Ready, Teddy, God!: the teddy bear as catechist and religious educator

Feature

by Leslie Francis and Nicola Slee with Teddy Horsley and Betsy Bear

The Teddy Horsley Bible Series of books is designed to build bridges between the young child's day-to-day experiences of the world and major biblical themes and stories.

In this article we want to do four main things. To begin with, we want to tell you about how our story books came about. Second, we want to describe our work with young people who are growing up in Christian families. Here we work as catechists, to help build up their faith. Third, we want to share some of our own faith story. We want to give you a glimpse into how teddy bears' minds work and to let you see behind the scenes. There you will find something about the theory of our educational practice and about our theological perspective. Fourth, we want to describe our work with the young people whom we meet in schools. Here we work as religious educators, to help young people know what Christians do, what Christians believe, and what it means to take Christianity seriously.

Introducing Teddy Horsley and Betsy Bear

Our authors said we could tell our own story, so that is what we are going to do. Let us begin by introducing ourselves - Betsy Bear and Teddy Horsley. We live with Mr and Mrs Henry, Lucy and Walter. We are a Christian family. We believe in God, read the Bible and pray together, and often on Sunday we go to church. We try to put our faith into practice through the ways in which we relate to others.

Our stories have been used to help young children explore the Christian faith. For those whose families go to church, this is a way to deepen their faith and foster their understanding and commitment. For children whose families do not go to church, this is a way in which they can discover what Christians do and what Christians believe.

Personal discovery

We first discovered our authors almost by chance. We suppose that teddy bears must always have been part of the congregations where Leslie and Nicola, our authors, worshipped and ministered, but for many years they completely failed to recognize the presence of these teddy bears. It was, first of all, Susan's bear which changed all that.

In the usual way Leslie had been administering Communion at the communion rail. Susan's mother held out her hands to receive the bread and Leslie pronounced the words of administration, 'The Body of Christ keep you in eternal life.' Susan held her head high to be blessed and Leslie placed his hands on her saying, 'Susan, the Lord bless you and keep you.' Then suddenly, Susan's bear raised his head. Leslie was perplexed. He ignored the bear and moved on to the next pair of outstretched hands. But as he stood there saying the words of administration, he became very conscious of a rather aggressive bear bashing and biting his ankles. A minute later Susan's bear was being projected across the sanctuary floor, to be seen by everyone kneeling at the altar rail.

After the service, neither Susan nor her bear would speak to Leslie or look at him. Later in the week Susan's mother began to help Leslie and Nicola understand the strength and the power of the relationship which exists between the child and her bear. We suppose they must have known about this from their own childhood, but it is so easy to forget what it is like to be a child.

Following on from this conversation with Susan's mother, Leslie had an equally long conversation with Susan and her bear. He said sorry to the bear, and we think the bear said sorry to him. Anyway, they seemed to part the best of friends. Next Sunday, as Leslie passed along the altar rail, Susan held her head high as usual and this week so did



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Teddy Horsley

her bear. After blessing Susan, Leslie placed his hands firmly on the bear's head and said, 'Rupert, the Lord bless you and keep you.' And we suspect that, in blessing Rupert, the Lord extended his blessing to Susan by helping her feel more truly welcome in the Eucharistic community of which she and her bear are essential parts.

Teddy as catechist

Together we decided to plan a family Communion service based on the theme of a teddy bears' picnic

aving at last awoken to the fact that teddy bears were coming to church anyway, Leslie decided that it was high time that his church should make a greater effort to make them feel really welcome. He asked us to talk with the headteacher of the local village school, a Church of England school, catering for forty children between the ages of five and nine. Together we decided to plan a family Communion service based on the theme of a teddy bears' picnic.

The Picnic

Over a period of almost half a term, the three classes worked on a project preparing for the great picnic. Various groups created a huge collage backcloth, depicting the woods where the picnic took place. The bold brown tree trunks supported a riot of bare branches. Gradually, the branches were brought to life with multicoloured leaves, birds, butterflies and squirrels. The undergrowth was transformed by bluebells, primroses, toadstools and hedgehogs. At first the collage was displayed in school and then it was transferred to the church.



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The top class set to work to prepare a short mime and dance and devised their own costumes. The children also made their own teddy bears. Glove puppet teddy bears were based on papier mâché heads; simple cutout shapes were stuffed; some were even knitted. Pictures of teddy bears were painted and cut out to stick on every pew end. Soon the children were discovering that teddy bears had a part to play in their more formal lessons concerned with language and number.

Nearer the day, the chancel of the church was taken over to make a real picnic area. A carpet of artificial grass (borrowed from a friendly undertaker) was placed on the floor. Picnic benches and tables were made from cardboard boxes. Real moss and flowers were collected and arranged. Small logs and branches were strewn around. On the Friday before the picnic, much of the school day was given over to baking and preparing food.

When the Sunday arrived, lots more children and lots more teddy bears than usual came to the service. After the introductory part of the Communion service, the teddy bears were invited to come to the picnic area in the chancel and to take their places among the picnic tables and benches. Then children from the top class presented their drama and dance, in their teddy bear costumes, and the whole congregation sang The teddy bears' picnic to a musical accompaniment of percussion, chime bars and recorders.

The teddy bears' enjoyment of their picnic enabled the adults as well as the children in the congregation to explore the power of the image of feasting in the Christian tradition, especially as this related to the Eucharist itself. This part of the service culminated in the reading of the story of the feeding of the five thousand from John's gospel.

While the teddy bears were left picnicking in the chancel, the focus of attention in the service changed. A table was placed in front of the chancel screen to act as a nave altar. Once again children came forward with a tablecloth, but this time to cover the altar. Once again children came forward with food, but this time carrying the bread and wine of the Eucharist. When the children had prepared the table for the celebration of Communion, the formal liturgy resumed with the Eucharistic prayer.

As far as the children of the school were concerned, the teddy bears' picnic had been an enjoyable project. Over a period of time it had involved almost all of the components of their varied curriculum, from numbers to language, from drama to dance, from music to craft, from painting to knitting, from cooking to woodwork. Educationally this project approach to Christian nurture demonstrates the close relationship between the secular curriculum and religious experience. As far as the local church was concerned, the teddy bears' picnic had given the children an opportunity to make full use of the church building and participate in formal liturgy adapted to their own level. As far as we teddy bears were concerned, the teddy bears' picnic had shown that we were a valued part of the local church.

It was through planning for this service and attending the teddy bears' picnic and the Eucharist that our own commitment to faith was fostered. We had enjoyed the occasion so much that we began to pester Leslie and

Nicola to help us explore other great themes of the Christian tradition, and the rich language and imagery of the church's worship.

Spiritual development

ollowing the teddy bears' picnic, all four of us spent some time thinking theologically about the close parallels between our experiences at the picnic and our experiences at the Eucharist; we began to formulate a theory about the ways in which religious language develops from and uniquely qualifies secular language. We thought educationally about the ways in which young children can be introduced to the concrete secular analogies which form the experiential basis from which religious language is developed. Soon we were asking our authors to help us write down our thoughts.

Now, when we teddy bears go picnicking with our family, Lucy, Walter and Mr and Mrs Henry, we take bread to eat and lemonade and wine to drink. We munch, we chatter, we laugh: we celebrate our picnic. Everyone is happy. When we go to church with our family, we bring bread on a silver plate and wine in a silver cup. We sing, we worship, we share: we celebrate the Communion. Everyone is happy. Mr and Mrs Henry lead some prayers, Lucy and Walter play their instruments, while we sometimes play under the pew.

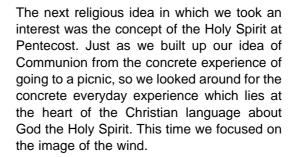
At that stage we knew nothing about Greek or Hebrew, but we recognized the essential qualities which God the Holy Spirit and the wind have in common. On a windy day we opened our eyes to look for the wind, but we could not see it. Yet we saw the wind shake apples down, turn washing inside out and blow paper along the street. We stretched out our paws to touch the wind, but could not feel it. Yet we felt the wind push us along, tug our kite into the sky, and drive rain into our faces. We pricked up our ears to listen to the wind, but could not hear it. Yet we heard the wind rattle dustbin lids, slam doors shut, and whistle through trees. Although we could neither see, touch nor hear the wind, we knew that the wind was there, all around us.

Similarly, we discovered that we cannot see, touch nor hear God the Holy Spirit. But we can see the Holy Spirit making people smile and dance. We can feel the Holy Spirit making us feel safe and loved. We can hear the Holy Spirit making people sing and laugh.

Through these signs of the Holy Spirit's activity in the world, we came to know that the Holy Spirit was there, all around us, just like the wind.

A word from the authors

By taking the concrete image of the picnic seriously, we can help children (and teddy bears) to grasp one of the central ideas of the Communion service. By building on children's concrete experiences of picnics, we are able to help them make the transition from everyday secular experience to religious experience. In other words, we are developing their religious vocabulary from the everyday secular language which lies at the heart of our interpretation of religious experience.



Images of the wind have historically played a very central part in the development of the Church's teaching about God the Holy Spirit; the link between the secular experience of the wind and the religious experience of the Spirit of God is in fact so close that in both the Hebrew and Greek languages the same word is used both for wind and for spirit.

After exploring the great festival of Pentecost, we became restless to explore other central feasts of the Christian year. At the heart of the gospel message of Easter, we found the simple basic concept of new life. At the heart of the gospel message of Christmas, we found the simple and basic concept of light. At the heart of the gospel message of Epiphany, we found the simple and basic concept of presents.

Teddy as religious educator

As active members of the faith community, our first concern was as catechists, and gradually to develop the language and concepts employed in the church's liturgy. As we took seriously current trends in educational philosophy and the theory underpinning the place of religious education within the secular school curriculum, we realized



Betsy Bear





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that our special approach to the development of religious language was equally acceptable and helpful within a non-confessional context. In fact the teddy bears have a job to do as religious educators in enabling young children from secular or non Christian religious backgrounds to understand what Christianity is and what it would mean to those who take Christianity seriously.

A good indication of the teddy bears' potential as non-confessional religious educators is given by the way in which our two adventures exploring Christmas and Epiphany, Lights and The Present, were used to form the basis of the Christmas celebration of church-aided schools within the Southwark Diocese, where Nicola was working at the time. Many of Southwark's schools are multi-faith schools and many of them draw the majority of their pupils from totally secular backgrounds. The aim of our Christmas celebration was not, therefore, to assume or to encourage Christian belief in young children. We had two aims in mind: firstly to enable them to discover the imagery and language of the Christian Christmas tradition in a novel way: secondly to enable them to explore the place of Southwark Cathedral, the mother church in the area, as a central focus for the Christian celebration of Christmas.

For a month or so before the cathedral celebration, infants prepared their project work on lights, presents and teddy bears. By the day of our Christmas celebration, Southwark Cathedral was full of the children's two- and three-dimensional project work. They had also learned a new Teddy Horsley song.

Meanwhile, secondary church schools had worked on creating a three-dimensional Christmas crib scene, similar to the one we encountered in our Christmas books. Another secondary school had adapted the Teddy Horsley theme music for their band. Junior schools had orchestrated the Teddy Horsley song for percussion, piano, recorders and strings. A professional children's theatre company had worked with just one class of top juniors to translate our two books Lights and The Present into drama.

When the day of our Christmas celebration arrived, over 300 infants and thousands of teddy bears travelled in to the cathedral. Collecting special Teddy Horsley badges and balloons, they were then able to see their own project work on display, together with the

work from other schools. The music of the steel band caught their attention as they settled down on the cathedral floor. The Teddy Horsley song, learnt in each of the schools, quickly welded together infants from different backgrounds in one co-ordinated activity. Then the children's theatre company presented the drama.

The children and teddy bears from non-Christian religious backgrounds would have gone away from the project with their religious integrity respected, but with a clearer idea about what it is that Christians celebrate during December. The children and teddy bears from secular backgrounds would have gone away from the project unconverted and yet better equipped to recognize the essential characteristics of the Christian Christmas tradition. The children and teddy bears from Christian backgrounds would have gone away from the project with fresh insights into their own tradition and with plenty to talk about in their Christian families and among their friends in the worshipping community.

Happily, some parish priests from the diocese shared our Christmas celebration with their local church schools and were then in a much better position to enable the children of their parish to relate their school-based Christmas project work to the actual ongoing life of the local church.

End piece

By developing the relationship between concrete everyday experience and the religious concepts of the Church and the Bible, we have been gradually expanding the Christian experience, vocabulary and understanding of young children. Together we have now developed a special book, Ready, Teddy, God! which is full of exciting ways in which the children can join in our fun and explore the experience, language and themes of the Christian tradition. We hope that you will want to find out more about us.

Both Leslie Francis and Nicola Slee work in church-related institutions of education. Leslie Francis is DJ James Professor of Pastoral Theology at Trinity College, Carmarthen, and the University of Wales, Lampeter. Nicola Slee is Director of Studies of the Aston Training Scheme, Birmingham. This is an Anglican Foundation Course training candidates for ordained ministry.





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Spectrum Moves On



by Martin Lambourne

ess than ten years since the first Spectrum course for Christian youth workers appeared, it has been replaced. Is this really necessary?

The original Spectrum was a major achievement: it represented a commitment to working together in Christian youth work training which was already happening at national, regional and local levels. It offered a working tool for adult educators in the youth scenenot just another 'political' statement or a conference. It took vision, co-operation and hard work to produce.

Like all new car models or computer software, it was bound to have aspects which could be tweaked or upgraded and which would eventually give rise to a Mk II version. Most of the tweaking was done on a customizing basis by tutors using the material. However, because Spectrum had led to an even greater level of co-operation all around and a consolidation of tutoring teams and expertise, it became evident that a Mk II would need to be produced to reflect shifts in adult education philosophy and practice as well as to build in a greater degree of flexibility in ways of using the programme.

The subsequent decision to make the new version a Britain & Ireland product rather than another English churches' initiative confirmed the Management Group's feeling that a totally new programme would need to be devised if ownership was to be passed to a wider partnership including the organisations and agencies which were willing to be involved.

Spot the difference

The new programme still bears the title Spectrum. It shares the conviction of its predecessor that certain elements are part of the foundation of good youth work practice. Looking down the list of session titles, there are few changes. The group-work session has been expanded into a six- hour experience in order to engage participants in extended group-work activity as part of the

learning process. There is also a new session devoted to exploring how Christian values can underpin and affect attitudes and practice in working with young people - it has the scintillating title **Youth Work and Youth Workers II!** The resources section now includes notes on working safely with young people.

There are still no sessions devoted to issues such as world perspectives or various -isms (race, sex ...). It is still felt that these are issues which can precede, run alongside or follow on from a foundation course. It is hoped that working groups can be established to address some of these issues and create supplementary sessions or even a further programme of one-off or linked sessions.

If the session titles are not very different, the structure and content of each session certainly is. The new structure includes more opportunity for participants to reflect and evaluate as individuals and as a group within each session. There is the possibility of preparatory work before each session and of follow-up activity to consolidate each session's learning focus.

Whilst Mk I Spectrum acknowledged the advent of portfolio building and offered advice on incorporating it into the programme, Mk II has built in the concept of a Personal Learning Record to be developed for inclusion in a wider portfolio. This means that, if a participant wants to work towards some other qualification within the youth service or beyond, s/he can produce a course record and portfolio to submit for recognition or credits on courses offering accreditation of prior learning.

The other major difference is evident by its absence: there is no separate tutor's pack. Tutor notes, together with briefing notes and solutions for some of the group exercises, are placed at the back of the pack, but included for all to have access to. Hopefully, this will encourage tutors to adopt a democratic approach to the programme and include the

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