

Leaders Guide - Lesson Planning for God Across Cultures Series

Introduction

The United Methodist Church supports full inclusion for all, including people with intellectual, developmental and physical disabilities. In 2020, the Flames, a group of teens and adults with developmental and intellectual disabilities in Minnesota, wanted to learn more about other cultures. This was timely, following global unrest after the death of George Floyd at the hands of police. Some Flames are members of non-white cultures. Over the years, we have talked about everyone being made in God's image. Using scripture, we have discussed needs, gifts, skills and ways to have more inclusion in church and community, especially for people with disabilities. The lessons create opportunities to learn more about people who look different from oneself. This series on spirituality and religion helps us understand and engage others with Jesus' kind of love.

Basis for Lessons

God in Other Cultures begins with the legacy of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar citing the beginnings of Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The **Judaism** and **Islam** lessons include shared stories and traditions in the Torah, Quran and Bible. Like subsequent lessons, they include contemporary experience and faith practices for Jewish, Muslim and Christian persons. Similar to the Disability Ministries Confirmation: Faith Development Series, the lessons include songs and videos from United Methodist sources. This helps prepare participants for worship alongside everyone in the congregation. Hands-on activities reinforce lesson themes.

Native American Spirituality lesson reflects Minnesota's Indigenous people The Anishinaabe Ojibwe (pronounced Ojibway) and Dakota Indians were early civilizations in Minnesota, who are still present. Some of the traditions (such as sacred plants) in the lesson will be familiar to learners in states with an Algonquin presence. The Anishinaabe migrated to Minnesota to find the "grain that grows on waters" (mahnomen or wild rice). Likewise, Dakota traditions are similar to other Plains Indians. If you have an opportunity, name the indigenous people in your geographic region and discuss their spiritual practices. Field trips are encouraged. The Flames visited an historical Dakota seasonal rounds location (Gibbs Farm).

The **Buddhist friends** lesson includes celebrations and ways to be with God through song and meditation. It also explains compassion for one's neighbor, a universal religious theme. Buddhism is a major world religion. The lesson reflects the large Minnesota Southeast Asian community.

The **African Methodist Episcopal** and other Black American churches lesson celebrates the role the church has played in families and communities. It also acknowledges the historical forced separation of brown and black congregations from white churches, much like people with disabilities have been excluded from worship. Learners experience a piece of church life. For instance, singing and spirituals were often sung in echo format (first the leader and then "all" sing). This also helps non-readers learn songs.

The Flames group includes several learners from **Roman Catholic** traditions. Therefore, joint beliefs and traditions are tied together in "Our Catholic Friends" lesson. Lessons survey how some differences came about. The rosary activity (and prayer beads in Islam lesson) are designed to engage learners such as those on the autism spectrum with sensory needs.

Members of the **Deaf and Hard of Hearing** community inspired this lesson in the series. While each lesson in the series supports various ways of learning and communicating, this fun lesson puts the learners in the drivers' seat. Drumming and vibrations, streamers or liturgical dance, along with body actions in praise to the Lord, and American Sign Language allow all to participate.

Pedagogy

The primary author is a family member of a person with developmental disabilities. She's been immersed in the community for decades as a Sunday school teacher, a friend and volunteer coach for people with disabilities. She grew up in a culturally diverse neighborhood and her career has included work in Native American and immigrant communities. For each lesson, scholars and people from each of the communities provided pedagogical and practical information. The series shows that demonstrating love for one's neighbor and working together with other people of faith helps us to do God's work.

Lessons offered by the Disability Ministries Committee of the United Methodist Church for teens and adults with developmental (diagnosed before age 22) and intellectual disabilities promote being in ministry together. Lessons support various personalities and learning styles. They include video clips, hands-on activities and text at a 4th grade reading level. United Methodist Hymnal songs pre-teach experiences found at church services. If learners are in a class with peers who do not have disabilities, these lessons supplement regular curriculum. Invite family and caregivers to the first session. Share how the class will prepare learners to participate at church and in the community. Answer questions and discover what motivates each student to learn (and what to avoid). Assess learners' ability to read or to be part of the class in different ways. With creativity and flexibility, the lessons can be presented in person, via a digital Zoom-type format, or through live streaming.

Digital Class Time

- Prepare leaders and learners for upcoming classes. For instance, mail and/or electronically send lessons a few days in advance, along with an invitation and a link for the session. State who will read, sign, clap, drum or ring bells for specific parts of class (highlight names at the beginning of their parts). Provide engaging, hands-on activity kits for the discussion time. These are similar to the activities that are used in classroom settings. About an hour before class, send a text to each household, include the link and the time.
- Try to open the meeting at least 5 minutes in advance. Seek a co-host with technical experience. Let people into the meeting and greet them. The co-host can help walk through participants who want to un-mute, show themselves (share video), be heard, use closed caption, and see everyone in the group. You or the co-host should be able to mute people during parts of the class, if necessary.
- In class, engage each learner three or more times, with a question, opportunity to read, or share in other ways. Help people find their places by referencing the icons (Bible, Music Note, Praying Hands). Some participants will engage for the 45 minutes to hour-long class. Others engage for 15 minutes. It's ok; they got to be with their Christian friends. Household members may join the group. Value their contributions.

In-person Classroom Time

- Prepare in advance. Gather materials. Ask a designated tech person to check videos and links before each session. Adapt lessons to fit the likes, abilities and disabilities of your learners (i.e., video may be at beginning of class or before the activity).
- Greet everyone by name.
- Write the theme of the day in large letters on a board to help everyone stay on track.
- Help non- or emerging readers by reading with them.
- Give all who want a chance to read or sign specific words, to clap, ring bells, pass out papers, etc.
- It is ok that some learners prefer to do parallel activities, next to but not in the group.
- It is ok to set boundaries, like no leaving the room without permission and taking turns.

Lesson Sections

Welcome Social time, eating and sharing for 10 -15 minutes. Ask about food allergies before food is shared. Use the Greetings in various languages to keep cultures in this series fresh in everyone's minds.

Explore

Explore the lesson theme-watch a short video, and/or sing a hymn from **THE UNITED METHODIST HYMNAL** or **FAITH WE SING**. If learners know sign language, ask if they will sign song parts for others to learn. If you use multi-media, remember *some people exhibit sensory overload*. Alternate: watch the video after "Bible."

Bible

The Bible is the foundation of United Methodism. Lessons reference the New Revised Standard Version, with slight edits to make it readable. With Scripture, keep in mind that learners may not have a sense of time (historical, past and modern day). Also, they may see literal but not figurative or implied meanings of words.

Discuss –teaching moments

Use discussion time to help learners discover what the Bible or spiritual principles mean in their lives. Adapt questions so they fit the everyday life of learners (school, work, day programs, roommates, siblings, sports, relationships). Ask participants to share experiences, people they have met and culturally significant places or events they have visited. Share yours too. All responses are good - they help us make faith choices. They help us have hard conversations and see things in a different light. Give learners choices to participate or "pass." During "Discussions" in digital meetings, participants may show what they made from materials (you delivered prior to class) and talk about it. Allow topic freedom within boundaries. It is ok to wander to student interest, but if they get way off subject, say, "Let's hold that for another time." Your witness, role models and real-life examples demonstrate how working together with people of all faiths is the way of God and God's love.

Prayer End the worship and teaching part of lessons with prayer. Ask one of the learners to lead it.

Activities

Bridge activities by repeating the theme and saying how each activity relates to it. Describe activities before you begin. Most learners enjoy a craft or food activities. Some prefer worksheets. Adapt materials for learners who avoid specific textures, foods, colors or sounds or have physical disabilities.

Before Next Time

Give learners something to think about, a Sign Language action, or service project until next time. Or invite them to complete the activity that accompanied the lesson. This helps them share their skills and gifts with others.

Lesson	Scripture	Materials	Media	Activities
Judaism	Exodus 12:17 1 Corinthians 11:23b-25	Communion wafers or unleavened bread, grape juice, crayons, pencils or markers	youtube.com/watch?v=v6jBP4YXwo Hymn #448 Go Down Moses	Participate in Communion, color the Seder image.
Islam	Exodus 20:1-3; 12a	Beads (33), cord or embroidery thread	Hymn 431 Let There be Peace on Earth	Make prayer necklaces, fidgets or bracelets; use them or finger pray.
Buddhism	Mark 12:30-31 Psalm 46:10	Globe or map, crayons, pencils or markers, earth stress balls	Youtube.com/watch?v=W4jRLf0_3E Hymn #572 Pass it on	Find India, Middle East and China; color the Dharma Wheel.
Native American	Psalm 24:1-2 Ojibway Creation Story	Sweet or long grass, wild rice, corn, cedar, sage, paper, glue, pencils, markers	Hymn #92 For the Beauty of the Earth	Make a collage with sacred plants or braid a grass bracelet; make popcorn; color the medicine wheel.
Black American	Galatians 3:28-29 Philippians 4:13 Micah 6:8b	Crayons, pencils or markers Crayola Colors of the World	Hymn 448 Go Down Moses	Color the "Jesus like me" stained glass.
Roman Catholic	Matthew 16:18 Luke 1: 28-35	Rocks, brush, paint or stickers	Hymn 558 We Are the Church	Show "God is Love" Make streamers
Deaf – Hard of Hearing	Leviticus 19:4 Exodus 15:20	Dowels, ribbon, eyelets or tape	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJDV_CzwoWo Hymn#2145 Peace Like a River	