

Welcome Facilitators!

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est
(Where charity and love are, there is God)

We could spend our entire lives arguing about who and what God is. In fact, some people do! Or, we could make it really simple and acknowledge that wherever there is love, peace, compassion, tolerance, acceptance, and understanding, the Divine is present. That is the single-sentence, theological foundation of this curriculum.

At Faith Seeker Kids, we believe that each child should be allowed to discern his/her own faith path. Each child must find ways to articulate who/what the Divine is; to ascertain preferred methods for accessing the Divine presence; and to discover methods for staying connected to God, to the earth, and to humanity. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his book *Faith and Belief: The Difference between Them* (One World Publications, 1998), said this:

Faith, then, is a quality of human living. At its best it has taken the form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service: a quiet confidence and joy which enable one to feel at home in the universe, and to find meaning in the world and in one's own life, a meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event.

Our goal is not to produce “happy kids” or mini-religious scholars. Our goal is to provide kids with the tools they need to walk their faith path – whatever that looks like and wherever it might lead.

Thanks for being part of the journey!

OVERALL APPROACH

This Peace unit consists of 15 lesson plans: an Introductory lesson, one Old Testament/Hebrew Bible lesson, five New Testament/Christian Bible lessons, and eight lessons from other cultures/traditions (Native American, Islamic, Hasidic, Sikh, Sufi, Hindu/Vedic, Buddhist, and Sub-Saharan African).

This edition is designed for faith communities, so background information for each tradition focuses on age-appropriate aspects of religious practice. Our overall goal is to provide kids with some understanding about how humans – from around the world and over the course of history – have tried to address life's big questions about who we are, how we might live lovingly with one another, and how we might verbalize and access that which is Sacred.

Leaders in all faith traditions and communities advocate for peace. Sometimes, one finds uncanny similarities in the way that occurs; other times, one finds glaring differences. And even young kids will sometimes disagree. One of my favorite stories comes from our Preschool-Kindergarten class. The facilitator was reading about Moses' adventure on Mount Sinai. The question posed to the kids was this: What does God look like to you? A mild argument ensued as three kids each tried to convince the others of their viewpoints. One child said she already knew what God looked like: God was an old man with a white beard and he lived “right over there” as she pointed to a non-descript, but distant, corner of the room. Another child took issue with her claim and asserted that “God is everywhere.” A third child was quick to point out that both classmates were mistaken since “God lives inside you.”

PEACE

This level of articulation and wonderment increases exponentially during the middle school years. Jean Piaget, one of the best-known developmental theorists of the 20th century, was one of many people who recognized a noticeable shift in the way middle-schoolers think. They begin to ponder abstract concepts – like freedom and peace – in a more adult-like way. They can also hold onto, and mentally manipulate, several different perspectives at once. These cognitive changes mean that ethical and moral issues both occupy and fascinate middle-schoolers in a whole new way.

Another developmental psychologist of the 20th century, Erik Erikson, focused more on the sociocultural aspects of development. But he also noticed an important shift that begins in the middle school years. Erikson specifically highlighted the identity formation work that begins during the adolescent period. Tweens, teens, and young adults spend a lot of time focusing on their vocational, political, and sexual paths as they embark on a more grown-up version of self-discovery. Questioning authority, feeling confused, and being keenly aware of how one is viewed by others are all hallmarks of this development period.

Scholars in the field of religious education incorporate similar ideas into their models. For example, Bruce Powers calls this particular stage of faith formation “Reality Testing.” John Westerhoff refers to it as “Searching Faith.” But these theorists are simply articulating what anyone who works with middle-schoolers already knows: they are beginning the years-long transition from childhood to adulthood. As part of this process, they will eventually form their own conclusions about faith-based beliefs and practices. And some of them will settle on conclusions that differ considerably from the standards of their families, congregations, and communities.

Facilitating a middle-school classroom is therefore a great honor. You are on the front end of their adult-like faith journey as these fledgling birds prepare to leave the nest. You get to create a safe space for asking questions, you get to encourage self-expression, and you get to teach them how to listen respectfully when others share thoughts that differ from theirs. This curriculum is here to help by providing opportunities for exploring stories, Biblical passages, moral lessons, and peace-related themes in an age-appropriate way. You don’t need to have all the answers or be strong in your own faith; you simply need to appreciate the privilege of being their guide. The rest will take care of itself.

The Bible and Other Sacred Texts

About ½ of the lesson plans in this curriculum focus on stories found in the Christian Bible. For these lessons, the passages come directly from the Bible and provide an introduction to the Bible as the sacred text of Christianity. We have used several different translations throughout the Peace unit, including the New Revised Standard Version, the English Standard Version, the Contemporary English Version, and the World English Bible.

Many kids this age have heard only storybook versions of the Bible stories. Since the Bible can be somewhat complex – both in terms of vocabulary and content – the stories are broken down into manageable chunks. We have also provided opportunities to review vocabulary words, story illustrations to serve as a visual anchors, and prompts to re-read certain passages if necessary. We have also clarified certain pronouns; these clarifications are in brackets to indicate our changes to the wording. For example, we might use [Jesus] where the passage says “he,” or we might use [disciples] where the passage says “them.” You can read the passage as though the brackets aren’t there, but we felt it was important to note our edits in a relatively non-obtrusive way. For some of the Bible-based lessons, we have also included a “Modern-Day” section that focuses on relatively recent Nobel Peace Prize winners whose work somehow relates to that day’s readings. We hope this helps the kids recognize that many Biblical themes are still relevant today.

The Bible-based lessons also include short passages from the sacred texts of other traditions, including the Tao Te Ching, the Qur'an, the Buddhist canon, the Guru Granth Sahib, and the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. Presented as “Cross-Faith Connections,” these sections offer age-appropriate opportunities to explore similarities/differences between the texts. Middle-schoolers are not yet capable of adult-like literary comparisons across texts, but some of them will certainly be capable of recognizing how these stories might be interpreted metaphorically. They can also comprehend that legitimate, but differing, opinions can exist about the same topic.

We highly recommend buying copies of the various faith-based texts, particularly the Qur'an and the Tao Te Ching. Showing these texts demonstrates, quickly and easily, that these writings are analogous to the Christian Bible. On the one hand, many people revere them as divine revelations/wisdom. On the other hand, they are books – just like any other book – with a front cover, a back cover, chapters, verses, etc. Sacred texts can be purchased (used, if you prefer) on-line or in bookstores. You can also download them as apps. for your phone, or simply access them (for free) on various web sites.

Use of Narratives

The remaining lesson plans in the curriculum make use of the rich narratives found in the various religions/cultures of the world. These stories have, in some cases, been shared with children for centuries – passed down from generation to generation orally, eventually put into writing, and eventually translated into English. We have the tales of the Panchatantra (from the Hindu/Vedic tradition); folk stories from indigenous traditions; the Jataka Tales (from the Buddhist tradition); and legends about the Sufi masters, the Hasidic rabbis, the Prophet Muhammad (from the Islamic tradition), and the ten human Gurus (from the Sikh tradition).

We have written our own versions of these narratives for this curriculum. In nearly all cases, we were able to find at least two different versions to compare/contrast; in some cases, we were able to find numerous versions. The narratives for the Middle School group are about 1,000-1,200 words long. They are divided into three or four parts with questions after each part. Some questions focus on story content, some help the tweens apply story events to their own lives, and some are just for fun. All are designed to keep them engaged in the story, its characters, and its teachable moments. As with the Bible-based lessons, an illustration is included for each narrative, and a prompt for sharing it is provided.

Creative Responses and Activities

In all the different faith traditions, kids acquire knowledge through experience. Our curriculum, like most other Christian Education curricula, makes use of crafts (which we call Creative Responses) and activities. Many of these experiential learning opportunities were informed by other faith communities, including Buddhist sanghas, Jewish synagogues, Hindu/Vedic craft web sites, Islamic centers, and Neo-Pagan/Wiccan gatherings. Time and again, our overall sense was one of fellowship and camaraderie. That is, despite all the faith-related differences, the education of kids in all traditions looks incredibly similar to a typical Christian Education class.

We have put special effort into designing crafts for the middle school level that are interesting yet easily-completed in about 20 minutes. The crafts also use inexpensive, readily-available supplies. Most everything can be bought at your local craft store; where appropriate, we also suggest the use of recycled/recyclable materials or items from nature. Although some middle-schoolers will take their crafts home to decorate their bedrooms, most of them are no longer planning to hang their crafts on the family refrigerator. It's therefore helpful to think about what role crafts might play in the middle school classroom. We have found the crafts to be useful in at least four different ways:

PEACE

- 1) Crafts can keep hands busy while the group is working its way through the lesson plan. If this is the case for your group, you might want to put out the supplies at the beginning of class, so they can start working on parts of the craft while learning.
- 2) Crafts can offer opportunities for group process. Certain steps in the construction of the craft might appeal more to one person than another. If so, consider having the kids pair up or work in teams. In this way, the kids can teach one another, and each person can make a contribution. Also, this approach often leads to a slightly better final product. In our experience, middle-schoolers often act like they don't care about the craft, but they clearly exhibit a sense of pride when they've created something that is both unique and decently-made.
- 3) Crafts can be fun. Classroom facilitators are amazingly good at adapting curricular elements for their own specific needs, but we've also provided some additional ideas to help with that. If the craft requires lots of counting, try doing that in different languages. If the craft requires hammering nails, try creating some sort of rhythm while doing it. You know your kids best, so be innovative!
- 4) Crafts can serve as a reminder that we are all co-creators with the Divine. We want the kids to be creative, imaginative, and resourceful. We also want them to be inspired, not just by their own creations, but by the creations of their friends and peers, as well.

Activities function in much the same way. For the Peace unit, our activities largely focus on group process. They often require class members to work together cooperatively, and they are designed to ensure that everyone plays an integral role in the overall effort. In many cases, we have also provided post-activity discussion questions to highlight certain concepts or principles.

SPECIAL FEATURES FOR MIDDLE SCHOOLERS

Smartphone Time

We all know middle-schoolers love to be on their smart phones. In fact, I probably wouldn't recognize my own middle-schooler without his gaming headphones! Rather than admonish the kids for having their smartphones in class, we have incorporated technology into the lesson plan. Each lesson contains a brief time period where the tweens are asked to use their smartphones to complete a task. Our experience suggests that it's easier for them to put their phones away if they know they will be able to get them out at some point in the near future. It's also a good reminder that they can be unplugged – for brief amounts of time – without having the sky fall. For kids who don't have smartphones, we find that the kids with smartphones are more than eager to share.

Having said all that, if you have a “no-phones” policy in your classroom/program, please feel free to skip this portion of the lesson plan. The Smartphone Time sections are intended to take only about five minutes, and in most cases, you can easily teach those points on your own.

Handouts of Readings

Many middle-schoolers can also read quite well. For that reason, we have included a handout of the readings for each lesson plan. Please feel free to photocopy the handouts, so each class member has one. Some middle-schoolers love to read out loud for the group and will regularly offer to do so. Others will not be as comfortable reading aloud but will use the handouts to follow along. The handouts also facilitate discussion since everyone can look on the handouts to find answers to some of the questions being asked.

Developing an Opening/Closing Ritual

Beginning/ending your class session with a brief (5-7 minute) ritual is an excellent way to incorporate the peace theme into the classroom experience. Many of us either participate in, or lead, rituals for adults. Yet, Americans often bemoan the lack of ritual in our society. If we want ritual to be a vibrant thread in our cultural fabric, we need to offer ritual more often and in more ways. And we need to start with our kids.

Below, you will find some general guidelines for creating an opening/closing ritual.

General Guidelines

Step 1: Indicate the start of the ritual with a special sound or phrase (e.g., ring a bell, sound a Buddhist bowl, or use a pleasant alarm sound from a cell phone).

Step 2: Create a ritual space by providing the necessary instructions for gathering everyone together (e.g., stand around an object, sit on pillows).

Step 3: Focus attention and bring awareness to the body/breath (e.g., by inhaling/exhaling, by adopting a prayer posture).

Step 4: Offer a brief ritual activity (e.g., contribute a thought/ feeling/reflection, share a special object).

Step 5: Bring awareness back to the body/breath.

Step 6: Indicate the end of the ritual with a closing word/phrase (e.g., amen, oh yeah, aho, aahhh) or sound (e.g., bell, Buddhist bowl).

Putting the Kids in Charge

Our recommendation is to let the tweens create and lead their own opening/closing rituals. There are various ways for them to do that. For example, you could spend the first day designing a ritual, as a group, that will be used throughout the unit. You, as the Facilitator, can lead the ritual the first few times. Then, each class member who is willing can take a turn once everyone is familiar with the routine.

Alternatively, you could create small groups of 2-3 kids and have each group design a ritual. Use one ritual for a few weeks and then switch to a new one. If you have kids who are comfortable with one another and/or really brave, encourage individual kids to design and share a ritual with the group.

A LITTLE ON LOGISTICS

A few practical details probably deserve mention.

Timing

The lesson plans are designed to take about one hour, but they are easily adapted to 45-minute or 75-minute time slots.

Previews

Each lesson plan consists of slightly different subsections. The Preview, at the beginning of each lesson plan, will give you a sense of what's included for that particular lesson. In all cases, there is a Review section, a Background section, a Lesson/Story/Bible Passages section, a Creative

PEACE

Response, an Activity, and a Smartphone Time. For the Bible-based lessons, there is also a Cross-Faith Connection section. Sometimes, more than one craft or activity is provided and, sometimes, there is a Modern-Day section.

Sequencing

There is some method to the sequencing of the lessons, but they are not chronological in any sense. The Review and Background sections will be most affected by presenting the lessons out of sequence. In contrast, the Lesson/Story/Bible Passages, Cross-Faith Connection, Creative Response, and Activity sections are designed to stand on their own.

Pronunciation

One aspect of interfaith education that makes adults nervous is pronunciation, so we've included easy-to-interpret pronunciation guides (rather than the more official International Phonetic Alphabet).

However, we cannot stress this point enough: do not worry about pronunciation! Mispronunciations are not considered crimes in any faith tradition. Moreover, in many cases, we have simply suggested pronunciations that seem most common in our experience. Even within traditions, pronunciations vary widely across sect, denomination, country, and region of the world. Here's an example from "Hinduism," a term that refers, rather loosely, to the religious and cultural practices of India. While many Hindus share common sacred texts and rituals, there is no governing body or agreed-upon religious authority. Major holy days vary from country to country, and even from region to region within a country. Even popular deities, like Ganesh, are known by different names (e.g., Ganesha, Ganapati, Vinayaka, Binyak). Given such variability, it's easy to imagine the wide range of possible pronunciations. Multi-syllabic words, especially in the Asian traditions, are also frequently said with no clearly-accented syllable, which is difficult for native English speakers to imitate.

The variability observed in pronunciation is also reflected in how words are spelled. In Islam, "dhikr," the practice of repeatedly reciting short prayers or the names of God, can also be written as "zikr." Similarly, in the Neo-Pagan/Wiccan tradition, the goddess of sacred wells and the hearth can be written as Brigid or Brigit. In nearly all cases, we have chosen to use the Wikipedia spelling. This is partly to make it easier to investigate topics on your own.

Please remember: the content is significantly more important than pronunciations/spellings. Do the best you can and maintain your sense of adventure!

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Ajahn Chah, a much-loved Buddhist teacher and founder of the Thai Forest Tradition, often said, "If you can't practice in the city, you can't practice in the forest." For him, faithful living was an ongoing endeavor that transcended time, place, and circumstance. Similar views are found in Christianity (as reflected in a disdain for "Sunday morning Christians"), as well as the other major world religions. If we want our kids to embody peace, day-in and day-out, we need to help them connect the concept of peace with people and events in their daily lives. Here are a few of our suggestions for transcending the classroom walls.

Take-Home Opportunities

At the end of each lesson, we provide a Take-Home Opportunity so kids and families can acknowledge, remember, or practice some aspect of peace during the week. For the Middle School group, we also provide time at the beginning of each class to share thoughts/experiences from the previous week.

Guest Speakers

Inviting members of other cultures/religions to visit your classroom is a great way to connect with your community. Encourage guest speakers to bring ritual items or articles of clothing as “props.” Visitors can also read, or tell, a favorite story from their tradition.

Community Service

We also encourage pairing at least one community service project with the unit. There are numerous ways to bring peace to the world, even for kids, and community service projects are certainly one way to do that. Here are some projects to consider.

Do something kind for animals, like facilitating a pet-food drive or making DIY pet toys. This pairs well with Lesson 2: Muhammad – Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, Lesson 7: Isaiah Imagines a Peaceful Kingdom, or Lesson 9: Krishna Saves the World.

Collect spare change and decide, as a class, where to donate the money. This pairs well with Lesson 11: Dhat’s Magical Journey, although we also offer this as an option for the last lesson (Lesson 15: Merchant and Rabbi Find Peace).

Collect gently-used clothing, toys, books or stuffed animals and donate them to other kids. This pairs well with Lesson 10: Jesus and His Mission of Peace.

Pick up trash around your neighborhood. This pairs well with Lesson 3: Tribal Chiefs – How Three Tribes Became One People, Lesson 8: Four Harmonious Friends, or Lesson 14: Worrying Less.

Make get-well cards to share with sick people in the community. This pairs well with Lesson 13: Sick Woman Who Found Peace.

In the Jewish tradition, there is a concept called *Yiddishkeit*, which is translated as “Jewishness.” Despite the relatively simple translation, the underlying meaning is both varied and complex. For some Jews, *Yiddishkeit* involves adhering to a rather strict set of ritual practices. For the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe, it refers to the culture, food, and music of the region. And for still other Jews, *Yiddishkeit* encompasses all the different ways in which Jews have retained their Jewish identity despite years of persecution. At its core, however, *Yiddishkeit* is about how Jews live into their faith on a daily basis. This is the attitude we want to foster when it comes to peace. We want kids to live into peace, both in and out of the classroom, as much as possible.

LET’S GET STARTED!

This curriculum offers a glimpse into how kids from around the world might learn about peace from their faith perspectives. What stories do they hear? What games do they play? What sacred texts do they read? How do they talk about the Great Mystery? And how do they honor the Sacred in their lives? Hopefully, our curriculum will serve as a small step toward a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of traditions found across the globe and in our own neighborhoods.

Thank you again for being a fellow pilgrim! Please visit FaithSeekerKids.com for more information on our theology/pedagogy, to read our blog/tweets, to view other available products, or to offer feedback. We’re always interested in hearing about what worked, what didn’t work, and how we might improve.

Shalom, Salaam, Li-k’ei, Shanti, Namaste, Peace!