

Teacher Orientation Handbook

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Introduction

Teaching in a church school setting carries with it special responsibilities and wonderful opportunities. Because we are with the children for only one hour and fifteen minutes, forty Sundays of our church year or approximately ten school days, we must make the most of that time. This handbook is designed to help make the experience an enriching one for you as well for our children and youth. Thank you for the considerable commitment you have made to raise the next generation of Unitarian Universalists.

A Covenant for the Cooperative Church School

As part of a religious community the promises we make to each other about how we will treat each other and what we will do to create a safe and sacred space is called a "covenant." Our covenant is based on the Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association and was developed by the Religious Education Committee with input from parents, children and youth. Each family that registers is asked to review the covenant with their children and those 6 years and older are asked to sign the covenant. A copy of the covenant is posted in each meeting room and there are copies in each curriculum notebook. We ask each team to review the Covenant, Responsibilities, and Consequences with their groups at the beginning of each term

Support for Teams

For each team there is a team support person. S/he is responsible for regular communication with you during the time you are volunteering. If you are having difficulty with the material in general, a specific lesson, group dynamics, or an individual in the group, please phone your support person. Problems dealt with immediately tend to be more manageable than ones that are ignored or left to fester. You will receive the name and contact information for your support person before the beginning of the year.

Of course, I am always available for advice and support. I am in the office during the week at work or by email. If your schedule requires evening phone calls, I can be reached at my home phone number and home email.

Sunday Mornings

Consult the newsletter and the white board in the Tower Entrance to determine the worship plan for the morning. Child Care, Toddler and Preschool groups meet at 10:30 AM every Sunday morning and have their own worship and do not attend the intergenerational services in the sanctuary. Grades 1 – 6 begin the morning with a brief worship service in the Chapel or an Intergenerational Opening in the sanctuary. Teachers are asked to attend the service in the chapel and sit among the children. Children attend the Intergenerational Openings and Services with their families unless your group decides to attend together. If you are working with

preschool children and your own child is in an older group, please make arrangements with the teacher or another adult to take your children into the sanctuary. Worship, whether in the chapel or the sanctuary, will begin at 10:30 AM.

Plan for lessons that run between 45 minutes and one hour. Please involve the children in the clean up of the space after the lesson is concluded. There are games that are available for all groups to use if there is time left at the end of the morning. One of the goals of having our children together is to maximize their contact with each other. Some teachers have found that having an opening or closing that involves a brief check in is useful in building group spirit and helping the children get to know one another and the adults.

Parents with children in Preschool, Kindergarten, and Grades 1 and 2 will pick up their children at 11:45. Grades 3 and up will be accompanied by one of the volunteers to parish hall for social hour. Please do not release your group into parish hall before that time without the supervision of one of the teachers.

Curriculum

Each year we prepare an insert for our brochure, “The Ministry of Religious Education”, which describes in detail the curriculum that will be used with each group. Most curricula are revisions or combinations of material developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association Lifespan Faith Development group or by religious educators from other congregations. Every effort has been made to provide for different learning styles and include a variety of approaches to accommodate the range of children and youth that are in your group.

The better prepared you are, the more relaxed you will be. The lessons usually have more material than you need for a single session. This is done to accommodate the variety of interests of the adult team members and for the group that is experiencing the material. Use your own discretion about using what is needed for your group. The important thing is to be able to accomplish the specific goals stated for each lesson; not that you cover absolutely all the material that appears in the lesson. I am always available to help you edit the lesson for your particular group.

The best guarantee for a productive session and an engaged group is a clear understanding of the material and advance preparation on the part of the leader. Read your lesson well in advance of the day you are teaching so that there is time for percolation and the possibility of a creative change or addition. Reading it over the night before is in most cases a prescription for disaster. You should also know well in advance what supplies and materials are recommended and whether they are available.

The curricula you are working with were prepared with the notion that changes would be made by the individuals who actually use it with children. You are very likely to have ideas for discussion, or materials or projects that are different from what appears in the curricula. We hope you will share them with us so that those who use the material in the future will have the advantage of your creative thinking. Please use a separate sheet of paper to record your changes or additions to a lesson and make copies to the other team members including the Team Support

person to insert in their notebooks. This ensures that future volunteers can take advantage of your creative work.

Guidelines for Teachers

Behavior problems in the classroom may present the most frequent test of our abilities to put ideals into practice. In the past, some teams have offered snacks or treats as a bribe for good behavior. This is not consistent with the covenant and in the long run does not work and may cause difficulty for some children. It is better to work on developing a respect for the group that results in positive behavior.

It is important that there be an agreed on set of guidelines for the group. If there are different expectations from week to week, it is confusing for the children and ultimately does not contribute to a sense of community among the children and adults. Be sure that in your first meeting you come to consensus on what the expectations are for both the children and the adults. The Covenant will be a valuable resource for this. It is better to be proactive rather than reactive.

Guidelines that help include:

- **Please make boundaries immediately clear.** Kids want to know what the limits are. Let them know what is “out of bounds” for you. Rarely is misbehavior directed at the teacher, so don’t take it personally.
- **Avoid criticizing a child in public.** There should be at least two adults in the class for every meeting. If a child disrupts the group, the first choice is to deal with the individual in private - not in front of the whole class. It is better to wait until a private moment to discuss the incident with either you or your teaching partner.
- **If you are provoked, be authentic.** It is better to be honest than to be hypocritical but at all costs **avoid sarcasm.** Try to give the child or the class a way out of the difficulty. If it is an individual, give her/him a way back into your good graces - a smile, a hug, or a touch. Children can learn from your politeness, forgiveness, and generosity of spirit.
- **Be prepared.** Know your material well enough so that you know exactly what is to be done during the meeting. Plan for more than you need. If something bombs, you have an alternative. Have everything ready when the kids arrive. The better prepared you are, the more relaxed you will be; the more relaxed you are, the easier it will be to deal with problems that arise.
- **Additional suggestions that may help to insure a positive outcome:**
 - A warm greeting for each child goes a long way.
 - Remember your sense of humor and beware of false dignity.
 - A gentle voice is often more effective than a loud voice.
 - Avoid making comparisons or encouraging competition as motivation.
 - Let the children know who you are and what you think. Express your opinions freely but acknowledge that their opinions are valid as well.
 - Let children know that we celebrate the differences among us.

Supplies and Other Resources

Routine supplies such as markers, scissors, papers, tape, pencils, etc., can be found in the cabinet or shelf system in your classroom. These supplies are to remain there and will be replenished as requested by the teachers. They should be left in your room at the end of the term you are teaching. The RE Resource Room, located next to the Chapel, is filled with additional books and materials which you may find useful as you plan for each session. We ask that you use the sign out sheets for anything that you remove from the shelves and return it at the end of the term. Some of our curricula have laminated posters or pictures. Please take care that these things are not bent or folded. We would like them for long-term use with the curriculum.

The teacher in charge of each week is responsible for finding both the general and special materials s/he needs for the lesson. If they are not in the cabinet in your room, request them by completing a request form and leaving it on the clipboard. These forms are available on the same shelf as the clipboards. Advance notice is important so there is time to locate or purchase what you need. If a book is suggested but is not on your supply shelf or in your supply box, in the cabinet in your room, or in the Resource Room, it may be in the RE Office. If a book has to be purchased, two weeks advance notice is required.

Team Transition Meetings

At the end of Term I and Term II your team support person will schedule a meeting of the current teaching team and those taking over the next term. At this meeting, those who are teaching in Term I and Term II will pass along the curriculum notebook to a member of the incoming team. This meeting provides an opportunity to share valuable information with the incoming teachers about the group dynamics, information about individuals that may be useful such as food allergies or special needs, and what material has already been used with the group. Transition meetings are held a few weeks before the end of the terms.

At the End of the Term

Near the end of the term, you will be provided with **Checkout Guidelines**. Please follow the directions related to supplies so that those who follow you will find a room that is neat and well organized. Please do your part to clean up the main supply areas by stacking paper neatly and returning what you have borrowed to the supply closet and RE Resource Room on the first floor, or the bell tower room on the second floor.

The Religious Education Committee is particularly interested in knowing about your experience as a volunteer in the church school. A feedback sheet is in your notebook. During your teaching term, reflect on the questions below. Record your responses and hand them to the Director of Religious Education at the end of your teaching time.

Questions to guide reflection about teaching:

- What would you say to encourage someone to teach?
- What was problematic for you?
- What could have been done to prevent and/or solve the problem?

UUA Teacher Development Website

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- Any suggestions for improvements in the program in general?
- How do you feel about the orientation you received?
- Describe how you feel about the support you received while teaching?