

Support for the Volunteer Religious Education Teacher

Betty Jo Middleton with additional material by
Dawn Star Borchelt and others
an alphabet soup handbook
Alphabet Soup

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Designing a Support System for Volunteer Teachers in the Religious Education Program

Few, if any, religious education programs in local congregations could operate without volunteer teachers. Supporting these teachers is the single most important task for professional religious educators and religious education committees. In order to support them well, it is essential to design and implement a plan which includes the following elements.

Recruitment

Teacher support begins with the recruitment process. Clarity is essential. Volunteers need to know the nature of the job they are asked to do, supports available, and the time commitment (each week, and for how long a time period). The recruiter may be the religious educator or a member of the committee responsible for the program. In either case, the one who recruits the teacher should maintain contact with the teacher.

Staff Contact

The religious educator is the staff person who works most directly with teachers, but a minister, ministerial intern or administrative assistant may be designated as the staff contact. This contact person meets frequently with the leaders of teaching teams and at least once or twice a year with all members of the team, and provides leadership in all aspects of teacher support. The committee responsible for the program may maintain liaison with teachers also, and will be primary contacts when there is no paid religious educator.

Orientation

An orientation for all teachers, both new and experienced, precedes the beginning of the class year. This provides an opportunity to explain and clarify policies and procedures, a chance to meet others involved in the program, and inspiration. Teachers who are unable to attend will be contacted for individual meetings to go over information covered in this session. Methods recommended for use in the classes are used in this session and other teacher support meetings to provide good models for teaching. Games, exercises, and participatory activities enliven these sessions, as they will classes for all ages.

Communication

An initial letter, outlining the commitment made by the teacher (class to be taught, age group, time and dates, other members of the teaching team) will be sent out soon after recruitment and before the orientation session. Regular mailings and notes in the teachers' folders and mailboxes each Sunday will keep them informed. Prompt response will be made to comments, questions, and requests from the teacher. In addition, regular phone calls will be made by staff contact persons or committee members, or both.

Materials, Supplies, and Equipment

Curriculum materials, supplementary resources, resource lists, and critiques of the material will be provided, as will necessary supplies and equipment. A well-thought-out system for providing these will be outlined in the Procedures Manual.

A thorough, well-designed manual will place needed information at the teacher's fingertips, preventing much confusion and frustration.

Teachers need to know:

- Beginning and ending times of class
- Dates class meets Location of class
- Location of supplies, materials, and equipment

This may include forms (for field trip permissions, for example). Policies with regard to safety, code of ethics for teachers, and other such information is important to include.

Rewards and Recognitions

Plan for occasions when children, parents, church leaders, and the congregation may express appreciation and recognize the efforts of volunteer teachers. These might include a service of dedication at the beginning of the year and of appreciation at the end, a dinner for teachers with food provided by parents, gifts to teachers (especially those made by class members), and gifts to the church in honor of teachers.

Recruitment

Some ideas gleaned from various sources:

Be positive rather than issuing desperate pleas for help. Advertise that there are many ways people may serve in the program, rather than for specific positions.

Be realistic about expectations—don't make the job seem too easy or too hard.

If you have access to several phones, get a group together to make recruiting phone calls.

Be sure those who are accepted to teach are well known in the religious community; it is almost never a good idea to recruit brand new people. Some congregations do background checks on all applicants.

Publicize the support available to teachers, as in this example from the Unitarian Universalist Church of Loudoun, Leesburg, Virginia:

If you decide to teach in our religious education program, we will provide curriculum materials and supplementary resources, as well as all needed supplies and equipment. We will be clear in our expectations as to your time commitment and we will respect your need to be absent on occasion.

We will plan a teacher orientation session and provide information about other opportunities for continuing education. Throughout the year we will respond promptly to your comments, questions, and requests.

We hope you will find teaching as a religious education volunteer to be rewarding and enjoyable – Religious Education Committee

Plan for a Teacher Orientation Session

Three to five hours, plus a meal if desired

Gathering

- Name Tags** Previously prepared or to be made by participants. (If numbers are large, may be color coded to indicate teams or age groups.)
- Activity** Example: Prepare a community bulletin from a rudimentary design and provided materials.
- Example: Scavenger Hunt (in teams, or if you have few teachers, as individuals).
- Have a prepared list of items that teachers will need to be able to find on Sunday mornings, such as:
- First Aid kit
 - Dust pan
 - Supplies
 - Pencil
 - sharpener
 - Instructions for using phones to summon help
- Give winners a prize that may be shared with others.

Who We Are, Why We're Here

Introductions

Name, role (teacher of *x* class, committee member, etc.)
Perhaps an "I statement" regarding teaching ("I am a little worried about behavior problems" or "I have always enjoyed teaching and know I will this year.")

Opening worship

May be brief (chalice lighting, opening words, song) or a more substantial service including readings, a homily, responses from the group.

What Teachers Need to Know

Policies and procedures

Hand out a detailed policies and procedures manual or give information and ask for and answer questions.

Talk about the Code of Ethics and why all who work with children and youth are asked to sign it.

Schedules, classrooms, locations, other needed information.

Content for presentation

Some possibilities: Teaching and learning styles
Multiple Intelligences
Games, songs, and activities related to a theme
Learning goals and lesson plans

Team Meetings

Go over curriculum materials
Talk about each member's teaching style, favorite activities, skills, interests
Work out teaching schedule and responsibilities for each session
Set up classrooms and prepare materials, as time permits
Individuals or teams leave when they have finished, unless a group closing has been planned.

Ideas for Teacher Orientation

Gleaned from participants in Renaissance Modules and other workshops

Goals: Build community

- Provide information Model teaching methods
- Explain forms (safety, field trip, etc.) and why needed
- Instill a sense of ministry
- Establish a sense of teamwork
- Leave them feeling empowered and excited

Activities: Chalice lighting/worship

- Tour of building Singing
- Games suitable for religious education groups
- Share joys and concerns Role playing conflict situations
- Make signs and banners to welcome participants in the program

Content: Teaching and learning styles

- Teaching as ministry
- Developmental theories Justice and diversity issues
- Learning goals and lesson planning

Nuts'n'Bolts: Materials and supplies

- Rituals
- Taking attendance
- Discipline
- Substitutes
- Safety
- Snacks
- Schedules

Policies

All congregations and all religious education programs have policies. Some are written down and clearly delineated; others are more ambiguous. They cover a range of issues relating to snacks, safety, field trips, recycling, fees and fundraising, use of space, and so on and on...

All policies which impact the religious education program should be collected and distributed or posted, as well as discussed in teacher orientation, so that teachers will have the information they need to function in your particular program.

Procedures

Procedures vary from program to program, and these too should be clearly stated and made known to teachers. They explain "how to" in your specific situation, and may cover such items as:

- Communication First aid
- Fire alarms and fire drills Newsletter items Letters and postage Copying material Forms and record keeping Field trips
- Reimbursement of expenses
- Fees and fundraising
- Service projects
- Food preparation and snacks
- Class parents
- Use of shared space
- Curriculum resources
- Supplies
- Equipment
- Cleanup

Team Teaching

“By ‘team teaching’ we mean two or more people who plan together, teach together, and evaluate together. *We don't* mean ‘rotation teaching’ where people pass from Sunday to Sunday like ships in the night.”

—Eugene B. Navias

The teaching team is composed of two or more people, with one person designated as the team leader or contact person. The team meets together regularly for planning, and each member of the team works in the classroom with every other member of the team at some point. It is desirable if all members can be present on several occasions during the year. Team teaching isn't rotation teaching, but it does permit Sundays off.

Substitutes are rarely needed when there is a teaching team, because the team members are able to arrange coverage so that someone is always there. At times, a team member who teaches only one quarter will agree to substitute during other quarters.

Each teaching team needs at least one major planning meeting as the work begins. After that, brief monthly meetings, perhaps after the class will be sufficient. For many teams, once a comfortable working pattern has been established, telephone and email communication works well.

Classroom Management

Plan early enough in the week that you will have an opportunity to prepare or obtain needed materials.

Prepare the environment to be conducive to worship and learning.

Be aware that the class begins when the first child arrives; you may wish to invite early arrivals to help with set-up, or you may wish to have puzzles and quiet things to do available for them.

Encourage groups to make their own classroom rules, but if the program has certain behavioral expectations for all, make them known to children and to parents.

Learn what to expect from your age group. Young children can't be expected to sit still for long; plan a change of activities with a flow from quiet to active, sitting to moving. Even older children need a change every 20 minutes.

Several ways to use the time available for a one-hour session: Opening and/or Closing Circle	15min.s
Story and Conversation (younger children)	15 min.
Story and Discussion (older children)	20 min.
Art/craft Project (younger children)	15 min.
Art/craft Project (older children)	20 min.
Free Play or Optional Activities	10-20 min.
Songs/Games	5-20 min.

Allow time for snack if one is provided

Of course you can't do all of these at each session!

Be sure to build in clean-up times; teaching our children that we know they can be useful, helpful, self-reliant, and cooperative is a great gift.

Methods and Our Message

Our teaching approach is participative, experiential, celebrative, conversational, developmental, cooperative, and reflective. Participation in projects designed to promote and enhance social justice is a thread throughout our curriculum and our practice.

As a general rule we do not expect classes to feature lecturers speaking to passive audiences, although there may be occasions when the lecture format (with interactive audiences) may be appropriate. We do seek a maximum of class participation. Conversation, discussion, games, dramatic activities, and the use of learning centers are particularly effective.

We start with people where they are; whatever learning occurs must begin with the experiences of the learner. Insofar as possible, we design sessions so that people have an opportunity to begin with their own experiences. We learn more by doing than from hearing or seeing. Each person has a distinct learning style, based on an innate learning preference reinforced by experience. When we offer opportunities for participants to try a variety of approaches to learning in the classroom, we make it possible for the learner to operate out of individual strengths and to reinforce learning through less developed styles.

Many of the published materials we use have suggestions for closing circles or other kinds of worship experiences. These are important for people of all ages. Find time for celebration of personal milestones and accomplishments, such as birthdays, joining a sports team, school promotions or home schooling milestones, getting a new job or driver's license, becoming a parent or grandparent, a big sister, an aunt, or an uncle.

In her book *Conversations with Children*, Edith Hunter says, "Teaching religion through the give-and-take of conversation has been a method used by some of the greatest religious figures of the past." She cites Jesus, Socrates, and Buddha as examples and goes on to say that the "teacher's most important role is that of midwife to thought rather than imparter of wisdom."

In our programs, we want activities to be age appropriate. Teaching methods and learning activities are to be based on our best understanding of stages of human development and theories of learning and teaching. It is important to remember that not all seven year olds, or all 14 year olds, at the same place developmentally. This knowledge suggests that mixed-age classes with activities for a variety of age levels may help to solve problems of developmental disparity.

Cooperative learning is essential to a democratic faith. One of our chief goals is the building of community, and encouragement of competition works against that goal. In our religious education programs as well as in our witness to the world, we should encourage cooperation in learning. New educational research confirms the value of learning in small groups.

As we ask participants to share their own experiences and learning, and as we experience activities together, we need to reflect upon these experiences in order to complete the learning experience and to incorporate new learnings into our beings and into our community.

In addition to focusing on justice issues and social responsibility throughout the curriculum, specific, age-appropriate social action and responsibility projects (ranging from filling bags with toiletries for the homeless to public witness) promote the message of liberal religion.

Some Thoughts about Teachers and Teaching

“Teaching as Spiritual Guidance”

Adapted from a theme talk given at the Greater Washington Association Religious Education Council (GWAREC) Curriculum Festival September 2000 By Betty Jo Middleton

Teaching Maori children in New Zealand, Sylvia Ashton-Wamer found that those who could not read using the British textbooks and methods approved by the government, could not only read, but also write, books of their own, using the self-chosen words of the Key Vocabulary. These words—brought to the process by five year olds—were not bland, insipid “first reader” words, but rather words filled with power and meaning, and reflective of their own lives: kiss, frightened, kill, gun, ghost, beer, police, Granny, drunk. They sometimes gave her words which later proved not to be of critical interest; they couldn’t recognize them on second sight. But this never happened with “kiss” or with “frightened,” a fairly long word for new readers!

Ashton-Warner’s *organic teaching* was profoundly religious, despite being done in a back country government-sponsored school which had as part of its intent repression of the native culture. It was, I think, a good example of the teacher as a spiritual guide. She did not carry the children where someone else wanted them to go, but rather helped them equip themselves for their own journeys.

I was asked to address the topic of the religious education teacher as a spiritual guide. My acquaintanceship with “guides” is mostly with the urban tour guides who lead flocks of tourists through museums with a red umbrella held high as a beacon, to prevent clients from losing their way and ending up on busses heading for destinations for which tickets have not been issued.

The white-water rafting wilderness guide, or the Tibetan Sherpa, is perhaps a more apt comparison to that of the religious education teacher, but having no experience in those areas, I—like all teachers—must work with what I have got.

I share insights derived from some of those I have considered spiritual guides for my work in this field, in hopes that you will share your own insights as well. In 1837, Unitarian William Ellery Channing wrote “The great end in religious instruction, whether in the Sunday School or family, is not to stamp our minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own.”

Half a century later, philosopher and educational theorist John Dewey’s oft-called “child-centered approach” was a methodology which recognized “what already existed in the child—interest in conversation, inquiry, construction, and artistic expression.”

And another half-century on, Universalist Angus MacLean almost said it all with these words: “The method is the message.” What methods are worthy of *being* the message? What methods lend themselves to our seeing our roles as teachers as *spiritual guides*, rather than lecturers or drill sergeants?

The interests Dewey recognized (conversation, inquiry, construction, artistic expression) form the basis for “discovery” teaching, which leads the child toward forming his or her own meanings, using all the materials and resources at hand.

The use of appropriate questions, if done carefully, is a tool for discovery learning. But the Socratic method may have limited effectiveness in the hands of the wrong person. I give an example. Each of my children, at a certain point in time, asked the same question:

“Is there really a Santa Claus?”

Mother responds: “What do you think?”

Child: “I don’t want to tell you what I think; I want you to tell me the truth.”

Storytelling is perhaps the best and most time-honored of all teaching methods. When we do this, however, we should refrain from always telling children “what the story means.” Did Jesus explain the parables? No, we are left to make meanings for ourselves. By telling and re-telling stories through activities and projects, children do the same.

The shared praxis method of teaching, with a flow of focus, reflection, community story and vision interacting with our own stories and visions, and leading us toward action reinforces Dewey’s “experience, reflected upon” as the best teacher. We need to always remember the importance of those two words “reflected upon.”

A long-time advocate of concrete objects, learning centers, and the open classroom, I am now studying Jerome Berryman’s “Godly play” as a way to provide a structured framework for using the “artifacts, games, puzzles, and toys” I always provide in classrooms, to help children make their own meanings. The first goal of Berryman’s approach is “to model how to wonder...”

I think the most helpful suggestion I can make to those who wish to be spiritual guides to the children and youth they teach, is to think of our sessions with them more as worship, than as school. Which means, simply, to consider together those things which are of worth.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, Gabriel Moran, Maria Harris, and oh, so many others, have inspired my work in this field for lo, these many years...I invite you to think of the insights you have gained from others for this work...You are invited to offer your own thoughts on the religious education teacher as a spiritual guide to those with whom you share this important work...

19-21

Learners and Teachers All

Adapted from a sermon delivered at the First Unitarian Church in Richmond, Virginia April 1, 2001 by Betty Jo Middleton

...what came to me in the night was the realization that I don’t “do” religious education because I’ve mastered a lot of theory about it, although I have mastered some. I “do” religious education because of experiences which have shaped and transformed me, and continue to do so as I continue to reflect on them.

It started with Mrs. Waldrep and the little sheep stickers (“seals” we called them in those days) she gave us to affix to a pastoral scene with the Good Shepherd, which served as an attendance chart. This was in the choir loft of the Methodist Church, where we had a child size table and a couple of benches behind the folding chairs where the choir would sit later, during the service. Each of the other teachers—Miss Coy, Miss Eloise, and Mrs. Lovett—had her own pew to use as a classroom.

It continued through Vacation Church School, where our cousin Kathryn taught us to spatter paint leaves, using old toothbrushes, wire screening, and a bit of paint. Like Annie Dillard, who reported visiting the Unitarian church in Pittsburgh with her friend Judy Shoyer, where, she reported, “we folded paper into little geese”; I was “shocked to the core.”

The opening and closing exercises of our Sunday morning program for all ages was led by Mr. Gatlin, the Sunday School superintendent, who led us in that Unitarian statement “I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something.

What I can do, I ought to do, and what I ought to do, God helping me, I will do.” My older brother commented as an adult that whenever he saw Mr. Gatlin outside his corner store,

sprinkling water from a bowl to settle the dusty street, he thought of what that prayer meant when lived.

At those exercises we were given an opportunity, on the Sunday following each birthday, to make a birthday offering (Yes, instead of getting a treat!) There was a little silver bank into which we were allowed to drop a penny for each year, while everyone counted “One ...two...three...four ...five ...six...seven...” We couldn’t really tell how old the grownups were, for they often put in only three or four coins, and we didn’t know if they were nickels, dimes, or quarters—for all we knew they might actually be a hundred! What a thrill the day Mr. Lookadoo dropped his birthday offering in pennies, and we all counted as they dropped: “sixty-eight...sixty-nine...seventy!” Seventy years old!

Another formative experience was sitting with my Catholic cousins at the feet of Maria, Leona, or Theresa Kraesig, whichever one came to my grandmother’s house with the priest on a given “first Sunday” of the month, to teach us the catechism.

As a family, we talked about all of these experiences over Sunday dinner, and then talked about those conversations later on. My parents used to tell a story that had me, as a small child, saying that I liked church better when Mrs. Lovett played the piano, because “she jazzes it up!” What happens in our classes, groups, and activities for children and youth is important, in and of itself. The time our younger folk spend with the entire worshipping community is important, as well. But perhaps most important of all is the way we are together.

Children are good observers and learn much that we do not intend to teach.

At our best, our congregations are centers for worship, for caring, for justice-making, and for educating ourselves and those around us, and we are learners and teachers all.

22--25

What does an RE class leader do?

by Dawn Star Borchelt Davies Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church Camp Springs, Maryland

The Big Picture

Commits to being in the classroom two Sundays per month, from early September through mid-June; usually, you’ll lead the class one Sunday per month, and assist another member of your team one Sunday per month.

Comes to a leader orientation, usually a Saturday morning in early September. If you have a serious conflict with the scheduled time, you’ll be asked to meet with the DRE separately before classes begin.

Learns and abides by the RE safety policy. A copy of this written policy will be given to you and discussed at the leader orientation.

A Week in the Life of an RE Class Leader

Monday-Saturday

Call whoever led the class last Sunday to see how it went, or reflect on how it went if you were assisting.

*Read through the lesson for the coming Sunday and plan your preparations.

Notice any unusual supplies you may need— you’ll be given a list of supplies the RE program has on hand.

Decide what books and music you’ll use— some curricula require books or other materials which are available in the RE or Public libraries, while others are

self-contained.

Gather these supplies and resources yourself, or ask the DRE (by Wednesday at the latest) to help you find them.

Mentally rehearse the session

Think through what will happen, and in what order—most of our curricula have an outline for each session.

Familiarize yourself with the story you'll read or tell.

Think about questions to raise in discussion.

Make sure you feel comfortable doing the craft or activity described.

Contact your assistant to make sure he or she knows which lesson you are planning.

Sunday

10:15 Arrive at least fifteen minutes early to complete your preparations. Pick up your class folder from the RE office and check in with the DRE or Sunday Supervisor.

10:30 Enjoy the first fifteen minutes of the service with your family.

10:45 Greet the kids in your class as you leave the sanctuary.

10:45-11:45 Class time usually follows a predictable pattern:

*Gathering circle—20 minutes
Introduction of your theme for the day, sharing time.

*Story/Discussion—5 - 15 minutes *
Activities/Discussion—15 - 25
minutes *Snack—5 minutes *Closing
Circle—5 minutes

11:45 Take a few minutes to mark attendance and fill out a report for the DRE. How did the session go? What worked? What didn't?

12:00 You're done for the week!

Total Preparation Time:

About 45 minutes to 1 1/2 hours—depends on how many resources you need to find, how comfortable you with storytelling and crafts—and tends to get shorter as you become more comfortable over the course of the year.

If you are assisting—preparation is usually limited to reading through the lesson once and speaking briefly with the leader before Sunday.

Resources

Sylvia Ashton-Warner, *Teacher*. Simon & Schuster 1986.

Maria Harris, *Teaching and the Religious Imagination*. Harper & Row 1987.

bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress*. Routledge 1994.

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Corita Kent and Jan Steward. *Learning by Heart*. Bantam Books 1992.

Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching from the Heart*. Trinity Press International 1998.

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Parker J. Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*. HarperSanFrancisco, *The Courage to Teach*. Jossey-Bass, Inc. 1998.