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Introduction

This section includes suggestions for getting the most out of collective worship, and is a follow-on to the introduction in *Collective Worship Unwrapped* (Barnabas, 2005). *More Collective Worship Unwrapped* provides a further 20 story-based assembly outlines to be used with Key Stages One and Two. Those familiar with the previous book may be pleased to see some more stories of The Toolshed Gang and The Two Johns, as well as another adaptation of Tolstoy's short stories and a further adventure of Honky the Donkey. There is also a new set of stories for younger children, looking at some of Jesus' parables through the eyes of a motherly teddy bear. Using a toy as a proxy for their own feelings can often help younger children to express themselves. As before, each of the assembly outlines gives a Bible base, tips on presentation, a list of visual aids required, recommended songs, an optional prayer and follow-up material. An idea of the level of preparation required is provided.

GETTING STARTED

When it comes to leading assembly, whether we are experts or 'first-timers', good preparation is vital. Any carpenter, painter or decorator will tell us that half the task is in the preparation. Get the wood, wall or window properly 'prepped' and we save ourselves a lot of grief afterwards. We can usually tell if a job was inadequately prepared by the standard of the finish.

This principle is even more evident when it comes to addressing children and young people in school. Any activity that involves interaction with a group of people needs to be carefully planned. Take conjuring, for example. A good trick will need to be repeated over and over again at home before being tried out in the public arena. For maximum effect, conjurers need to cover every eventuality, so they will practise dozens of times, even to the point where they can carry out the procedure with their eyes closed. The better the preparation, the better the presentation; and the better the presentation, the better the penetration.

Here is a checklist of elements to consider when preparing for collective worship, whether we are using conjuring, puppetry or drama, or just telling a Bible story.

Resources

We need to make sure everything we need is close to hand, such as the matches to light a candle or the projector required to display a colourful acetate. Check that the visual aids are in good condition and carefully organised so that no one gets the idea the assembly has been thrown together a few minutes beforehand. Make sure the visual aids illustrate the topic clearly and are appropriate for the children. In this book and *Collective Worship Unwrapped*, there are suggestions for visual aids to accompany every assembly.

Personal presentation

We need to ensure that we are clean, neat and appropriately dressed. The aim is to do nothing that might put a barrier between ourselves and the children. Personal hygiene and fresh breath are important areas to watch.

Timing

This is very important! 'Better late than never' is the watchword of the sluggard. 'Better never late' is better. Allow plenty of time to check for any potential difficulties, such as not having enough space for children to come out to the front or an extension long enough to reach the projector or CD player. We will also want to ensure that any items we expect the school to provide—such as a screen or a small table—are available. All these details require time, so we need to be sure that we have it. Also, we need to confirm how long the assembly is expected to last. As a rough guide, 15–20 minutes should be allocated, but, if there are lots of younger children present, the time may be even shorter. We need to keep an eye on the clock.

No matter how well we prepare, however, unplanned incidents will occur. Children will always come up with statements that catch us off guard. They often delight in embarrassing us or taking us down an avenue that we didn't expect. Good preparation should ensure that these incidents enhance rather than interrupt the assembly.

EVOKING THE SENSES

The environment in which we deliver an assembly will also be crucial to how well it is received. Creating a calm and peaceful setting in the area where collective worship is carried out is very important, so it is helpful to hold collective worship in surroundings other than where the children usually sit and work. The establishment of the environment will relate very strongly to the senses, and the children will often respond positively to their first impressions as they enter the designated hall or classroom. School halls can often be very adaptable to a positive spiritual atmosphere. If clear guidelines are laid down for acceptable behaviour in collective worship time and if the guidelines are consistently and sensitively underlined, then the ‘otherness’ of this time and space can be effectively communicated. Since assembly is also an ideal opportunity for teachers to give notices and to administer a ‘telling off’ where necessary, the ‘otherness’ aspect may be a little compromised, but this need not be a major problem.

Here, then, are some suggestions for establishing the environment.

What we hear

This should be addressed first, as hearing will be the first sense impacted, even before the children enter. Music should be used most sensitively, as it can powerfully affect mood and attitude and can enhance or destroy the environment right from the start. Some schools are very good at creating the right atmosphere through music, others less so. Some schools have a ‘composer of the week’ and display the titles of the pieces being played, but lack of musical knowledge or lack of competent musicians is often used as an excuse for little or no musical content to an assembly. Interestingly, where music is used more to set the scene, the children appear more receptive and less inclined to be disruptive.

Music sensitively delivered can enhance the experience of collective worship. Pieces that are calming and relaxing are especially helpful for Key Stage One and Foundation children.

What we see

There is huge scope through the medium of sight: pictures, colours, materials and objects can all convey positive experiences. Lighting will also be an important factor and should be used creatively. Closing drapes and blinds can be effective in establishing a ‘holy space’ but there also needs to be an element of ‘openness’.

Candles and fresh flowers can be very helpful. Lighting a candle is a very evocative act that can involve the children themselves. It can signify a moment of silence, reflection or prayer. Balloons and bubbles can also illustrate reflection or celebration. A media projector can display all kinds of images to enhance the environment as well as to illustrate talks, and is often a good aid to opening and closing the assembly time—children might enter and exit to an appropriate visual display accompanied by suitable music. Visual presentations of children’s work, illustrating a project or aspect of the curriculum (pictures, drawings, collage, mobiles, photos and other displays), can improve the appearance of the collective worship space.

What we smell and taste

Smell and taste are perhaps not senses that we usually associate with collective worship. They may not be as important as sound and sight in establishing the environment for collective worship, but their use can still be taken into account. After all, worship in many churches (and some schools) will involve tasting bread and wine, and some churches will use the very distinctive smell of incense.

If we are aware that these senses are at work, we can use them in a positive way. A pleasant or evocative smell in the hall, or an assembly that includes tasting things, is certainly worth considering. For example, an assembly on the prodigal son might involve a large bowl of hummus, possibly with a wooden spoon sticking out of it. We could suggest (not inaccurately) that this is something like what the prodigal son had to eat and invite some of the children to look at, smell or even taste it. Proper hygienic safeguards would be needed, of course, but it is an interesting use of the senses. Let’s not underestimate the value of what we taste and smell in collective worship.

What we feel

This sense will be active throughout an act of worship and long after it is over. I am utterly convinced that worship should be an enjoyable experience and, as such, it will involve the ‘feel good factor’. Put simply, if the children enjoy the assembly, it will be a good, positive and pleasant experience for them; if they don’t, it won’t!

There are lots of factors associated with the sense of feeling (some of which we may be unable to control). We should give some thought to how the children come in to assembly, where and how they sit and who they sit with. One of my local schools encourages the

children to sit anywhere they like on the floor rather than putting them in rows by class or year grouping. Most primary schools are happy for their pupils to sit on the floor but, however the children are seated, we need to be aware of their personal comfort (or lack of it!) and their attention span. I think 5–20 minutes is about right. In any event, no school assembly should last more than half an hour.

‘Awe and wonder’ as a concept is difficult to quantify. Sometimes it happens accidentally, but it is more likely to occur if we have prepared carefully, taken proper account of the needs of the children and invited God to participate.

THE ART OF STORYTELLING

The art of storytelling has been around for ages and we are seeing more and more storytellers coming into schools, to the delight of children, parents and staff alike. Storytellers will often spend a whole week in a school, working in different classes, taking assemblies and possibly even offering a public performance of their skill. Lance Pierson, himself a wonderfully accomplished storyteller, says the following in his excellent book *Storytelling* (SU, 1997, p. 5):

I thought of the college lecturer who told me about the latest discovery made by post-modernist communicators. ‘It’s no good trying to persuade people with reasoned arguments and lectures today,’ he said. ‘The way to get through to them is with stories.’ And I thought, ‘Surely the wisdom of the ages (not to mention Jesus, the master storyteller) knew this already.’

Lance’s book is a good one to read, not just to discover a wealth of new stories to enjoy but also to help us find the best way to read and tell those stories. A lot of us find it incredibly daunting to think of standing up in front of a room full of people (especially children) to tell a story. Although telling a story is a bit like telling a good joke, we still find it difficult. Many people feel understandably nervous about taking assembly. Even vicars, pastors and other church leaders who are quite comfortable preaching to their congregations become anxious at the idea of communicating with two or three hundred children. Assembly will usually involve telling stories—reading them if we must—and making them vital and interesting. Certain skills are active in this process and many of them can be learnt.

Learning how to speak and to appreciate the value of words will help us greatly in communicating with children. Here are some pointers that might help our storytelling technique.

Knowing the story

Stories can be told or they can be read. If we are attempting the former, we will certainly need to have committed the tale to memory. If we are sufficiently accomplished, we will remember the highlights and use our imagination to fill in the gaps. Reading a story from a book can also have great value—although, if it is a picture book, we will want to find a way for the children to appreciate the artwork. Whether we read or tell, we will always need to prepare carefully. Remember BBC’s *Jackanory* (‘I’ll tell you a story of Jackanory; now my story’s begun. I’ll tell you another of Jack and his brother; now my story is done’)? The readers on that programme were reading from a book (or possibly an autocue) but we just knew that they had spent a lot of time preparing themselves and probably knew the story by heart. In most cases, the better the preparation, the better the story.

Engaging the listener

A good story, well told, will always engage the interest of the listener. Nevertheless, we may want to use a variety of techniques to enhance this engagement—for example, audience participation such as responding to particular words or phrases in the narrative. When telling a story to children, we might want to include comic interludes such as getting things obviously wrong and having the children interrupt with the correct information. This technique is often used in pantomime: ‘He’s behind you!’ ... ‘Oh, no he isn’t!’ ... ‘Oh, yes he is!’ and so on. Examples may be seen in the assemblies ‘Honky the donkey’, ‘Samson the superhero’ and ‘Peter the escape artist’ in *Collective Worship Unwrapped*.

Narrative repetition

Narrative repetition is a classic technique used in storytelling and appears in many traditional fairy tales—for example, the wicked queen’s oft-repeated question of the magic mirror in ‘Snow White and the seven dwarves’ or the threefold response of the troll in ‘The three Billy Goats Gruff’. Sometimes the technique of repetition is used to build suspense in a narrative, so the listeners become more excited as they think, ‘We’ve heard this before; we know what’s going to happen!’ You’ll find this technique a number of times in the Bible: see, for example, the story of the fiery furnace in Daniel 3. There is also an example in the story ‘Arthur and the magic fish’ in *Collective Worship Unwrapped*.

Simplifying the tale

At Clown Camp they teach the K.I.S.S. principle: 'Keep It Simple, Stupid!' Stories don't need to be overly complicated. The best ones usually have a very straightforward story line and development—for example, the classic fairy tales of Grimm and Anderson, the parables of Jesus and a good number of the other Bible stories. Making stories complicated, with ever more tortuous plots and twists in the narrative, works well in the written and read form, but a story that is told needs to be simple so that it holds the listeners' attention. For example: 'Man goes on a journey, gets mugged and needs help. Three people see him; the least likely helps him.' The moral is made and the story ends. This is a pretty uninteresting précis of the story of the good Samaritan but there are endless ways to tell a simple tale. We just need to keep the basic outline clear-cut. Make it difficult and people soon begin to lose interest.

Spice it up a bit

The much over-used phrase 'Variety is the spice of life' is actually very meaningful when we think about it. Variety saves us from bland mediocrity—a good story can be ruined if it is told too often or always in the same way. Spice can make a meal interesting, even surprising, and can call forth radical reactions from within. Stories can be like that, too, if they are imaginative, creative and varied. I recommend *Tales of Grace* by Eve Lockett (Barnabas, 2005) as a great source of well-spiced stories.

Variety is important not only in the content of the story but also in the way we tell it. If we change the pace of the narrative or the volume, then, like the piquant spice or the surprising chilli pepper that we discover in a meal, the story will jolt the listeners' capacities and deepen their appreciation of the event. Try starting a story with 'Once (pause) upon (pause) a (pause) time (pause) there (pause) was (pause) a (pause)...'. Or, how about 'Once... once upon... once upon a... once upon a time... once upon a time there... once upon a time there was a...'. See how variety can be used even in the simple classic start to a story.

Stay focused

The most successful jokes work best when they have a good start and a humorous punch line. What we put in between is up to our own creativity and imagination. Similarly, our stories will need an attention-grabbing

start and a punch line that leaves the audience thinking and possibly wanting more. The journey between the beginning and ending may employ any of the techniques listed above, but it must progress consistently and in a disciplined way. Paying attention to detail requires practice and care but it will lead to a high level of excellence in the telling of the tale. Focus in the narrative will also ensure that we retain the interest and approval of the listener.

Smile!

It's surprising how much difference a positive attitude can make. Short or long, biblical or secular, the tale needs to be told with vibrancy, passion and enthusiasm. Then, even the sorriest story will animate our listeners and raise their interest levels significantly. If we show the audience that we enjoy the story, then they will enjoy it too. In collective worship, we need to focus on the child right at the back and be determined to communicate the story to him or her. If we believe in what we are doing and project our enjoyment of the story, we will hold our listeners in the palm of our hand.

When I was younger and tended to embellish my experiences with rather fanciful narrative, adults told me sharply, 'Don't tell stories!' I think they meant 'Don't tell lies' and with that I heartily agree. Stories, on the other hand, are not lies, even though many of them are not factually true. (If stories had to be 'true', we would require Jesus to prove that the good Samaritan, the sower and the prodigal son all existed independently of the parables in which they appeared.) The fictional nature of parables and stories makes them no less valuable to us. They continue to be a vital resource in the communication of education, entertainment and encouragement.

GATHERING RESOURCES

Although stories are at the heart of an assembly, we will need to have access to a great many more resources if we want to make an effective contribution to collective worship. When I first started taking 'assembly', back in the 1970s, people generally had to make it up as they went along, coming up with their own ideas and trusting in the innate power of the story. Nowadays, I'm glad to say, there is a veritable treasure house of material available to use with various age groups. A great deal of this is accessible through the Internet (see, especially, www.barnabasinschools.org.uk).

Most of the collective worship material that is available in book form has been written for anyone to

use. Provided we check the copyright permissions and so on, it is fine just to go ahead and use it. It is well worth taking a stroll around a local Christian bookshop and leafing through some of the material that is on offer in this format. As I just mentioned, the Internet is also a very useful source of collective worship material: as well as Barnabas, many Christian publishers and children's organisations have excellent websites. For Anglicans, the diocesan children's and schools' officers will have much to offer. Try logging on to a local diocesan website for information on the work being done by the education department. In my diocese of Chelmsford, there is a scheme allowing schools to become affiliates for a modest fee, thus enabling them to access many good training and partnership prospects.

It is, of course, important to be creative in the use of other people's material. Anybody can simply rehash someone else's ideas, repeating parrot-fashion what another person has put together. The best value to be gained from using someone else's material is to let it become a springboard for our own thoughts, applied to our own context. The stories and ideas I glean from a variety of books are always better for being adapted to the local scene and the kind of children I am addressing. It is only common courtesy to credit the originator of the idea where that is appropriate, but there is no reason why those same ideas should not encourage our own creative abilities to rise. We need to use our imagination, our own adapted visual aids, our own voice characterisation and so on. Our collective worship will then become as individual and unique as we are.

The best resource of all, without doubt, is the Bible. When I first introduce people to the Bible, I remind them that it is not actually a book but a library. There are 66 books in this library, each of them with its own particular appeal. The Bible is far more than just a story book, history book, poetry book or theology book: it is a huge resource that encompasses all these things and a great deal more.

Each of the assemblies set out in the assembly books I have written includes a Bible link—a passage

from the Bible to read before taking the act of collective worship. Sometimes it is good to read the Bible aloud to children or listen to someone else read it, live or recorded. It is also good to encourage children themselves to read a portion of the Bible aloud (with help if needed). Modern translations of the Bible are invaluable and it may also be helpful to look at modern paraphrases. The translation I use throughout my assembly books is the Contemporary English Version (CEV). Once again, the Internet has some good links to Bible sites, such as www.biblegateway.com or www.bible.com. I have found many fascinating pages on these sites and a host of Bible translations in many languages and styles.

The Bible is now available in many formats as well as different translations. Lance Pierson, in his book *Storytelling*, is particularly good at bringing Bible stories to life, and my old friend Roly Bain persuades us to look at many of them in ever more innovative ways. We can take the time to study the different ways in which people handle the Bible but we can also allow God to stir up our own creative ideas so that we present those wonderful stories in our own way. The Bible itself says, 'Do your best to win God's approval as a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed and who teaches only the true message' (2 Timothy 2:15). We owe it to ourselves and the children and adults we work with to become good students of the Bible—like avid miners, digging deep into it to unearth all the treasures it holds. But a word of warning: once we set ourselves to examine and study the word of God, we will never be the same, for the Bible is the only volume I know that reads its reader. Here's a final word for next week's assembly. Question: What colour should a Bible be? Answer: Read!

In conclusion, careful preparation, building a positive environment, making use of the resources available and communicating the truth in an engaging and professional manner should ensure that collective worship is one of the most rewarding activities we can experience.

The Toolshed Gang

Jimmy the Jigsaw

STORYTELLING METHOD

Narrative with visual aids and some pupil participation



Preparation

You will need to allow yourself time to find a toolbox and, if necessary, someone who will display it. Make sure all the 'characters' are available in the box (see below).



Bible link

Colossians 3:5–10, 12–17

FOLLOW-UP

This assembly is quite hard-hitting and deals with a number of highly emotive issues. Be prepared to face these issues sensitively with the children. You could ask the following questions: How did Paula feel when Jimmy called her names? The story says she was 'rather short and fat', so why was it wrong for Jimmy to call her that? How did Paula feel when she was accused of stealing? What did her friends do to try to help? Why did Jimmy say he was the Master Builder's favourite? Why was he so unkind to Paula? Why did he tell lies? Do you know any bullies? What do they do or say? How can you stand up to bullies? (Emphasise the importance of telling a teacher, parent or trusted grown-up rather than trying to get your own back.) How hard is it to tell the truth or to own up when you do something wrong? Was Pontifex the Power Saw good or bad in his behaviour? What would you say to Jimmy to help him to change?

End this session by emphasising school policies on bullying, name-calling, truth-telling and respect for others.



Visual aids

- ❖ A toolbox with a selection of tools including a large hammer, a chisel, a screwdriver and a pair of pliers
- ❖ A jigsaw
- ❖ Alternatively or, preferably, in addition, pictures of the characters to show or project

Helpful hints: See page 23 for safety advice on handling tools.



Main themes

Telling lies, name calling and bullying

Further topics covered

Conflict resolution and character building



Prayer

Father God, show me every day the importance of telling the truth and owning up when I do wrong. Help me not to tell lies or call people bad names. Thank you, God. Amen



Songs

I want to be a tree that's bearing fruit (KS)
So if you think you're standing firm (KS)
Jesus, Jesus, here I am (KS)



Once upon a time, not so long ago, in a shed at the bottom of the garden, was a toolbox. I don't know its name but it was big and it was strong and it had many tools inside it. It belonged to the Master Builder and he loved it and all the tools inside it.

Four of the tools were particularly important. They were good friends who did a lot of work together. Let's meet them, shall we?

As you introduce the four main characters, you can take them out of the toolbox and/or show them on the screen.

First, there was Billy the Big Hammer. He was strong and liked working but was inclined to be a bit hard-headed. He was also a lot bigger than Sally the Small Hammer, who was only used for the more delicate jobs. Next there was Clara the Chisel. She was tall and slim but also had rather a sharp tongue. After her came Sammy the Screwdriver. He could turn himself to most jobs and was particularly useful at getting in and out of scrapes. Finally, there was Paula the Pliers. Although she was rather short and fat, once she got a grip on something, she never let go!

'You're lazy, you're too fat and you smell funny!' said Jimmy the Jigsaw to Paula the Pliers as she sat by the toolbox after a hard day's work.

You could show a jigsaw at this point and carefully point out that in this case it is a type of saw and not a puzzle that you put together on a table!

Jimmy the Jigsaw had only been in the toolshed for a few weeks but some of the tools were quickly beginning to realise that he wasn't really very nice. He'd been niggling Paula for some days now. He often had a sharp or unkind word to say, but usually when nobody else was listening.

'You're not nearly as clever as me,' said Jimmy unkindly as Paula sat up with tears in her eyes. 'I can go into all kinds of places you can't, and I'm MB's favourite!'

'MB?' sniffed Paula. 'Who's that?'

'M... B... Master Builder. Don't you even know that, Potty Paula?' sneered Jimmy and he pushed her with his sharp blade. 'Well, I guess only the special tools call him MB.' He laughed in her face and went off.

Billy and Clara found Paula sobbing by herself later on. 'He's so nasty to me,' she told them, 'and I've never done anything to him!'

'Dry your eyes, Paula,' said Clara kindly to her friend. 'We have to stand up to bullies. We're your friends. We'll stick with you.'

'Don't worry, Paula,' said Billy the Big Hammer. 'I'll have a word with Ritchie and Reggie. They'll sort Jimmy out!'

Just then, Sammy the Screwdriver jumped down beside them. 'Have you heard the news? There's quite a fuss going on in the toolshed. Someone's taken the Master Builder's apron and he can't get any work done!' Paula's problems were quite forgotten as all the tools began to talk excitedly about the problem. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

Later that day, Oily Fred gathered all the tools together and asked if anyone had seen the Master Builder's apron. It had been taken from the door earlier that day. 'I bet Jimmy's nicked it,' whispered Clara to Paula as they stood together. 'It would be just like him!'

Paula took a deep breath. She remembered the need to stand up to bullies. 'Why don't you ask Jimmy if he's seen it, Oily Fred?' she shouted out suddenly. All the other tools turned and looked at her.

'I haven't seen it at all, Mr Oily Fred, sir,' said Jimmy in his nicest voice. 'Why, I've been here in the toolbox all day with my friend Mr Power Saw, haven't I, Ponty?' He turned to the large and impressive figure of Pontifex the Power Saw, who nodded in confirmation. 'I wouldn't dream of touching the Master's apron!'

Just then, the tall figure of Ritchie Rasp pushed through the crowd. 'Ere, Oily!' he called. 'Look

what Reggie's found.' And he held up a piece of creased and dirty material. The Master's apron!

'We nearly missed it,' explained Ritchie, 'but Reggie and me, we don't give up easily. We got an inside tip-off, see? We found it, shoved in a corner, in her quarters!' And he turned suddenly and pointed to Paula.

Paula the Pliers was stunned. 'I'm so disappointed in you,' wheezed Oily Fred. 'I thought you were such a good pair of pliers.' He turned sadly away to take the apron back to the Master Builder. Paula burst into tears.

Many of the other tools wouldn't talk to her after that. Sammy, Billy and Clara tried to console her but it was no good. She took to sitting on her own and was often unavailable for work.

Later that week, Jimmy the Jigsaw found her on the edge of the workbench, all alone. She tried to move away but Jimmy stopped her, blocking her path with his long sharp blade. 'Leave me alone!' cried Paula. 'I've never done anything to hurt you.'

'Really?' said Jimmy, cruelly giving Paula's little green legs a sharp nip. 'What about accusing me of stealing the other day? And all the time it was you—you bad, lazy, fat, smelly little pair of pliers. Why don't you do all of us a favour and jump off the bench?' And he looked down suggestively into the depths below.

'But it wasn't me, it wasn't!' complained Paula. 'I didn't take anything. I don't know how the Master's apron got into my corner.'

'But I do, little fat Potty Paula,' said Jimmy in his nastiest voice. 'I do! You see, I took it from the back of the door when MB was washing his hands. I took it and I put it into your corner, and now I've got Ponty's word I was with him all the time, and he's the biggest tool in the box. Nobody will believe you and nobody wants to be your friend, and if you tell anybody anything bad about me you'll wish you'd never been made!' And he jabbed Paula's legs once more to make his point.

'Well, I think we've heard enough,' came a funny squeaky voice, and Oily Fred stepped out from

behind the toolbox. 'Jimmy! I need a word with you!'

Jimmy gave a lopsided smile. 'Me, Mr Oily Fred, sir? I was just sitting here trying to cheer Paula up. She's so sad.'

'The game's up, Jimmy,' said Billy, stepping out to join Oily Fred and then being joined by the other two friends. 'Pontifex the Power Saw confessed everything,' explained Sammy. 'Paula's off the hook.'

Jimmy the Jigsaw was taken away snarling and swearing and wasn't seen again in the toolbox by any of the other tools. I'd like to think he made a public apology to Paula but I don't think he ever did.

Clara the Chisel comforted Paula later that day. 'You were great,' she said to her friend. 'You stood up to a bully and told the truth, and that's what matters!'

I think she was right, don't you?