

Creating an Interfaith Curriculum for Kids

Part Two of a Three-Part Series
by Vicki Garlock, PhD

The theme was peace. I chose it because I thought it would be easy. Peace is the central message in numerous Bible stories, and they came to mind readily – Isaiah’s vision of a peaceful kingdom, Jesus calming the storm, Jesus healing the hemorrhagic woman, the mission of the seventy. All are great stories for kids to read or hear. More importantly, “peace” would be amenable to interfaith exploration.

When I started the job as curriculum developer at our progressive Christian church, it was made clear to me that families really wanted their kids to know the Judeo-Christian stories. But after spending a year on the job, I had concluded that an open-minded approach to the Bible was still too limiting. The adults in our community, who participated in the church service while the kids were in Sunday school, were already practicing interfaith rituals. They were calling in the four directions at the beginning of the service, a practice grounded in the neo-pagan tradition. The minister was ringing a Buddhist bowl to initiate prayer time, and our sanctuary contains hundreds of Buddhist prayer flags hanging from the rafters. Occasionally, someone would even construct a sukkah over the altar for the Jewish holiday of Sukkot.

Outside the walls of our church, however, America was still reeling from the events of 9/11. We had troops on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq, and anti-Muslim sentiment ran high. It would be years before my kids could

vote, hold office, or operate as change-agents, but as a parent and an educator, I knew we desperately needed to start somewhere. I felt called to create something unique, age-appropriate, and wide-ranging for the kids in our program. It might be a small contribution, but at least it would be something.

Unfortunately, I had no idea how to accomplish the task I had set for myself. I had never read any other sacred texts. **I had no idea how parents of other religious traditions raised their children. I started with a copy of the Qur’an and a supplemental book called *Understanding the Koran*.**

The supplemental book was easy to read, but reading the Qur’an – even in English – proved incredibly difficult. Frankly, it was sleep-inducing. I realized that I had never read the Bible from beginning to end either – for similar reasons. There had to be another way. And that’s when I received a big dose of inspiration from my then 10-year-old daughter.

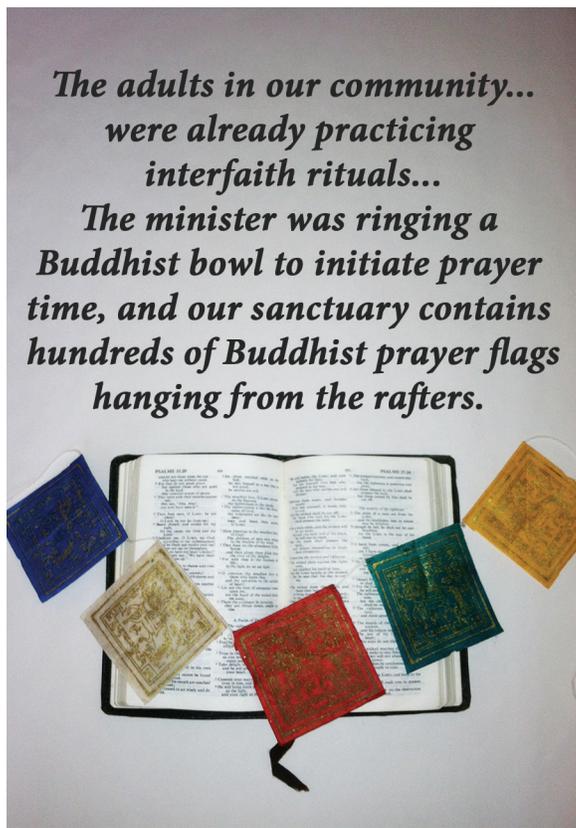
She was learning to use computers at school. We were thinking about buying a laptop for her because she had just been given her first school assignment requiring an internet search. In the process of teaching her to conduct internet searches, I started to wonder if a version of the Qur’an were freely available online. And the walls came tumbling down.

Multiple translations of sacred texts exist on the internet, and many sites include search functions. The Internet Sacred Text Archive offers complete copies of texts from all the major world religions. Since many of the translations are more than 90 years old, they are in the public domain. There are sites for searching multiple translations of the Qur’an and the Hadith and sites offering side-by-side comparisons of the Tao Te Ching and the Qur’an. There are online versions of the Vedas and the writings of the Bahá’u’lláh; there are searchable versions of the Pali Canon and the Bhagavad Gita. The list goes on and on. I couldn’t bookmark sites fast enough. I did buy various texts for my bookshelves, but now I had an entry point.

My online adventures paid huge dividends when it came to the older kids in our program, (i.e., upper elementary and middle school kids), but there was still much work to be done for the kids in preschool, kindergarten, and the lower elementary grades. The older kids actually read passages from the Bible, so it made sense for them to read passages from these other ancient texts. The younger kids, however, have tales from Bible storybooks read to them. What did parents from other religions do? Did they read scriptures to their children? Unlike the Bible, many writings from other faith traditions are not in story format.

The Tao Te Ching is abstract and philosophical, the Buddhist teachings are long and repetitive, and the Qur'an is poetic with references scattered non-chronologically throughout. Where were their children's stories?

It was time to get off my computer and telephone a few real people! I have two friends/colleagues who are priests in the Buddhist tradition – one from



the Zen tradition and one from the Tibetan tradition. “Oh yes,” they assured me. “There are all sorts of stories for children in the Asian traditions.” “Well where are they?!” I demanded somewhat frantically. “How can I find them?” My Tibetan friend suggested *Buddha at Bedtime* by Dharmachari Nagaraja. On the very first page, it explained that the stories are retellings of the Jataka Tales – narratives in which the Buddha appears in various forms from his past lives. The Jataka

Tales led to the Panchatantra Tales – animal fables from ancient India that may have served as the basis for some of Aesop’s fables. Now that I had the correct terms, a quick internet search revealed numerous versions – both in written and video form – online. I started ordering books that retold the creation tales of various native peoples from around the world. Eventually, I found the Qisas al-Anbiya – tales that expand on the lives of prophets mentioned in the Qur’an. I also ordered books about holidays in other faith traditions. I was astounded by the number of options. Many books are published individually, but two series — *Holidays Around the World* for the upper elementary kids and *Rookie Read-About Holidays* for our younger kids— provided a great start.

I soon realized it was time to leave my office. I could accomplish an amazing amount of work by reading books, browsing the internet, and talking on the phone, but I harbored only vague notions of what other faith practices actually looked like. I had never visited a dharma center or stepped foot in a synagogue. I had never fasted for Ramadan, bought a ticket for a Jewish High Holy Day, or chanted at a kirtan. I didn’t even know what a dhikr was. Asheville, NC is

hardly an urban center, but plenty of interfaith opportunities were available once I started looking. I began to meet faith leaders from the community and to get a first-hand glimpse into how others connect with the divine. Most importantly, I got to think about how I could share their rituals and practices with kids of various ages.

I had the pieces I needed to create a multi-age, multi-year, Bible-based interfaith Sunday school curriculum.

Now it was “just” a matter of putting the pieces together. First, I needed to develop my themes and find the associated Bible stories. Then, I needed to find stories and passages from the other faith traditions that would relate, in some form or another, to those themes and stories. For the younger kids, the connections would need to be straight-forward and concrete to match their cognitive abilities. For the older kids, the connections could be slightly more abstract, and they could engage in more comparing and contrasting. Obviously, their abilities are not yet at adult levels, but I wanted to take advantage of their burgeoning cognitive skills. Once I had the verses and stories, I needed to turn them into Sunday school lessons and that meant adding crafts and activities.

I still had a long way to go, but the path ahead of me was clear. And, my initial instinct was correct: peace was a great place to begin. Over the years, I have been heartened by the kids’ capacity to open their hearts and minds. I have been amazed by our Sunday school teachers who are willing to explore along with them. And I am so grateful for the opportunity to connect with others – not in spite of their faith traditions, but because of them.



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