



Gather 'Round Talking Points

1. Introduction to *Gather 'Round*

- **Mission.** *Gather 'Round: Hearing and Sharing God's Good News* is a Bible-based curriculum nurturing children, youth, and adults in becoming followers of Jesus: people who know and love God, interpret God's word, belong to God's gathered community, and share God's good news. [See *Gather 'Round Handbook*, Chapter 1.]
- **Origin.** *Gather 'Round* is a project of the Church of the Brethren, Mennonite Church USA, and Mennonite Church Canada. It is the successor to the highly regarded curriculum *Jubilee: God's Good News*. *Jubilee* was one of a handful of curricula top-rated by Karen-Marie Yust in her 2002 Lilly-funded report, *Faith Formation in Children's Ministries*, a survey of over 100 Protestant curricula.
- **Key scripture texts.** Deuteronomy 6:4-9, also known as the Shema; Luke 10:27; Matthew 18:20. Themes from these texts are fundamental to the *Gather 'Round* curriculum. The passage in Deuteronomy reminds us that our awareness of God should extend to every aspect of our lives. We want to be faithful to Jesus' linking of this commandment to love of neighbor, so that one essential way we express our love of God is through our relationships with others. We also invoke Jesus' assurance that he is with those who gather in his name. [See "Key Bible Texts, at www.gatherround.org and in the *Gather 'Round Handbook*, pp. 15-16.
- **The name.** *Gather 'Round: Hearing and Sharing God's Good* reinforces the importance of the gathered community: people of all ages coming together to hear God's word, to worship, and to share God's love at home and beyond.
- **For more information.** The curriculum website, www.gatherround.org, has information about theological and educational foundations, Bible outlines, product samples, and more. The *Gather 'Round Handbook* is also a mine of information about the curriculum.

2. Nuts and bolts

- **Age groupings:** Seven units: Preschool (ages 3-4, with tips for 2s), Primary (grades K-2), Middler (grades 3-5), Multiage (grades K-6, with tips for older youth), Junior Youth (grades 6-8), Youth (grades 9-12), and Parent/Caregiver. All units are offered in the fall, winter, and spring. Preschool, Multiage, and Parent/Caregiver are offered during the summer as well.
- **Bible outlines:** The Bible story is the focus of the curriculum. The four-year Bible outline takes the learners through the Bible. All age groups study the same text (abridged for younger children) each week. Fall quarters cover the Old Testament. Winter and spring quarters turn to the life and teachings of Jesus, and the early church. Each year focuses on the perspective of a different gospel. Summers are thematic, covering topics such as the parables, peace, and the letters of Paul. [See www.gatherround.org or *Gather 'Round Handbook*, pp. 21-39.]
- **Bible translation:** The New Revised Standard Version is the translation used when scripture is quoted. For reading the Bible stories and discussion, groups may use the translation of their choice.
- **Classroom products:**
 - *Teacher's guides* for each age group.
 - *Student books* for children's units.
 - *Classroom packs* with posters and other material for children and parents.
 - *Annual music CD*, appropriate for all ages,
- **At-home products:**
 - *The Talkabout*. Design varies each quarter. On the topic of the weekly Bible themes, it poses questions for family reflection and discussion, suggests scripture readings and family activities, and offers prayers.
 - *Connect*, the Parent/Caregiver guide, can be used by individuals as well as in group settings. It includes daily meditations for parents on the weekly texts.
- **For leaders and teachers:** The *Gather 'Round Handbook* provides an overview of the curriculum, as well as articles and practical tips on everything from the stages of faith formation to the responsibilities of committees and superintendents, from calling volunteers to discipline in the classroom.
- **Youth curriculum:** *Search*, the Youth unit, is a teacher's guide that includes reproducible pages. It is downloadable, and may be ordered through the curriculum website. It is also available on CD.

3. Theological perspective

“Before we are conscious of God, we are known by God, who loves us and invites us into relationship. As we grow and experience God's reconciling love and grace, we are led to respond in love and obedience. The Bible, the Holy Spirit, and the wisdom of the gathered faith community guide us in living faithfully as followers of Jesus. . . . , embracing peace and nonviolence, and seeking justice and wholeness for humanity and for all of creation.” (See entire statement of "Theological Convictions" at www.gatherround.org or in the *Gather 'Round Handbook*, p. 14.)

- **Peace and justice.** *Gather 'Round* is oriented toward peace and justice. The curriculum adopts a prophetic perspective on scripture (see *Gather 'Round Handbook*, pp. 18-20). The curriculum critiques cultural values such as consumerism, individualism, and militarism.
- **Walking in the footsteps of Jesus.** *Gather 'Round* fosters commitment to discipleship, good stewardship, and service to others.
- **Inclusiveness.** The curriculum emphasizes love of neighbor and inclusiveness (e.g., racial/ethnic, cultural, gender, socioeconomic). [See *Gather 'Round Handbook*, Chapter 7.]
- **Examples from the sessions:**
 - *Faith focuses* lift up the good news of God's all-inclusive love and Jesus' radical calls to discipleship. (For example, the Middler faith focus for the story of Hagar and Ishmael is “when we feel alone, God hears our cries”; for Cain and Abel, it is “God wants us to resolve our conflicts.”)
 - *Connecting* time asks children and adults to explore what the scriptures mean for them. How are they called to be servants of God and disciples of Christ?
 - *Acts of service* are suggested; service organizations are lifted up.

4. Pedagogical methods

“The *Gather 'Round* curriculum has some fundamental understandings about children and the role that teachers can play in nurturing faith formation. Children are spiritual beings. . . . Children can be in relationship with God even though they may not be able to articulate their understanding of God. . . . [Teachers] help children develop their relationships with God. [See entire statement of “Educational Principles” at www.gatherround.org. Also see *Gather 'Round Handbook*, Chapters 3 and 4.]

- **Theorists.** *Gather 'Round* draws on the work of educators such as Karen Marie Yust, Howard Gardner, Jerome Berryman, Thomas Groome, Sara Wenger Shenk, John Westerhoff III, Maria Harris, and James Fowler. [See “Educational Theories and the Curriculum” at www.gatherround.org.]
- **Direct engagement with scripture.** Bible stories are faithfully retold to the younger children. Older children, youth, and adults generally read the story directly from the Bible.
- **Children are partners in ministry.** Children’s contributions are encouraged and supported. Open-ended questions help them reflect on the story.
- **Age-appropriate faith talk.** Some stories are abridged so as to be age-appropriate for the youngest children. Faith focuses are simplified for these age groups. Children are encouraged to make faith commitments appropriate for their age. [See *Gather 'Round Handbook*, Chapter 3.]
- **Drawing on different ways of learning.** Multiple intelligences are drawn on throughout the session. In the Responding section, icons help teachers be aware of intelligences called out by each activity. Teachers are encouraged to offer as many Responding options as possible in each session and allow children to choose the option they prefer. Responding options are also offered in the Parent/Caregiver unit: kids aren’t the only ones who can respond visually, musically, or kinesthetically!

5. Teacher-friendly curriculum

There are fewer and fewer “career” Sunday school teachers. In some congregations, teachers only teach for only one quarter in a year; substitutes may be used frequently. More and more people are unfamiliar with the church and its practices.

- **Clear and easy to follow session plans.** Session plans are clearly laid out; design is friendly.
 - Preparation needs are clearly spelled out. Alternatives are offered for different activities (e.g., a quarterly quilt project can also be a construction paper quilt).
 - Story summary on first page reminds or acquaints teacher with the story.
 - Faith focus, repeated on every spread, is the basic “so what?” of the story for the given age group. They are short and to the point.
 - Multiple intelligence icons are fun and attractive and help make teachers aware of different ways of learning.
 - Use of classroom pack items is built into the session plans.

- **Built-in teacher training.** Teacher training is written into the sessions.
 - Introductions in the teacher’s guides and “called-out” teaching tips in the margins. Teaching tips are also embedded in the session text.
 - *Gather 'Round* doesn’t make assumptions about theological or educational background. Jargon is minimized; terms are explained to teachers, and language is given to help them explain concepts to children.
 - The *Gather 'Round Handbook* offers a multitude of tips from arranging classroom space to keeping junior youth engaged. [See Chapters 8 and 9.]
 - Multiple intelligences are explained in each introduction and drawn on throughout the sessions. The icons used with the Responding options help reinforce teacher’s awareness.

- **Spiritual nurture for teachers.**
 - Opening to God and Pondering and praying sections in each session provide spiritual food for teachers.
 - Bible insight essays are written by commissioned Bible scholars. All teachers (and parent/caregivers) receive the same essay each week.

- **Adaptability.** Options are offered in session plans to adapt activities depending on size of class, ages of the group, interest of the teacher, and available supplies.
 - Multiage unit is designed for grades K-6, with smaller congregations in mind.
 - Preschool unit has Tips for 2s; Multiage has Tips for older students.
 - *Gather 'Round Handbook* has tips for adapting the curriculum to specific situations. See pp. 96-101.

6. Support for parents

“Nine out of ten parents of children under age 13 (85%) believe they have the primary responsibility for teaching their children about religious beliefs and spiritual matters, while 11% said their church is primarily responsible. Nearly all parents of children under the age of 13 – 96% – contend that they have the primary responsibility for teaching their children values” (Barna Research, 2003).

- **Help for parents.** *Connect* and *Talkabout* provide innovative help for parents who want to aid in their children’s faith formation, but often do not feel equipped to take on the task. Busy schedules require manageable tasks.
- **Redesigned take-home products.** Based on feedback from research, leaflets have been replaced by student books that are used in the classroom all quarter and then go home. Bible storybooks for Preschool and Primary children give families opportunity to revisit stories from previous quarters. Middlers have magazines and Junior Youth have booklets of resources for worship and drama.
- **Same scripture text for all age groups.** This makes it possible for parents to study the same Bible stories as their children, which helps families carry the stories into their conversations at home.
- **Parent/Caregiver guide.** *Connect* does more than give adults the opportunity study the same texts as their children. It allows them to look at the scriptures through a parenting lens. How can I talk to my children about this text? What parenting issues does it raise?
 - *Connect* is flexible, and can be used in a group setting or at home.
 - Daily meditations provide further parenting reflections on the weekly theme.
- **The Talkabout.** The *Talkabout* is for use at home and is different every quarter. Its name is derived from the Shema: “Recite them to your children and *talk about* them when you are at home and when you are away” (Deut. 6:7). It offers suggestions for at-home reading, talking, acting, and praying on weekly Bible themes.
- **Strengthening the church-home connection.** Pastors and church leaders give leadership to nurturing families as well as individuals. “In this partnership, the congregation ministers *with* families, not *for* them or *to* them.” [“Partners in faith formation: Families and congregations,” *Gather 'Round Handbook*, p. 52]

7. The *Gather 'Round* Session Plan

- Every session for children and youth begins and ends with a prayer or meditation for the teacher; in the case of Parent/Caregiver, these sections are for all participants) (*Opening to God, Pondering and Praying*)
- Each unit has the same *Bible story summary*, a memory jog for those who know the story, a capsule version of the story for those who don't. Sometimes an age group will only use part of the story, and if that is the case, then that part of the story will also be summarized.
- The *Faith focus* states the main point of the text for a particular age group. Each element in the session points back to the *Faith focus*.
- The *Bible insight* essay provides historical and theological context for the Bible story. These essays are written by commissioned Bible scholars.
- *Gather 'Round* is an opening that brings the group together, flowing into a worship ritual. We encourage teachers to think of the entire session as part of a worshipful experience.
- Every session provides a place to teach the **memory verse**, or part of it. Placement varies, as does the method of teaching.
- Every session suggests music, often songs from the *Gather 'Round* CD. Songs from *Hymnal: A Worship Book* are also called out. Because not everyone uses this hymnal, the language is generally open-ended. For example, the suggestion might be: "Sing a song of praise, such as "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," number 71 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.
- Every session is based on the reading or faithful retelling of a Bible story (*Hear the Bible story*). All age groups study the same Bible story each Sunday although they may stress different aspects of the story.
- Each session has suggestions for helping that age group understand and think about the story (*Reflect on the story*). These are often in the form of questions or wondering statements. We encourage teachers to create space for silent, personal reflection on these questions. Verbal sharing is also appropriate and helpful, but this time is not seen as a "discussion" (and definitely not a debate).
- Each session has suggestions for helping that age group make connections from the story to their own lives (*Connect to the story*). This may be a discussion or it may be another type of activity.
- Every session provides options for age appropriate responding activities (*Responding*). Options draw on different ways people learn (multiple intelligences). We encourage teachers to offer all three options or as many as they can, given their group and their resources. Class participants can then choose to do the options they prefer.
- The sessions close with a worship moment, which may include song, prayer and/or scripture (*Ending and Sending*).
- Following the closing is a meditation for the teacher (*Pondering and Praying*). The Parent/Caregiver sessions conclude with a **FOR THE LEADER** section.