

Workshop: “Peace Experiments”: one approach to congregational peacemaking

Presenter: Rev. Dan Harper, Associate Minister of Religious Education,
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Overview:

The local faith community can embody peacemaking in ways that can be directly experienced, particularly in educational programs. In a culture permeated by violence, a local congregation can offer a counter-cultural educational experience of a community in which people live together peacefully rather than violently. The practical educational issue addressed in this workshop is how we might nurture peacefulness in school-aged children, within the setting of the local faith community.

This workshop is aimed squarely at religious education practitioners based in local congregations, who are interested in implementing peacemaking programs for children. Participants will be introduced to the flexible and creative “Peace Experiments” program, as implemented in a local congregation in northern California, for grades K-6. Participants will discuss program goals, educational philosophy, adaptation to local theologies, and implementation of this program—and whether it might be suitable for their own congregation.

Outline:

A. Presentation on “Peace Experiments”

I’ll begin the workshop by giving an introduction to the “Peace Experiments” program, as implemented most recently in the congregation I serve in March-May, 2014.

When we implemented “Peace Experiments” in 2014, we were guided first of all by our congregation’s mission statement, and by the Sunday school’s primary educational goals. Next, we looked back at the last time we offered “Peace Experiments,” back in 2012, and adjusted the curriculum based on feedback and evaluations. This affected several different areas:

1. Volunteer management and organizational strategy
2. Dividing age groups
 1. Theoretical considerations: challenging strict developmentalism
 2. Practical considerations: desire for flexibility
3. Assessment strategies

When we adjusted the curriculum, I was able to further clarify some theoretical matters that helped me while I trained and coached volunteer teachers:

4. Our theological grounding
 1. feminist theology: embodied learning
 2. “humanocentric” theology: humans bear responsibility for their actions
 3. existentialist theology: defining oneself in an absurd world
5. Our educational philosophy
 1. Move away from an essentialist educational philosophy
 2. Move towards an existentialist educational philosophy

B. Hands-on activity

Participants will try one of the “Peace Experiments” activities.

C. Case study

Participants will read and discuss a brief case study, consisting of a narrative account of a “Peace Experiments” class session.

D. Reflection and discussion

There will be ample time for reflection and discussion on, and questions about, the “Peace Experiments” program—its educational philosophy, its adaptability to other faith communities and theologies, its strengths, its weaknesses, and how participants might adapt it for implementation in their own congregations.

Resources and references:

- Participants may wish to glance at the online “Peace Experiments” curriculum outline: <http://kj6zwr.org/peace-experiments/>

- Participants unfamiliar with the workshop rotation method may wish to glance through *Workshop Rotation: A New Model for Sunday School*, by Melissa Armstrong-Hansche and Neil Macqueen (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 2000)—or visit the Workshop Rotation Website: <http://www.rotation.org/>

- One framework for thinking about religious education theologies is presented in *Theologies of Religious Education*, ed. by Randolph C. Miller (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1996).

- One framework for thinking about educational philosophies is presented in “Philosophical Foundations,” in *Foundational Issues in Christian Education* by Robert W. Pazmiño (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008).

Presenter:

Rev. Dan Harper began working as a religious educator in 1994. He has served as director of religious education, minister of religious education, interim minister, and parish minister in brick-and-mortar congregations ranging in size from 25 members to 500 members, and for a year as religious educator in a distance congregation with over 3,000 members. He is an ordained minister in fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association.