

STORIES FROM THE GROUND : ONLINE

Godly Play online

Sue and Arnie Hensby had seen several families join their growing church prior to the pandemic. They explain how they adapted the children's ministry at **Sutton St James Baptist Church** during the lockdown restrictions.



The pandemic and accompanying lockdowns came at an inopportune time for Sutton St James Baptist Church (SSJBC). Sue and Arnie Hensby had joined in 2017, seeking to breathe new life into the small Baptist chapel which had served the Fenland village for more than 200 years. They had been blessed by God with many previously unchurched families, and at Christmas 2019 had just welcomed 10 more people into formal membership.

"The family was growing in number and in intentionality on their faith journeys," says Sue, the church's pastor. "Having to close at such a crucial time in our rebirthing process was particularly tough as we were just getting a real head of steam. We had to rethink almost everything that we had done previously."

Part of this re-thinking involved their children's provision. With Sue being the church pastor,

Arnie had led the children's work through a weekly Godly Play session for around 15 children each Sunday.

"It's based on the Montessori approach – helping the kids on their journey, leaving space for God to do his bit," Arnie says. "I was sceptical at first, but became a real convert after I went on the training course, which I would say is a must, if you want to do Godly Play. It has worked well to engage the children and help

them explore their spiritual journey.”

There are several key parts to the approach: greeting each person individually; gathering; presentation of the story; a space for wondering with open-ended questions about the story; a feast time, where those involved share prayers over some food and drink; a response time where the children are encouraged to be creative on their own about the story, with a wide variety of materials; and a blessing and goodbye.

“When lockdown happened we said we needed to carry on,” notes Arnie, “but we quickly realised that younger members didn’t want to be on Zoom.” He decided instead to film a session for the church’s YouTube channel.

Clearly, with an approach as interactive as Godly Play there are limitations with a pre-recorded session. “It does restrict you a bit,” Arnie explains. “You can’t do ‘the wondering’. You don’t have the interaction. The editing takes a long time. But I adapted it: I upped some of the introductions. The ‘wondering’ - I asked a few more questions. We collect prayer requests from the kids. There are ways of making it more engaging online.”

All the sessions (described as ‘brilliant’ by Mark Clay, EMBA Regional Minister Team Leader) are available on the church’s Youtube

channel, alongside the pre-recorded services.

“We don’t get lots of feedback, which can be disheartening, but when we have people seem to have enjoyed and appreciated it. It’s out there,” says Arnie.

It’s part of a sense the couple had for SSJBC to be a beacon of hope in troubled times. Sue set up the Sutton St James Support Group to offer shopping and prescription collection for those having to self-isolate. Halloween bags and Advent bags were delivered to local children. They’ve tried to remain in contact with the membership and have used the time the doors were closed to step out in faith to refurbish the Old School Room.

Arnie has recorded several Godly Play sessions for local schools, and the church teamed up with Duggie Dug Dug (Doug Horley) to offer Christmas and Easter videos too. These have been shown to more than 340 children

and many more families will have watched at home – all hearing a simple but powerful Christian message.

“We were completely new to this,” says Arnie. “We are two ordinary people. And God has amazed us with the things he has done.”

Watch the Godly Play sessions on YouTube via the church’s website: ssjbc.org.uk

