that was an undercurrent. Not all activities had returned since the pandemic

⁷⁸ To be clear here, meaning and energy are different beasts. This experience was extremely meaningful to a number of people within and outside of the church. However, it was a lot of work, accounting for 75+ volunteer hours for set up and break down.

began. It was fairly clear that not all activities needed to return. There was a large number of children who were ready for something new. There were a large number of senior adults who were open to some change but had experienced quite a lot in moving from a pastorate to co-pastorate, moving from one sermon to two homilies in worship, moving from a pastor with grown children to spouses with a six-year-old, moving from a music director who had served the congregation for 26 years to a younger music director who would start on the first Sunday of Advent, and, most importantly, moving from a strong base of lengthy adult leadership to experiencing 12 funerals, many for those strong leaders. There was a heaviness below that excitement and we all needed to experience some wonder, curiosity, and new expressions of our imaginations.

The Journey to Bethlehem team gathered, the staff gathered, and the Co-Pastors gathered to dream and ask some questions. What does our congregation need in this time? How can we help make the experiences of Advent more of a journey through the season? What are our opportunities for play? In this season of birth, dreams, stars, shepherds, mystery, and lights how can we elicit wonder, curiosity, and imagination throughout? In a season steeped in nostalgia, how can we invite people to do something they normally wouldn't do? A possible answer to all of these questions was a strong focus on story. With the stories of Advent and Christmas already holding so much power, our goal was to help intersect each individual congregant with these stories and help them find wonder, curiosity, and imagination in the ways that their own personal stories carry meaning and

must be valued. We extended the invitation far and wide to “Join the Story!”⁷⁹ and for everybody to hold their own stories in the light.

THRESHOLD

The first thing people experience when they enter the church building on a Sunday morning—really any time the building is entered—is an area called The Gathering. This beautiful space, which is the primary entrance of the church building, provides a way to enter the story of Advent from the moment people are inside. In meeting with the staff and Journey to Bethlehem team, we invited the group to reflect on the question: how can we help congregants enter the story the moment they enter the building? In Godly Play terms, how can we create an intentional threshold of meaning?

With the exception of the pandemic years, Journey to Bethlehem has always been set up on a Friday night and Saturday morning. It is quite an undertaking and requires around 20 volunteers for setup and about 40 volunteers overall. Besides the stable with the live animals, the thing that makes this experience quite incredible is what is called “the Marketplace.” The Marketplace for Journey takes the most time and effort as The Gathering is transformed into a beautiful space that models a Palestinian market. The night of Journey booths are filled with a bread baker/seller, a spice merchant, a basket weaver, a nut salesperson, a children’s game area, and a rope-making station.

In thinking about the worship experience, we pondered together about the actual start of worship. When does worship actually begin? Does it begin in the online Sunday

⁷⁹ See Appendix 6

School class called “The Forum?” Does it begin when someone enters the building or turns on the live stream? Does it begin with the first interaction with another human being? Does it begin in the silence? Does it begin with the first notes of the prelude instrument? With the answer seemingly being “yes” to all of those questions, the need for a physical threshold to begin the story became even more apparent. With the work of all of the planners and volunteers, for the first time ever, the Journey to Bethlehem Marketplace was set up at the very beginning of Advent. When congregants entered the building on that first Sunday, they were greeted with a new threshold moment never experienced before. Our welcome table was moved directly in front of the doors and as part of their welcome, our greeters ushered people up the ramp into the marketplace.

With that motion upward, a story began. Congregants walked in the marketplace to find one or two storytellers in period clothing sharing a short monologue or dialogue.⁸⁰ This short vignette set the stage thematically and also invited congregants to listen for other parts of the story on that particular Sunday. Once congregants entered through the threshold of the Marketplace, the Sanctuary was adorned in the same beautiful fashion one might find usually on the second Sunday of Advent and beyond. Together with the worship team, we decided that the Hanging of the Greens service had been stale and that people really wanted to see the nostalgic Christmas decorations as soon as possible. Through playing with the liturgy, we were able to reclaim the first Sunday of Advent. The usual practice of almost losing the whole first Sunday of Advent to discuss the meaning

⁸⁰ See Appendix 7

behind the decorations was replaced with a very familiar liturgy, that looked the same in the order of worship but functioned in a completely different manner.⁸¹

The traditional approach to lighting the candles in the Advent Wreath was to ask newer members or families to do a short reading and then light a candle leading a congregational response. Playing with this idea, we invited leaders who had joined the church many years ago who were trained in the Godly Play style of storytelling to read the exact script from Godly Play for each Advent Sunday. As referenced in Chapter 2 of this project, the Advent story builds each Sunday and reminds the congregation where they have been along the journey. There wasn't a full explanation, but children who had participated in Godly Play created larger story boards that built a visual story to go along with the script.⁸² There is power in this story repeating certain elements every week and that powerful story led us all the way to Christmas Eve. This part of the liturgy was followed by a Call to Worship that remained the same each week, changing one word that corresponded with the particular Sunday.

Leader: Darkness still grows

People: But the light is gathering

Leader: Despair is weighing on our hearts

People: But the moment is turning

Leader: **Joy** is slipping through

People: The angels and shepherds are stirring

Leader: The stories are being rewritten

⁸¹ This was quite surprising, nobody on our staff or our worship team heard any negative feedback about leaving out the Hanging of the Greens service. Most simply didn't even notice that it didn't take place. This was a real win and a recognition that we all moved in a fitting direction.

⁸² See Appendix 8

People: Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus⁸³

During the children's moment which happened in front of the congregation every week, different congregants were invited to tell a story of a meaningful Advent or Christmas moment in their life.⁸⁴ One congregant in particular had children memorized with a story of waking up to find spiders had taken over the family Christmas Tree.⁸⁵ Although this was a story particularly for children, the whole congregation experienced this story and didn't mind one bit that our service ran over almost 15 minutes that Sunday. Those stories shared, even a playful memory of the Christmas spiders, were powerful.

In our new music director's interview, he was asked to bring a piece to teach to the choir during rehearsal.⁸⁶ Somehow, this miraculous musician pulled off teaching the choir new anthems almost every Sunday including an extremely playful and difficult piece called, "A Bluegrass Magnificat."⁸⁷ Our choir performed this in the interview and then performed it for the whole congregation on the third Sunday of Advent—the Sunday

⁸³ This Call to Worship was written by Rev. Katie Callaway and was used in worship for the Third Sunday of Advent. The word Joy is highlighted in bold print to show the particular Sunday.

⁸⁴ Living into this playful mentality the Children's Moment was renamed, "A Story for All Ages" by the Vice Moderator of our congregation. We have continued to live into the importance of inclusive storytelling and this is a good example of a grassroots movement springing forth from the congregation in response to our playful Advent.

⁸⁵ See Appendix 4 - One response mentions this exact story.

⁸⁶ Looking back, this was a particularly stressful time in the music department. With the music director of 26 years retiring in October with a search happening in his final months at the church culminating in a mid-November interview, it is absolutely amazing that the right person who is playful enough for this congregation came along. In another Christmas miracle, his first Sunday was actually the first Sunday of Advent.

⁸⁷ A Bluegrass Magnificat
(My Soul Magnifies the Lord from "Angel Band")
Tim Sharp & Timothy Michael Powell - Gentry Publications

of Joy. This mixture of familiar and brand new songs that told a story were certainly memorable and meaningful.⁸⁸

When Katie and I became the Co-Pastors of Christian Temple, we brought with us a practice that we found to be particularly meaningful and mysterious to the two of us. The Covid-19 pandemic starting in March of 2020 pushed most congregations to go completely virtual. In rethinking our practices, we moved from each preaching a sermon every other week to two, 10-minute homilies with a musical break in between. We found this to be better for congregational attention and it allowed for a third thing to happen when curiosity, imagination, and wonder were engaged to find the links and differences between the two. During this Advent season, we each focused on storytelling and either told a lengthy story as the homily or began both our homilies with a story. The congregation responded well to this in the project and it added to the overall focus on storytelling.⁸⁹ In the tradition of Disciple of Christ minister Fred Craddock, preaching as storytelling lends so well to the biblical material because it began in the form of a story.⁹⁰ We simply focused on adding more to this narrative preaching moment.

The familiar liturgy includes a hymn of meditation after the second homily. This is usually a quieter hymn that connects to the overall theme of the service and provides a moment of contemplation following the times of speaking. The two verses sung here allowed congregants the chance to sing a familiar carol in a contemplative manner. This is followed by a responsive invitation that leads into communion.

⁸⁸ See Appendix 4

⁸⁹ See Appendix 4

⁹⁰ 20 Craddock preaching

Leader: We turn to a time of thanksgiving.
We turn to a time of offering.
We turn to a time of communion.
People: All are welcome here!⁹¹

Congregants are then invited to stand in body or spirit to sing a Doxology that has been sung for many Advent seasons at Christian Temple.

“What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man, I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.”⁹²

This mix of familiar and playful story elements culminated at the communion table. With Disciples of Christ practicing communion every Sunday and making it the center of worship, the Words of Institution are particularly important. During the Advent season, Katie Callaway wrote words that summarized the theme of the Sunday worship and invited each of us to participate in the story. These were the Words of Institution for Joy Sunday:

Katie: Today, we embrace the essence of joy, knowing that even amidst the struggles, we find reasons to sing, to rejoice, and to lift our voices in harmony. Join us as we partake in this sacred communion, celebrating the victories of justice and holding fast to the hope that sustains us.

John: At this table, we recall the essence of joy—joy that springs forth not only from the promise of Christ's birth but also from the victories of justice that prompt us to sing melodies of triumph. Joy that is palpable around the table. Joy that certainly doesn't erase the sorrow and grief around the table, but embraces it.⁹³

⁹¹ Written by John Callaway for the Christian Temple Order of Worship beginning in January of 2023.

⁹² https://hymnary.org/text/what_i_give_him_poor_as_i_am

⁹³ Words of Institution for Joy Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2023 by Rev. Katie Callaway.

Katie: We remember how Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, saying, "This is my body, the bread of life."

John: Likewise, after supper, he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." Let us partake of this bread and cup, not just in remembrance but in the spirit of joy that uplifts our souls.

The familiar liturgy continued after communion with a passing of the peace, a closing hymn, and a pastoral benediction. And then, some magic took place. Having advertised about joining the story and clearly focusing on storytelling, Brandi Carlile's hit song, "The Story" was played to end every single Sunday morning worship. The first week, I introduced the song and played it on acoustic guitar with a pedal on a cajon. It was one person singing the words aloud that had been printed in the order of worship. Every week, the song grew. The second Sunday of Advent it was performed by 3 people with electric guitar and bass as instrumentation. On the Third Sunday of Advent this song grew to include piano, percussion, and the Chancel Choir singing on the choruses. On the Fourth Sunday of Advent the congregation witnessed the song take flight as they all sang along. Many wondered at first how a seemingly secular song that isn't about Christmas would fit in the service,⁹⁴ but after the first lines were sung, the experience of wonder began:

All of these lines across my face
Tell you the story of who I am
So many stories of where I've been
And how I got to where I am
But these stories don't mean anything
When you've got no one to tell them to

⁹⁴ See Appendix 4

It's true, I was made for you⁹⁵

Congregants made a point each week to share how meaningful that song was and how they experienced it in different ways every time they heard it. There is nothing quite like hearing an older widow walk over to share how meaningful a Brandi Carlile song was to her in worship. This song did something to all of the performers—myself included—and was an unexplainable experience for many in the congregation. This song carried us all the way to Epiphany Sunday.

There was particular care given in planning worship to provide a familiar experience, helped the congregation enter the story, moved the congregation to value their own stories, and was just different enough to continue piquing their interest.

The phrase “worship and beyond” was used in the proposal for this project as a way to try and capture the other elements that didn’t take place within Sunday morning liturgy. Our main adult Sunday School group met during the entire Advent season and studied the book, *The First Advent in Palestine*.⁹⁶ This was particularly timely with the news covering the bombs reigning over Palestine following the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack. We all wondered together how things could be so incredibly messed up and how the incarnation of God might be valued in the midst of such awful conflict. Playfulness was needed to imagine a world where conflict like this does not exist.

Perhaps the most playful moment in the entire season took place during the Christmas Eve Service. With Christmas Eve actually falling on the Fourth Sunday of

⁹⁵ See Appendix 2

⁹⁶ See Appendix 4

Advent, we felt it was important to change the liturgy entirely that evening since it had been a carbon copy of a Sunday morning worship for many years. We didn't experience any pushback in creating a service that was based upon storytelling and functioned like a traditional Lessons and Carols service. People rarely remember the words spoken on holy nights like this so we thought it best just to let the story tell itself. It was in this service that the Godly Play Advent script was read one last time. The children were up front and the Godly Play storyboards were used in addition to the ones created by the children.⁹⁷ Katie was reading the Godly Play Advent script: "Suddenly there was so much light in the sky that it hurt their eyes. They were afraid. Their hearts were beating so loudly. When they could hear something besides their own hearts, they thought they heard singing in the sky!"⁹⁸ But that is not exactly what came out of her mouth.

On Christmas Eve of all services, with a full Sanctuary complete with extra chairs brought in, and what felt like 20 rambunctious children sitting on the platform, Katie said, "Their hearts were beating so loudly. When they could hear something besides their own *farts*..." Katie quickly said, "hearts," but laughter filled the air. The congregation all giggled and belly-laughed with pure delight. The experience only became funnier as Katie tried to continue with the story and was so absolutely tickled that she couldn't do it. There had to be at least 2 minutes of the most pure, playful laughter.⁹⁹ It will go down in

⁹⁷ See Appendix 8

⁹⁸ Jerome Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play, vol. 3* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 60.

⁹⁹ It is absolutely worth your time to click this link: <https://www.youtube.com/live/DPiOf5bVeZs?feature=shared&t=1688>.

history as one of the best stories ever told at Christian Temple. Our Advent and Christmas season culminated in playfulness.

Design

A group of 25 congregants were asked to participate specifically in this project to share their feedback about the playfulness experienced during Advent to Epiphany. These congregants were selected as individuals who would be attending worship regularly, represented a broad age group within the church, and an equal amount of congregants identifying as male and female. About 15 people responded to the first survey and signed their consent form to participate.

I offered the survey online first and their results were not shared with any other participants. This document explained a bit about the project and why their consent was needed and then asked one question: “What elements in our worship currently, if any, incite wonder, curiosity, and imagination? And how?” Their responses can be viewed in Appendix 3, but it was abundantly clear this group was already experiencing playfulness in the two homily approach and music selections.¹⁰⁰ Having helped the group narrow their focus, they experienced these times of worship individually. After Epiphany, another survey was given to the study group individually that included two open-ended questions and a full Likert Scale response section.¹⁰¹ The opened ended questions provided the most helpful feedback and allowed congregants a true chance to respond twice.

¹⁰⁰ See Appendix 3

¹⁰¹ See Appendix 1

At the beginning before the Likert Scale: What new worship elements in the Advent season, if any, elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination? And how?

At the end after the Likert Scale:

If you did feel engaged to the elements incorporated in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, which elements elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination?

Please list all elements that apply.

(Type N/A if not applicable)

Once the survey was returned, the sample group was asked to spend 30 minutes together with me in a Zoom interview. All this interview did was say, you responded this way to the survey, is there anything you would like to add?

With only having 15 people respond in the sample group, I felt it best to open the final survey up to the entire congregation to give everybody an opportunity to share. This survey link ran for at least two weeks in our weekly newsletter and 6 people responded to that part of the survey. I did not ask for an interview without knowing how many people would participate.

Results

The results show that participants clearly experienced playfulness in the storytelling and shared some experiences of wonder, curiosity, and imagination. Through the open-ended questions and the interviews, it did become clear that the worship experience was being viewed as an overall experience and that it was hard to distinguish which particular elements elicited those feelings. Through the interviews, it became abundantly clear that people responded to the storytelling elements by tying their own

experiences two them. In other words, this focus helped them think about their own stories and find glimmers of intersection in the worship experience.

Through the interviews it was discovered that congregants had many different experiences that elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination. Everything from sitting in the Marketplace and finding silence to the repetition of the last song was shared as being meaningful. People mentioned the experience of walking in the door and seeing the Journey to Bethlehem Marketplace automatically putting them in a different headspace. They shared that they learned new things in the traditional stories that they had never noticed before. There certainly could be a certain amount of wanting to please the pastor/researcher, but people shared that the homilies were particularly meaningful in this time and helped them find ways to think about their own stories. One congregant connected the Advent exploration in wonder, curiosity, and imagination to thoughts about God and shared, “I always believed God is something you can’t completely define and understand on your own. I’d rather be amazed at something unexpected or be sent thinking about something that might not have a final conclusion.”

In reading through notes on interviews and Appendix 4 and Appendix 5, it is clear that something meaningful happened to our congregants during the Advent season. There was a resounding yes! With something as ethereal as wonder, curiosity, and imagination, I learned that one cannot fully capture another person’s experience. A project like this can only set the stage and then witness what is shared. Yes, storytelling did help elicit those experiences, but how much was the allure of Advent and Christmas and how much were the new elements providing those experiences remains to be seen. In this project, I

learned that people are going to always resonate with something when it sparks a wonder within their own story. Providing those opportunities are meaningful and will be in the future.

Overall, this has shown to be a project that is less likely to be quantitative and more likely to be a qualitative experiential journey. These interviews and surveys are goldmines for pastoral ministry in that they share congregants' feelings toward multiple experiences and responses to their own interactions with worship in general. The learning will certainly continue long beyond the Advent through Epiphany journey. There were things gleaned that will help in the coming seasons of the Church Year and things that will be useful throughout our pastoral ministry here. This also simply helped our congregation to talk about story more and the value thereof. In true Fred Rogers style, this will be a lengthy learning and will need to continue to be an intentional focus over a long period of time.

The process unfolds over multiple episodes—a deliberate choice, says Bill Isler. After airing single half-hour programs for several years, Rogers “eventually learned that it takes more time to work through problems and ideas. In the real world, problems don’t get solved in half an hour, and he wanted viewers to see that. So in 1979, he started doing those five-episode theme weeks.”¹⁰²

So we continue to share in wonder, curiosity and imagination through storytelling.

¹⁰² Joanne Rogers, Gregg Behr, and Ryan Rydzewski, *When You Wonder, You’re Learning: Mister Rogers’ Enduring Lessons for Raising Creative, Curious, Caring Kids* (New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2023), 112.

LEARNING AND DOING

From the project, we have learned that our congregation will benefit experientially from more storytelling. This helps connect others to the deeper experiences of real life. This has also been shown here to help congregants value their own stories. We learned that moments of silence are not just beneficial but are needed. Congregants need a chance to think and connect what they just experienced to wonder, curiosity, and imagination. Providing that opportunity will help to cultivate playfulness. We learned that there are great benefits to shifting, tweaking, and playing with the liturgy in worship especially when a new experience can be offered in a way that is still familiar. Change is good but providing a change that only disrupts when necessary is also beneficial. One congregant has been quick to share that in conversation they heard a person respond, “John and Katie haven’t really changed anything. We are just moving along like we always have.” Almost everything in the Advent experience at Christian Temple has been changed or tweaked in some way as expressed in this project. We also learned that more education is needed when changing something in a big way. If you want congregants to experience something different in their familiar place of safety, one must educate to prepare for the threshold of difference. These learnings are going to continue to unfold and I look forward to the next Advent season when our congregants share their wonder, curiosity, and imaginations now based upon a nostalgic feeling from the year before. This project will continue to gift new glimmers of learning.

CHANGES

There is an argument to be made that a focus on one single element would bring about more quantitative data. If I was attempting to only see the effect of one story told I would change the way the project was established. Our goal in this Advent season though was to saturate the entire experience with the story and see what happens. This did make it extremely difficult to pin down one single element's effectiveness but it did provide the overall experience we were looking for. Instead of sharing ways to cultivate a playful congregation, I would probably shift the entire project to simply providing an experience and opening multiple sharing opportunities for congregants to express the meaning they gleaned. After all, that is basically what I did for myself in this project.

The main change that might need to be made to garner more feedback would be to change the timing. It was incredibly difficult to speak to people about playfulness in an overall season. We almost needed town hall sessions or interviews after each and every Sunday worship experience, but that might also hinder the learning and take energy away from congregants in an already busy period of time. Maybe unstructured fellowships with a few table prompts for conversation would help, but it also wouldn't provide qualitative project data. It could also be possible that we need a experiential worship talkback. Many pastors practice a sermon talkback session where congregants can share the things that welled up in their beings. It is also an easy place for people to express their dissatisfaction in a public setting. I wonder if an overall congregational worship experience sharing could be helpful instead of the traditional talkback.

If I could change one single element it would be to spend more time preparing congregants to respond and participate. I did talk about this with multiple people before the project and shared from the pulpit that I would be doing this project and some could expect a survey of their experiences. Still, the participation was limited. I know now that completely new experiences like that are not well-attended at first in this congregation. Every new program has started small and grown, even with lots of advertising and pastoral energy. I wonder if a second project during another Advent might glean more learning and more participation.

ACTION

We will leave this project with energy and new understandings. We will also leave this project with a more overarching view of the value of story and the need to continue to provide playful experiences that elicit wonder, curiosity, and imagination. There were enough responses that leave us with the feeling that a 30,000 foot view of this particular experience was beneficial and will continue to be. So we go from here continue to play, continue to provide space for wonder, continuing to follow our curiosity, and creating action for our imagination to explore. We will continue to tweak, change, and educate remembering that things are received best when providing something familiar. A good example of that happened in the Easter season in the same liturgical year. Using the education elements available we prepared the congregation to sing newly written lyrics for the familiar Fanny Crosby hymn, “To God Be the Glory!”

1 To God be the glory, great things hath been done!
So loved God the world that God gifted our Son,
who gave all his life resurrection begins,
and opened the tombstone, no longer trapped in.

Refrain:

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear Christ's voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice!
Oh, worship Creator, the Spirit, the Son,
and give God the glory, great things hath been done.

2 O joyous redemption, the model of love,
in every season the promise of God;
a grace-filled inclusion will show who believes,
the actions of Jesus, our calling received. [Refrain]

3 Great things he hath taught us, great things he hath done,
and great our rejoicing in Jesus the Son;
but purer, and higher, and greater will be
our wonder, our living, when Jesus we see. [Refrain]

The congregation sang these new lyrics with joy. The new lyrics fit our congregation's progressive theology and helped us all imagine other hymns that could use a refresh.

So we go on in wonder, curiosity, and imagination. As Fred Rogers would say, "And no matter what game you play, you can be yourself. And that's all you ever have to be. You are you, and that's enough for anybody. And knowing that can give you such a good feeling."¹⁰³ In other words, keep cultivating the playfulness within.

¹⁰³ 204 wonder

APPENDIX

Appendix 1

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED TO PITTSBURGH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IRB COMMITTEE

To be posed before Advent:

What elements in our worship currently, if any, incite wonder, curiosity, and imagination? And how?

To be posed after Epiphany:

What new worship elements in the Advent season, if any, elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination? And how?

The survey questions will be:

1. How strongly do you feel that the worship services during Advent encourage a sense of wonder?
•Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree
2. To what extent did the Advent season at Christian Temple inspire your curiosity about the deeper meanings of the biblical narratives?
•Not at all, Slightly, Moderately, Very much, Extremely
3. How engaged did you feel with the imaginative elements (storytelling, Godly Play Advent Wreath, Journey to Bethlehem entry monologue) incorporated into the Advent worship experiences?
•Not Engaged, Somewhat Engaged, Moderately Engaged, Highly Engaged, Extremely Engaged
4. Do you believe the worship experiences during Advent stimulated your spiritual curiosity?
•Not at all, Slightly, Moderately, Very much, Extremely
5. How much did the Advent season at Christian Temple encourage you to explore new perspectives or interpretations of traditional stories?
•Not Encouraged, Slightly Encouraged, Moderately Encouraged, Highly Encouraged, Extremely Encouraged

6. To what degree did the worship services during Advent ignite a sense of wonder about the Divine?

•Not at all, Slightly, Moderately, Very much, Extremely

7. How much did the Advent worship experience encourage you to engage your imagination in understanding and reflecting on the Christmas story?

•Not Encouraged, Slightly Encouraged, Moderately Encouraged, Highly Encouraged, Extremely Encouraged

8. How often did you find yourself questioning or exploring different aspects of faith or spirituality during the Advent season?

•Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always

9. How often did you find yourself eagerly anticipating and looking forward to the creative elements incorporated into the Advent worship services?

•Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always

10. Overall, how would you rate the level of wonder, curiosity, and imagination incorporated into the Advent worship experiences at Christian Temple?

•Very Low, Low, Moderate, High, Very High¹⁰⁴¹⁰⁵

If you did feel engaged to the elements incorporated in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, which elements elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination?

Please list all elements that apply.

(Type N/A if not applicable)

¹⁰⁴ ChatGPT, response to “Create a Likert Scale survey for church congregants to reflect upon wonder, curiosity, and imagination in worship,” OpenAI, November 15, 2023, chat.openai.com/chat.

¹⁰⁵ Not one question in this survey was copied exactly from the ChatGPT output. Each one was highly edited and ChatGPT only served as a guide in creating a Likert Scale survey.

Appendix 2

“THE STORY”

All of these lines across my face
Tell you the story of who I am
So many stories of where I've been
And how I got to where I am
But these stories don't mean anything
When you've got no one to tell them to
It's true, I was made for you

I climbed across the mountain tops
Swam all across the ocean blue
I crossed all the lines and I broke all the rules
But baby, I broke them all for you
Oh, because even when I was flat broke
You made me feel like a million bucks
You do, and I was made for you

You see the smile that's on my mouth
It's hiding the words that don't come out
And all of my friends who think that I'm blessed
They don't know my head is a mess
No, they don't know who I really am
And they don't know what I've been through like you do
And I was made for you

All of these lines across my face
Tell you the story of who I am
So many stories of where I've been
And how I got to where I am
Oh, but these stories don't mean anything
When you've got no one to tell them to
It's true, I was made for you

Oh, yeah, well it's true that I was made for you

Performed and Released by: Brandi Carlile
Songwriter: Phil Hanseroth
Producer: T-Bone Burnett
© Columbia Records, 2007

Appendix 3

Pre-Advent Survey Responses (*Edited to protect confidentiality*)

QUESTION: What elements in our worship currently, if any, incite wonder, curiosity, and imagination? And how?

1. I think the enthusiasm of our pastor(s) and their storytelling abilities are very often what incites my curiosity and imagination. As for wonder - currently seeing our sanctuary decorated for Christmas and hearing the choir sing so beautifully.

2. Homilies/sermons - The homilies usually provoke an “Oh, I didn’t see it that way/think about it that way” response and then make me curious about other perspectives.

Music - The Bell Choir always opens my imagination with their music. There’s something magical, whimsical about the sound of bells.

3. The sermons always pique my curiosity so I continue to look forward to those moments. I'm also interested to see how the song "The Story" will be incorporated into this Advent season.

4. Children’s Moment, Sermons, Communion

5. The interplay between the two homilies often spark one or all of those reactions as I ask myself if the messages complement or interweave or are parallel to each other; or is each one taking us into different dimensions of the Christian/spiritual experience. 2. Selection of music specials that are clearly from the secular/popular sector. It prompts me to think and imagine how the lyrics - clearly not written as a hymn for church - have a spiritual message that ties into the day's scripture/theme. 3. Children's moment messages always have the potential to surprise - I'm always curious and alert to the possibility that a child will give an unexpected answer or comment that will spark wonder or imagination. 4. The choirs' special music performances reliably elicit feelings of wonder, and so does 5. the preparation and prayers at the table for the offering and communion.

6. Dueling Homilies

7. I enjoy looking for connections between the Bible readings, homilies, prayers and music selections. I find them more often than one might expect considering the time constraints and number of people involved in putting together each worship service. The number of different approaches to a theme often give rise to ideas of my own as I think back on each week's service.

8. The Homily:

I completely enjoy the concept of the "homily" as opposed to a sermon, and having the weekly treat of two performed provides the gift of perspective. I describe it as a performance, the delivery and the message are unique and creative, requiring craft and emotion, reaching for every parishioner on a level each soul will understand and share. This performance, this embrace truly inspires "wonder".

Take note, I've differentiated a homily from a sermon. One in the same at first glance, maybe, and yet not, (*edited*).

The Benediction Song:

I'm also partial to the benediction song. The wonder lies in the retreating message, the last hug, the parting gift, the words that guide us, that light our way through the week. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and reach for peaceful meadows, a ray of light.

9. I find wonder, curiosity, and/or imagination in the homilies almost every Sunday. They are creative and sometimes challenge me to think more deeply about the scripture reading or the homily topic than I might have otherwise done so. I also believe the introduction of Godly Play has given children and adults a sense of imagination and wonder when listening to bible stories.

10. Music is the big one for me, that and a homily or sermon that makes me think about a message from a different point of view.

11. The word wonder is often used in sermons which helps me think about possibilities of how to live my faith and how scripture gives the base for possible new life in the congregation.

12. Personal stories that are shared during homilies often incite wonder, along with my curiosity and imagination. I often try to imagine myself in the place of one or more of the characters and then find myself wondering if I would act the same way.

13. The sermon always offers a time to glimpse into the scripture and gives us the opportunity to travel down a more unconventional road in understanding what was intended by the authors for us to receive from the text.

14. The music and meaningful homilies on a regular basis: Thought-provoking messages by both pastors frequently have (my spouse and I) rereading scripture passages, researching information, and talking about the scripture/topic. Music promotes wonder and awe as the spiritual meets the lyrically beautiful, but also

from a sense of searching for meaning in the everyday, prompted by using mainstream, music that is not traditionally used in worship.

Special elements have added a sense of wonder and imagination, like the hands-on labyrinth stations we had on Ash Wednesday promote a sense of prayerful wonder and curiosity on both a personal and community level.

15. Children's Moment is often "wonder"ful with the kids responding in sometimes surprising ways. Homilies sometimes require our imagination as stories are told and settings or scenarios are described and we imagine what things looked like. Godly Play sessions with the children certainly include wonder as instructors ask "I wonder" questions to the children.

Appendix 4

Sample Group Survey Responses (*edited to protect confidentiality*)

QUESTION: What new worship elements in the Advent season, if any, elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination? And how?

1. Sometimes I like to sit in the gathering during service. The sanctuary makes me anxious when it's occupied, funny, I don't feel this way when I'm sitting alone. Anyway, sitting in the "Journey" gathering space was so much fun. Felt more like home. It was exciting and comforting at the same time.
2. In my history of church experiences advent has progressed over the years from being no more than a church-related word to a place deserving focus and attention. My most recent thoughts have been how to better appreciate, for example, the vision of the star guiding the wise men in terms of God's mystical powers rather than some scientific measure. I'm still struggling with how to best state that.
3. Intergenerational godly play..... if I could have participated 😊
4. Of course, I thought the storytelling was impactful and the use of Godly Play techniques with the kids one Children's Moment. I particularly loved the Brandi Carlisle song at the end of each service. Listening to it made me think of my own life story and how each of us has at least one story in us that would be valuable to share. In fact, I really missed hearing that that last Sunday. I also thought that this year's Journey was the best we have ever done.
5. Journey to Bethlehem, especially the way that the marketplace was set up in the gathering during Advent. It set the stage for the whole Christmas story. It was also interesting to see some of the actors really get into character.
6. I found a lot of meaning and excitement in the way the worship elements built up the anticipation each week: the Advent wreath readings including the prior weeks' portions of the story, the Godly Play poster boards that were placed on the altar, and adding more and more musicians and voices to The Story musical benediction. It felt like everyone in the congregation was experiencing the journey together.
7. Establishing the market for Journey at the beginning of Advent and leaving it up all season.

8. The newly woven element of storytelling throughout the services, from the lighting of the Advent candles to the children's moment not only enticed the imaginations of those candle lighters or children, but the entire congregation watching and listening as well.

9. Advent candle lighting with the story

Homilies giving images of the journey to Bethlehem, wise men visit, having the journey to Bethlehem visible and included in the service weekly.

The closing song each Sunday which made me think about my own story

10. Story with candle lighting, Journey to Bethlehem inclusion, homilies, story music at end of service thinking about my story

11. I liked the artwork by the children and I enjoyed the telling of the advent story during the wreath lighting

12. I loved the song that we were ending worship with each week, and once we knew it, we were all invited to sing along.

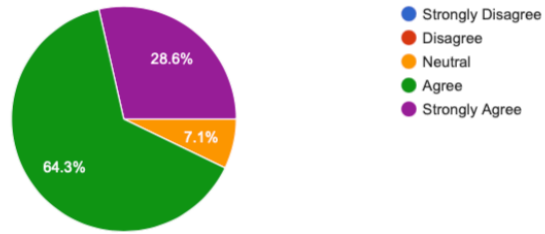
I liked the way the nativity scene was done this year with the children.

13. I enjoyed the stories told during lighting the Advent candles. I found that these stories touched my imagination more than reading the scriptures.

14. Having the Journey to Bethlehem marketplace set up during the Advent season jump-started the imagination every Sunday

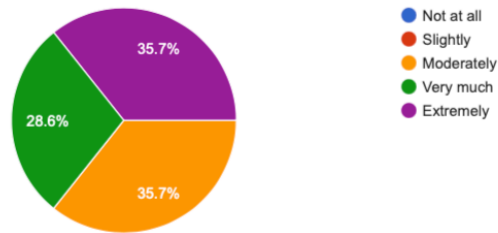
How strongly do you feel that the worship services during Advent encouraged a sense of wonder?

14 responses



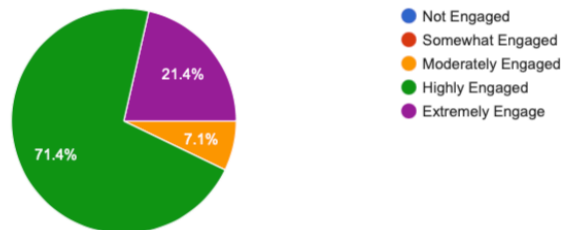
To what extent did the Advent season at Christian Temple inspire your curiosity about the deeper meanings of the biblical narratives?

14 responses



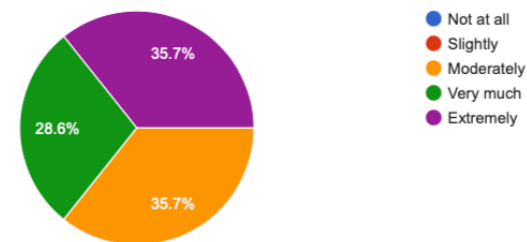
How engaged did you feel with the imaginative elements (storytelling, Godly Play Advent Wreath, Journey to Bethlehem entry monologue) incorporated into the Advent worship experiences?

14 responses



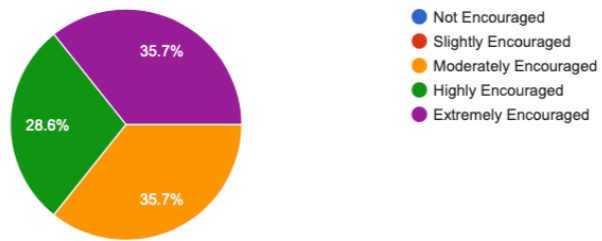
Do you believe the worship experiences during Advent stimulated your spiritual curiosity?

14 responses



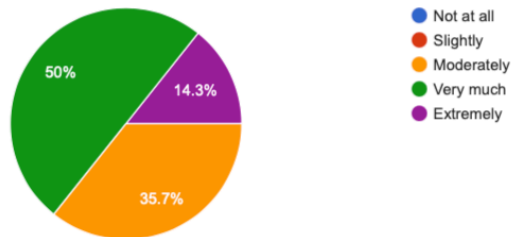
How much did the Advent season at Christian Temple encourage you to explore new perspectives or interpretations of traditional stories?

14 responses



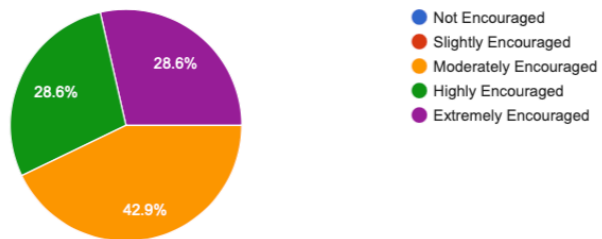
To what degree did the worship services during Advent ignite a sense of wonder about the Divine?

14 responses



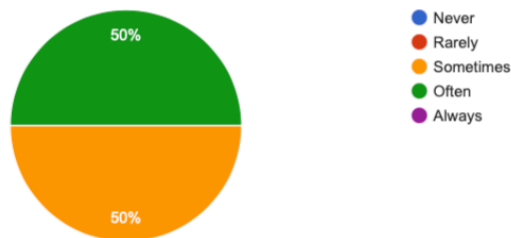
How much did the Advent worship experience encourage you to engage your imagination in understanding and reflecting on the Christmas story?

14 responses



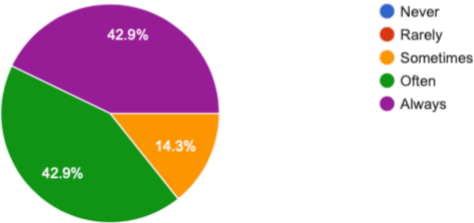
How often did you find yourself questioning or exploring different aspects of faith or spirituality during the Advent season?

14 responses



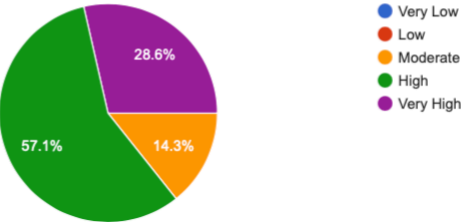
How often did you find yourself eagerly anticipating and looking forward to the creative elements incorporated into the Advent worship services?

14 responses



Overall, how would you rate the level of wonder, curiosity, and imagination incorporated into the Advent worship experiences at Christian Temple?

14 responses



If you did feel engaged to the elements incorporated in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, which elements elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination?

Please list all elements that apply.

(Type N/A if not applicable)

1. Journey
2. Epiphany, when defined as a process of discovery rather than a liturgical event.
3. Sermons, special music (Bluegrass Magnificat, The Story) forum topic
4. The Brandi Carlisle song each Sunday, Godly Play, Journey, the Homilies, Storytelling, the way the lighting of the Advent Wreath was presented each Sunday.
5. My curiosity is centered around the importance of symbolism, how its meaning might change over time, and how to communicate my thoughts about it to others. I've been interested in that for a while, but this Advent season at Christian Temple really brought that interest to the forefront again.
6. Advent wreath lighting, Godly Play Advent Wreath boards, music, and messages
7. Music choices, the homilies.
8. Storytelling and participating in Godly Play as well as Journey to Bethlehem, all carried a sense of wonder for me and for my young daughter. Additionally, being able to see the imagination awakened, from her perspective, drew that imagination and curiosity out of me. None of this would have been possible if these elements were not available or introduced. These experiences enveloped the entire season of Advent and Christmas for our family.
9. Homilies
10. wise men story, Mary's journey to Bethlehem, Journey to Bethlehem
11. I liked that the marketplace was at up all of Advent. The telling of the story during the wreath lighting was very nice. I also enjoyed the children's moment story although I think it might have been a little long and complicated for the children to remember week to week
12. -Children's Moment (edited). Everyone was totally accepting (edited).

- New music that our new music director has brought for our choir to sing. One that comes to mind is the Bluegrass piece that we sightread when he met us the first night. I wonder where we'll go under his leadership.
- Our Journey to Bethlehem with so many people doing different jobs that all came together with the excitement of new babies being Jesus.
- Hope Sunday's homilies with the message that messiness in life is where hope takes root and reveals itself in the chaos and uncertainty that actually fuels the hope.
- The lighting of the candles at Christmas Eve service makes my heart sing,
- The announcement about the matching gifts for Giving Tuesday sparked my imagination about where that money can help bring about the kingdom of God in this world.
- Hearing the bell choir and seeing two children (a new generation) enjoying making music with the bells. Our bell choir director is so encouraging and puts in extra time with younger ones, and it makes me curious to see what they will do in the future with their love of music.
- Our children's choir director leading the children's choir to foster a love of singing in a new set of young kids.

13. I was out of town for Christmas and missed the services. I have always enjoyed Christmas Eve services. I feel very connected to our community, to something wonder-filled during the service.

I also feel engaged during the sermons. The sermons always provide a new perspective for me to think about and reflect on. At times, I feel challenged in my beliefs (in a good way) and that keeps faith alive for me. Faith is not an end destination. It's a journey. And my faith keeps evolving and deepening with challenging sermons that make me curious and cause me to wonder and look at ideas in a different way.

14. 1. Two homilies from two different perspectives instead of one sermon from one person was especially effective in bringing out new insights on the Hope, Peace, Joy, Love themes during this season. 2. Incorporating a layperson's (edited) personal most memorable Christmas story was brilliant in helping me see beneath the modern trappings of the season to the timeless elements of a story so ancient and yet so humanly relevant.

Appendix 5

With the small amount of response in the sample size, the ending portion of the survey was offered to the entire congregation. This invitation to share stayed in our weekly newsletter for 3 weeks. This was sent out a little later so responses did not follow Epiphany as closely as the sample group. The percentages on the Likert Scale questions were slightly lower than the sample group. Their edited responses to the write-in questions are listed below.

QUESTION: What new worship elements in the Advent season, if any, elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination? And how?

1. I enjoyed hearing the song at the end of worship.
2. Sermons. He integrates a reality of what it was like in the 1st-century Palestine.
3. unsure
4. The Godly Play cards created by the children gave insight to how the children's minds perceive parts of the Advent/Christmas story.
5. Christmas Music selections were really meaningful. I really enjoyed the X-mas concert.
6. Due to Covid and the fear of transmitting it to my elderly mother, I only participated in church services remotely until last Spring, so was familiar with the order of worship, but not the actual in-person experience. The Advent season actually meant much more to me IN church than on a computer screen. I watch Talk and Toast/ Your thoughts help me watch for different elements you two present in your Homilies, which DO offer different perspectives on a common topic. So, I am passively absorbing YOUR wonder, curiosity and imagination via these two means of communication.

QUESTION: If you did feel engaged to the elements incorporated in Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, which elements elicited wonder, curiosity, and imagination?
Please list all elements that apply.
(Type N/A if not applicable)

1. N/A

2. Storytelling

3. stories and music

4. The music

The Advent wreath

Children's participation in Worship - their music and imagination

The Sanctuary

The candlelight singing of Silent Night on Christmas Eve -- brings home to me the feeling of being part of a community and traditions happening all around the world and through time; the love and power of Christ to engender this.

5. NA

6. As always during this season, it's the music and its interpretation that means so much to me. The Christmas Concert is always special, including the following reception that encourages camaraderie that isn't always possible during the regular church service. (I don't participate in the Bible study sessions, but I'm not sure how much camaraderie there is in a "class.")

Appendix 6

ADVENT POSTCARD

Advent @ Christian Temple

December 3
9:00 am Forum (Adult Study)
9:15 am Godly Play (Intergenerational Session)
11:00 am Worship (Godly Play for Children)
12:15 pm Christmas Party (Children & Youth)

December 10
9:00 am Forum (Adult Study)
9:15 am Godly Play (Intergenerational Session)
11:00 am Worship (Godly Play for Children)

December 17
9:00 am Forum (Adult Study)
9:15 am Godly Play (Intergenerational Session)
11:00 am Worship (Godly Play for Children)
6:00 pm **Christmas Concert**

December 23
6:00 pm - 8:00 pm **Journey to Bethlehem**

December 24
9:00 am Forum (Adult Study)
9:15 am Godly Play (Intergenerational Session)
11:00 am Worship (Godly Play for Children)
6:00 pm **Christmas Eve Worship**

5820 Edmondson Ave
Baltimore MD 21228
christiantemple.org

**CHRISTIAN
TEMPLE**

Christian Temple is an Open and Affirming congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). For us, this means that we cherish all God's children and welcome everyone to Christ's table of grace as we ourselves have been welcomed. We are especially intent on deepening our congregational welcome to anyone for whom church has not felt like a safe place. Our community of faith welcomes all people including members of the LGBTQ community and individuals ranging widely in age, physical and mental abilities, family and economic situations, marital status, gender, skin color, ethnicity, and political convictions. Join us as we seek to embody the realm of God through our diversity, celebrate the grace of God through our worship, and share the love and justice of God from our doorsteps to the ends of the earth.

Address: _____

Appendix 7

SCRIPTS FOR THE MARKETPLACE STORYTELLERS

Each script was written by Barbara Jean Callaway and John Callaway

ADVENT 1 - HOPE

Characters: Stall owners are bakers who are stacking a huge mountain of bread to sell to the folks coming to be counted for the census.

Stall Owner 1: Look at all of these people and our mountain of bread!

Stall Owner 2: Yes, with the Census here in Bethlehem, it has brought a huge crowd of people our way. and I AM hoping for something really big!

Stall Owner 1: Head into the Sanctuary where something big is sure to happen!

ADVENT 2 - PEACE

The stall has sold out and a woman shopkeeper is furiously sweeping the stall floor.

Character: Pax Romana! Pax Romana?! What kind of peace is this?

I am ready for real peace! What about you? Come on in; maybe you want to hear a story of peace, too.

ADVENT 3 - JOY

A woman is shopping in the marketplace with a basket and looks up and sees her little sister several stalls away. She has not seen her in years!

Woman Shopper: (Runs to her sister. Hugs her.)

Why Sister, look at you! You have become a beautiful woman! Oh my goodness!

Is that a kick I feel? Come on, so you can tell me all about it!

Go on in to hear another story of joy!

ADVENT 4 - LOVE

There is a shepherd looking all over for his lost sheep in the Marketplace.

Shepherd: Boy! My sheep are such stubborn animals! But you got to love them.

It's the same old story, you can always wander away. But you know what? I'll always find you. (Shepherd leans over and picks up the sheep.). Wonder where you will wander off to tonight?

Head on in to hear another story of love.

Appendix 8

Godly Play Advent Story Boards



Image by: Godly Play Foundation
<https://store.godlyplayfoundation.org/products/gp310>



Screenshot taken from the recorded live video, Christian Temple, December 23, 2023

WORKS CITED

Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Luke*. of *The Daily Study Bible Series*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1956.

Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 1 of *The Daily Study Bible Series*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958.

Bell, Rob. *Where'd You Park Your Spaceship?: An Interplanetary Tale of Love, Loss, and Bread*. BackHouse Books, 2023.

Berryman, Jerome. *Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of Children*. Denver, CO: Morehouse Pub. , 2009.

Berryman, Jerome W. *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: An Imaginative Method for Nurturing the Spiritual Lives of Children*. Edited by Cheryl V. Minor and Rosemary Beales. Vol. 2. New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017.

Berryman, Jerome W. *The Complete Guide to Godly Play: An Imaginative Method for Nurturing the Spiritual Lives of Children*. Edited by Cheryl V. Minor and Rosemary Beales. Vol. 3. New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017.

Biographical sketch of Peter Ainslie III. Accessed March 4, 2024. https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/wmoore/tnlpb/AINSLIE.HTM.

Borg, Marcus, and John Dominic Crossan. *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009.

Craddock, Fred B. *Craddock on the Craft of Preaching*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2011.

Cummins, D. Duane. *A Handbook for Today's Disciples: in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*. Fifth ed. St. Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publication, 2017.

Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010.

Dearybury, Jed, and Julie Jones. *The Playful Classroom: The Power of Play for All Ages*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley brand, 2020.

Dewey, Arthur J. *Proclamation 6: Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year*. of B. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996.

Jha, Sandhya R. *Room at the Table: The Struggle for Unity and Equality in Disciple's History*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2009.

Jones, Julie, and Jed Dearybury. *The Playful Life: Creating a Better Life Through Play*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2023.

Kinnaman, David, and Aly Hawkins. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016.

Kinnaman, David, and Gabe Lyons. *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity-- and Why It Matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2012.

Koukourikos, Konstantinos, Areti Tsaloglidou, Laila Tzeha, Christos Iliadis, Aikaterini Frantzana, Aristi Katsimbeli, and Lambrini Kourkouta. "An Overview of Play Therapy." *Materia socio-medica*, December 2021. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8812369/>.

Lilly, JP, Kevin O'Connor, and Terri Krull. "Play Therapy Makes a Difference ." Association for Play Therapy. Accessed April 15, 2024. <https://www.a4pt.org/page/PTMakesADifference/Play-Therapy-Makes-a-Difference.htm>.

Lyon, K. Brynolf, and Dan Moseley. *How to Lead in Church Conflict: Healing Ungrieved Loss*. Nashville , TN: Abingdon Press, 2012.

Marcus, Joel. "Did Matthew Believe His Myths?" Essay. In *An Early Reader of Mark and Q*, 217–50. Bristol, CT: Peters, 2016.

Rogers, Fred. *You are Special: Words of Wisdom from America's Most Beloved Neighbor*. New York, NY: Viking, 1994.

Rogers, Joanne, Gregg Behr, and Ryan Rydzewski. *When You Wonder, You're Learning: Mister Rogers' Enduring Lessons for Raising Creative, Curious, Caring Kids*. New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing, 2023.

Sloyan, Gerard S. *Proclamation 3; AIDS for interpreting the lessons of the Church Year. Series C*. Edited by Elizabeth Achtemeier. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985.

Thumma, Scott. "Faith Communities Today's 2020 Report." Faith Communities Today, 2021. <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Faith-Communities-Today-2020-Summary-Report.pdf>.

Tidsworth, Mark. "Dreams and Visions." Pinnacle Leadership Associates, January 3, 2023. <https://www.pinnlead.com/blog/2023/1/3/dreams-and-visions>.

Vecsey, George. "Parent Church Is Chagrined By Evolution of Jones's Cult." *The New York City*. November 29, 1978, sec. A.