“The great need in the Christian church is for a Sunday school curriculum for children that does not equate faith with having a pre-modern mind. The Center for Progressive Christianity has produced just that. Teachers can now teach children in Sunday school without crossing their fingers. It is the best I have ever read. It is not religious pabulum, but offers a critical approach to scripture. I endorse it wholeheartedly.”

— Bishop John Shelby Spong

At last, Sunday School lessons for which no apology is necessary.

— James R. Adams, Author of “So You Think You’re Not Religious and From Literal to Literacy”
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**Example of stories used:**

- 8 derived from the Bible
- 4 legends of Christian saints
- 9 adapted from folktales
- 5 biographical
- 2 original tales by Lorna Knox
A Joyful Path spiritual curriculum is intended for six- to ten-year-olds but can be adapted for children slightly older or younger.

The lessons can just be used as written, but our hope is that teachers and parents expand and adapt the ideas presented here to best serve their children, their personal goals, and their environment. Each part of the lesson outline will be reviewed and explained here in brief.

**Introductory Lessons** — In addition to the thirty-six full lessons, there are two lessons included that introduce the Progressive Christian view on the Jesus story and the Bible. The teacher may choose to use the two lessons at the beginning of the year or incorporate the ideas into the other lessons. These may also be appropriate to use in training new teachers.

**Topic** — The lesson topics are drawn from qualities that are important to develop in our own lives as well as to nurture in our children. The list is not definitive, but it includes many aspects of personal development that are vital if we want to open our hearts to a deeper relationship with spirit within ourselves and others.

The topics may be presented in any order throughout the year. However, there are two Christmas-related lessons and two Easter-related lessons you will want to use during the appropriate holiday season.

**Affirmation** — Affirmations are positive statements of truth that we aspire to. The repetition of affirmations can take our aspirations into our subconscious and bring about change in our thoughts and behavior.

Using affirmations with children is a fun and light-hearted way to communicate the essence of the topic being taught. Each lesson begins with the affirmation, and each story ends with the affirmation. Opening the lesson with the affirmation will help introduce the topic and bring everyone together in understanding. Closing with the affirmation helps to summarize the experience and reinforces the idea you want the children to carry away with them. We recommend printing the illustrated affirmation page that is included with each lesson; children can share this with parents, and discussion can continue at home.

Affirmations need to be repeated multiple times to be effective. Ask the children to repeat the words after you in a strong, clear voice without shouting. Repeat at least three times in softer and softer tones until you are all speaking in a soft whisper. Repeat one more time and tell the children to stay silent but to say the words mentally, with concentration.

Be creative in the use of the affirmations, and you will find there are unlimited ways they can be used to expand and deepen the lesson activities. Here are some ideas:

- Sing to a simple melody.
- Make up a clapping rhythm.
- Create motions or a sign language way to express it.
- Say or sing as a round.
- Use different voices (like a mouse, like a giant, like a tiger, like a robot, like a bird, etc.).
- Use a beanbag and have the children stand in a line. Toss the beanbag to each child down the line and have them say one word until the affirmation is complete.
- Discuss why the illustration does or does not express the affirmation well.
- Let the children create a dance to express the words.
- Have the children illustrate the words.
- Make an affirmation banner to hang in the classroom.
- Email the affirmation to the children midweek as a reminder of the lesson.
- Create cards and have the children send them to friends or family.
• And the end of the year, see how many affirmations the children remember.

• Make a list of the year’s affirmations for a bulletin board.

**Heart of the Lesson** — This is a brief explanation of the topic for the teacher. It explains the main idea being communicated in the activities and story for that lesson.

**Teacher Reflections** — This section provides specific ways the teacher can prepare for teaching the lesson and how the topic can be used as an opportunity for personal growth and spiritual study.

**Bible Verses** — The New Revised Standard Version was used for all references, except those marked: “TFG” (The Five Gospels, published by Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993). Any modifications are noted in the text. Bible verses were primarily pulled from the New Testament and the words of Jesus. These can be used for teacher study as well as part of the lesson activities.

**Quotes** — Quotations are from a wide variety of sources and are included to expand understanding and illustrate the universal nature of the topics. These can also be used for teacher study or as part of the lesson activities.

**Activities** — Suggested activities are designed to get children involved and provide an experience that goes beyond passive listening. As much as possible, each lesson contains a variety of games and activities that open the heart, engage the intellect, or provide creative and physical activity.

Material lists are included, as well as tips for modifications. Tips for adding more music and nature awareness are also part of the lessons.

**Stories** — All lessons include a story written specifically for that lesson. These include six biographical tales, ten adaptations of multicultural folktales, ten adaptations of Bible stories, four legends of saints, and eight original stories written for this curriculum. The stories are followed by questions to help the teacher engage the children in meaningful discussion and relate what they have heard to the heart of the lesson.
Preparing to Teach

Begin preparing for the lesson early in the week. Read through the entire lesson to become familiar with the flow of activities. Allow time to gather the materials, props, and supplies you will need.

Make a personal connection with the topic. Focus on “The Heart of the Lesson” for a perspective on the topic. Do the “Teacher Reflection” (visualization, meditation, or questions) to deepen your personal experience with the topic.

Be aware of your own inner wisdom. Be open to insights and inspirations that come to you about the topic. Trust your inner guidance. You are God’s instrument serving the children in your Sunday School class.

Creating a Positive Environment

Establish positive relationships with the children. Warmly welcome children to class by greeting them at the door with a smile. Make eye contact and say their names.

Connect with children in a personal way. Find out about their interests, hobbies, achievements, and special events in their lives. Pray for them throughout the week, feeling appreciation for them as unique expressions of God.

Create a caring community. Provide opportunities for children to get to know one another by varying where they sit. Let children know that they are an important part of the class by giving them classroom responsibilities, such as passing out supplies and cleaning up the room. Do not allow any put downs or negative comments between students. Model respectful, caring words and actions.

Share your expectations for behavior. Clearly explain to children how you expect them to behave during class. Review examples of what it “looks like” and “sounds like” to follow the rules. Phrase expectations positively. Rather than saying, “Don’t run,” say, “Walk slowly.” Instead of “Don’t interrupt,” say, “Wait to speak until the other person if finished talking.”

Explain and practice procedures and routines. Post a brief schedule so that children know “what’s next.” Establish specific procedures for common classroom activities, such as asking questions, moving around the room, and getting supplies.

Use rituals, celebrations, and ceremonies to acknowledge individuals and the whole class. Rituals may include beginning every class with a song and a prayer and ending each class by having the children complete an unfinished sentence (“Today I learned ...” or “During the week, I will remember this lesson by ...”) Celebrate children’s birthdays with a class blessing or written notes of appreciation. You may also honor children’s accomplishments or milestones with special ceremonies.

Enjoy in joy! Your attitude is contagious. Having a happy, joyful attitude will make your classroom a place children want to be.

Engaging Children in the Lesson

Immediately grab children’s attention at the beginning of the lesson. Start on time, even if not everyone has arrived. Maintain a brisk flow throughout the lesson so that students don’t get restless. The best way to avoid discipline problems is to keep children interested and involved.

Use props and student volunteers. Props are an easy way to keep children’s attention and enhance the meaning of a story, Bible verse or Quote. Even simple props can be effective. For example, use one of your own coats as you tell the story of “The Coat of Many Colors.” Incorporate your children into the story whenever possible. For example, when telling “The Three Servants and the Coins,” ask three children to play the parts of the servants and hand them quarters as you tell the story. (You may want to let children know ahead of
time that you will be calling on them and explain what you would like them to do.)

Encourage discussion and sharing among all students. Some children may like to talk all of the time, while others won’t say a word. One way to involve everyone in a discussion is to have children sit in a circle and pass around an object. A child may speak only when he or she is holding the object. Always give children the “right to pass” if they don’t want to talk. When applicable, use an object that relates to the story or Bible verse. For example, when discussing kindness, use a heart-shaped rock; when discussing St. Francis, pass around a bird’s feather.

Vary your group size. Sometimes children will become more involved in the topic when interacting with a partner or in a small group rather than the whole class. For example, have children pair up with a partner to talk about a story’s discussion questions. After a few minutes, bring the whole class back together to share their answers.

 Surprise your students by occasionally doing something unexpected. Play an instrument, wear a costume, bring in an unusual object, or give each child a special note as he/she walks into the room. The possibilities are endless. Have fun delighting the children in creative ways.

 Be flexible to adapt to the needs that arise. Sometimes your children may need a physical game or activity before they are ready to participate in a discussion or listen to a story. At other times, you may want to focus children’s attention with a craft activity and end with a more energetic activity. Pay attention to the needs of your students, and adjust the lesson accordingly. Be aware of the time and extend or cut out activities as needed. When a special “teachable moment” happens, feel free to disregard the lesson plan.

 Keeping the Lesson Flowing Smoothly

 Plan ahead for transitions between activities. Children can become distracted and lose focus between activities. Consider ahead of time how you will end one activity, such as a game, and smoothly move into the next activity. Give children time to switch gears between activities. Alert children before the transition is going to occur. You may use non-verbal signals, such as flicking the lights or playing a chime, to signal that a transition is coming.

 Provide clear closure for one activity before beginning the next. Keep transition times short and grab children’s attention at the beginning of new activity. Give clear directions so children know what to expect.

 Encouraging Positive Behavior

 Model the behavior you want to see in your children. Children learn the most from what you do rather than from what you say. If you want students to act respectfully, show respect for them.

 Point out positive behaviors when they happen. Let children know that you notice them paying attention, listening during the discussion, or waiting patiently. You may acknowledge them by saying their names, whispering a comment to them, or giving them a non-verbal message through a smile, nod, or a “thumbs up” signal.

 Use rewards consciously and sparingly. Rewards for positive behavior may motivate some children to behave appropriately, but they can also backfire and cause problems. Use them carefully.

 Responding to Misbehavior

 Notice potential problems and respond quickly to keep them from escalating. Often just standing close to the child is enough to prevent or stop misbehavior. For that reason, it’s a good idea to move around the room during the lesson. Another effective non-verbal cue is making eye contact with the child. You can also use gestures, such as raising your hand when you want a student to stop a behavior.

 Preserve a child’s dignity. Children will often go to extreme lengths to save face. Avoid public power struggles and don’t use words that would embarrass a child in front of his or her peers. Speak quietly and calmly with a child, privately if possible. If you have to intervene,
be as unobtrusive as possible. Keep the lesson going with a minimum of disruption on your part.

Clearly communicate consequences for misbehavior. Decide on consequences before misbehaviors occur and explain them to the class. Help children understand that behavior is a choice, and that all choices have consequences. Knowing the results of their actions can be a motivator to behave appropriately.

Choose consequences that relate to the misbehavior. For example, if a child repeatedly interrupts others during discussions, withhold the privilege of sharing aloud for the rest of the discussion period.

Follow through with consequences every time. When you are firm, fair and consistent, children learn that you mean what you say. It may take only a few times of follow through to eliminate an undesirable behavior.

Involving Parents

Inform parents about the topics their children are learning. Discuss ways they could reinforce Sunday school lessons throughout the week. Make sure children take their projects home to show their parents.

Share your expectations for children’s behavior with parents. Don’t wait until there’s a problem to talk to parents. Tell them about their child’s successes regularly and often. Find out what they do at home to encourage positive behaviors. Then, if a problem arises, you can work as a team to find a solution.

Teachers Reflections / Getting to the Heart of the Lesson

Feel free to use these as discussion tools and questions for your older or more mature kids. These reflections are meant for the teacher to prepare for giving the lesson, but they may also work for some of your older kids. Use them as you feel appropriate.

Bringing Nature into the Curriculum

“One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.” — Shakespeare

It is a rare child who doesn’t respond positively to being outside and experiencing the natural world. While the activities in this curriculum series are well-thought-out and contain opportunities for children to learn about the inter-relatedness of all life, nothing is as good as a real life experience with the sun, clouds, grass and trees.

The most important goal of this kind of spiritual curriculum is not that children learn a particular dogma or story or lesson, but that they have a positive experience so that they go away with good feelings about the ideals they learn there. Giving the children positive feelings about the experience of learning outweighs the specifics of any lesson.

On a beautiful April day, perhaps you will hear the birds singing for all their worth and feel that exhilarated movement of energy in your body that says, “It’s spring! Life and renewal are happening.” Stop and take a look around; is there a way you can structure today’s class so that the children can have that same experience?

Fifteen minutes outside may be just the activity that will inspire the children most. Even if you have spent some time preparing a craft, if everyone’s soul is craving to be outdoors, you’d be better off to meet that need if it is possible.

You can substitute a nature activity for the main activity or the story or opening the lesson. Trust yourself as the teacher. What will touch these children in this setting right now? Perhaps there is a park nearby, or your church is in a suburban location where there are shrubs, trees, a bit of grass.

Following are a few suggestions for activities you could do outside. Be sure to give children an opportunity to move and use their bodies a bit before expecting them to do a quiet, still activity. And use the guidelines on page 6 for transitions to help the children return inside.

Nature Through the Senses

Hearing — Have everyone sit down (giving each child a piece of paper to sit on might be a good idea to protect
any dress-up clothing) and listen for a twenty or thirty seconds to the different sounds they can hear. Give those who want to share an opportunity to identify one sound they heard.

Then repeat the activity, this time for a full minute and have the children close their eyes. Tell them to count this time every different sound and see how many different sounds they recognize. Afterwards, ask if they heard anything new this time. Don’t let the children become competitive shouting out how many sounds they heard; tell them it’s not about how many, but how much you enjoy listening. Did they hear any animals? The wind? Insects? Did they hear more natural sounds or man-made sounds such as traffic or planes? Which sounds were the most enjoyable to hear? Ask open-ended questions to bring out discussion, not questions with right or wrong answers. It’s about the exploring the experience, not being right or wrong or winning.

**Touch and Smell** — You can do a similar activity with touch and smell if the group is not restless or on a different day. Ask them to shut their eyes and feel the breeze on their skin. Can they feel the warmth of the sun or the cool of the shade anywhere on their bodies? Do they smell anything? The scent of a shrub or flower or traffic exhaust? Then draw their attention inside their bodies and feel their own hearts beating. Can they feel their breath in their throats or noses? Can they slow their breath down? End by asking them to smile and open their eyes and look around and see if they notice anything new they had not seen before the exercise.

**Vision** — Take a “nature walk.” Tell the children that their mission is to spot something special in the yards or landscaping that someone else may have not noticed yet. Have them walk slowly in a line, and challenge them to walk absolutely silently and look for instance a squirrel in a tree, a flower bud, a bird in the air, or an insect on the sidewalk. Stop and talk about any interesting discoveries.

**Taste** — If you serve snacks, a good way to let the children enjoy it, is to go outside to have the snack.

**Activity with Less Structure** — You can also take a nature walk around the neighborhood and ask the children to look carefully for anything in nature that they like or enjoy. You can draw their attention to anything special you think they have not noticed because they are talking to each other, but mostly just let them enjoy being outside. When you return to the classroom you can bring more focus to the activity by having each child tell one thing in nature that they saw and are thankful for. After the first few children share, others may say they cannot think of anything else, so let them share anything at all in nature that they appreciate. You could end with a prayer thanking Mother Earth for those gifts.

**If You Are In An Urban Area** — Although you may not be able to take a nature walk, there is quite possibly a tree nearby that you can visit or some bit of landscaping that supports the life of at least some insects. Take the children there and speculate on what could live there and what it takes to support life.

Bring in natural objects to class as often as you can — flowers, pussy willows, herbs, pumpkins, apples, nuts and seeds. Get the children to focus on them by letting them handle them and asking questions such as: Where do you think it came from? How did it grow? (on a bush, a tree, a stalk). Is there any animal, bird or insect that might use it as food? What gave it life?

**Notes:**