

Sensing the Sacred

An Introduction

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Sensing the Sacred: Alzheimer's Small Group Worship The Why and the How

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I began thinking about doing worship differently with people with Alzheimer's disease almost from the time I began working in a retirement community in 1998. It was clear to me from the beginning that the very word and sermon oriented worship I was giving them was not really working.

As my understanding of the disease deepened I knew why. The ability to think conceptually (which most sermons depend on) was one of the abilities lost in the disease process. And as the disease progresses the ability to understand language and to express themselves with words also decreases.

Before I worked at the retirement community I served as an associate pastor. The church I served sent some women to a workshop at Western Seminary in Michigan to learn how to do the Young Children and Worship program from one of its founders, Dr. Sonja Stewart. (Her co-developer was Dr. Jerome Berryman who has produced similar materials under the title Godly Play.) I was privileged to be at a pastor's retreat where Dr. Stewart was the presenter and I found watching and listening to the stories was a moving and meaningful spiritual experience. My friends who worked with the Young Children and Worship program at my church found the experience meaningful and enriching for their own spiritual life and saw the children respond in some profound ways.

The major components of the program are a structured worship with the "sermon" being a telling of a story from the Bible using felt underlays and wooden figures. The program

used concepts developed by Maria Montessori in her work with young children.

Maria Montessori developed segmented, small group activities to help children learn, build self esteem, and learn to focus on a task. The same kind of techniques support person's with Alzheimer's and help them maintain and gain strengths, not just lose functions. Montessori learning is based on the manipulation of objects—thus it is more demonstration based and oriented to the physical, rather than abstract concept and speech based. Montessori based activities support a sense of self-worth, give residents opportunities to express thoughts and feelings, give them the opportunity to be part of a group, provide a sense of accomplishment and success and provide a sense of order and safety.

I decided I wanted to explore the concept of adapting the methods and the stories used by Dr. Stewart for use with small groups of persons with Alzheimer's disease. I was awarded a grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian worship to develop and test the program in 2004. This grant enabled me to participate in a week of Young Children and Worship training and to have Sonja Stewart consult with me and train me and my staff in using her work as a resource. She was excited about the possibility of its use in this way and I am indebted to her for her assistance.

The following pages are adapted from the book *Young Children and Worship* and a manuscript, "Storytelling" by Sonja Stewart (©2000).

Worship

The ritual of worship is a time to experience and to praise God. Worship transforms ordinary time and space into sacred time and space. It provides the participants with a community, and meets their needs for love, security, continuity, order and meaning. Worshiping together kindles remembrances of songs, hymns, prayers, and scripture.

Sensing the Sacred is a way of being in worship with people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. It provides a way for both the presenter and the participants to grow in love for God and one another. By using a sensori-motor style of storytelling as the primary means for encountering God, God is experienced, not just learned about. It is vitally important that the presenter/leader sees himself/herself as leading a worship service. This is not an "activity," but a service of worship.

Telling the Story

Preparation of the Worship Leader

Begin to prepare to tell the story by reading and rereading the Biblical text for the story. Let the story be formed in you until you sense the wonder, awe and mystery of God. You want not just to memorize the story, but to internalize it. After reading and meditating on the Biblical text, read through the story script provided. Gather the materials needed for the presentation and arrange them in baskets on the tray. Reread the presentation. Begin placing and moving the figures without saying the precise words.

When you feel comfortable with the movement of the figures say the words aloud and move the figures.

Moving the Figures

Practice presenting, placing and moving the figures. To present a figure, hold it front of you with both hands, holding it at eye level of the participants. Move it around the circle so everyone can see it. Do not look at the participants. They will look at what you are looking at. You want to bring both yourself and the participants into the story.

Practice placing the figures on the underlay. You want to place them where you will move them the fewest number of times. You want to use only essential movements. Sometimes you need to see the movement at the end of the story to understand why figures are placed where they are earlier in the story.

Always handle the material with respect. When you move the figures hold them by the waist or the feet. Do not move them by their heads or faces. (No one wants to be grabbed and moved by his or her face or head.) When you point to or touch a figure, touch the shoulder, arm or back, not the top of the head or the face. Glide the figures when moving them. Do not jump, bounce or drag them.

Telling the Story

Prayerfully feel the presence of God so that you feel an inner silence and are centered in God. Remember that you are in a sacred space and that you have all the time you need. Begin when you feel the story forming within you. When telling the story use only essential words. Always keep your

eyes on the materials. There is no eye contact until the wondering questions.¹

As you tell the story, talk and then move the figures. Or move the figures and then talk. Speak meditatively and slowly because the sound and rhythm of your words are important for auditory thinking. Move the figures without speaking. Do not speak and move the figures at the same time. Different parts of the brain are used for listening and for watching. By saying the words first the participants listen. By moving the figures second, they see what they have heard. Hearing and seeing are not mixed, giving more time for processing the story.

Responding to the Story

The Children and Worship Program has three different ways of responding to the story: wondering questions, art, and a feast. When I first started working with this we did art and a feast. It made the session too long and too complicated. So I've just stuck with the wondering questions. I usually don't get a lot of response, but sometimes I do. This is an area on which I would love to receive feedback.

¹ I have had people tell me that when you work with people with Alzheimer's disease that you have to maintain eye contact with them. That's how you keep their attention. The problem with that is that making eye contact brings you and the participants out of the story. As presenter, you want to get out of the way so that you and the participants experience the presence of God in the story. And it does work. I had a housekeeper tell me a few weeks ago that she was watching from the hall and that everyone was watching and paying attention. She ended with, "That never happens!"

Other Liturgical and Practical Considerations

I use a song sheet for each song that's sung, passing them out and picking them up after the song. Always go around the group in the same direction. Use large print and not very many verses. Lyrics to songs and hymns in the public domain can be found at <http://nethymnal.org/>.

This worship needs to be done with a small group. Ten to 12 would be maximum size. Six to eight participants is the preferred size. If you're doing this in a health care setting it might take some conversation with the activity staff and/or nursing staff to help them understand that it's not an activity for everyone in their unit. It's probably most beneficial to people who have a life history of practicing the Christian faith.

If you have people from a very liturgical tradition, using the Trinitarian blessing at the end of the benediction along with making the sign of the cross is very appropriate. You might also want to add some short liturgical responses such as after the reading of scripture, to say "The Word of the Lord," and have the participants respond with "Thanks be to God." Whatever you decide to do, be consistent with it and do it the same each time you worship together.

At the end of the service offer a benediction and then go around the room and offer God's blessing, by name, to each participant. There are days when you wonder if anyone saw or heard anything that day, but when you come to give the blessing, they are often very present in ways that you did not see earlier. Above all, trust that the Spirit is working!

Materials

Most of the stories require a felt underlay. Most fabric stores have felt. I've developed a preference for wool felt, but it is more expensive and sometimes hard to find in the colors you want or need.

I made the patterns for the figures from Young Children and Worship about 1/3 bigger and had men from the woodshop at the retirement community where I was developing the program make them for me. The patterns included with these stories reflect that larger size. It is possible to buy the figures for the stories from Worship Woodworks (<http://www.worshipwoodworks.com/home.php>) but they are in the smaller size for children.

Men from the woodshop made some trays for me, but they are too heavy! Ideally all the figures for each story should be permanently assigned to a tray. Worship Woodworks has some bamboo and wooden trays and they also have baskets for the figures.

Stories Developed So Far

At the present time I have four stories done: Advent/Christmas, The Good Shepherd, Jesus and Zacchaeus, and Easter. I originally wanted to do a different story every week, but I've found that you can do the same story for several weeks running and it's new every time, although familiarity with the rhythm of the service does develop.

As I develop new stories, I'll keep you posted. And if you have stories you would like to suggest or offer, please do.

A Final Word

I know it's a temptation to see something like this and immediately start thinking of ways you can change it. Sonja Stewart was very insistent that people do the worship with children the way she'd laid out for them.² There were many layers of reasons and meaning that were reflected in her final work. I've built on her foundation and would appreciate your trying these stories and the worship services the way they are before "adapting" them for your use. If you have feedback and suggestions I would love to hear them.

And I want you to know that this is a wonderful ministry. May the peace of God be with you.

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² A friend of mine who had been trained by Sonja came back from the training with all sorts of ideas about how she would need to adapt it to make it work in her situation. But as she began to prepare to use it she saw how well it was all fitting together. Remembering Sonja's words about not changing it, she began to use it with children in her church and to her amazement it all worked!