

## Leading a Child to Jesus

As churches become more intentional about connecting with their communities, Sunday school leaders like you disciple more and more children who are at the very beginning of their Christian journey. When the Holy Spirit works in their hearts, these children begin to respond to the call of the gospel. Covenant children, too, commit their lives to the Lord, for every covenant has two parts: God's promises and our faithful, obedient response. Paul's words in Romans 10:9 are true for every child: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

As a Sunday school leader, what is your role in this miraculous, God-initiated process? The following questions and answers will encourage you to make the most of the opportunities that God's Spirit provides. Every child's spiritual journey is unique. Every leader's relationship with his or her children is different. No "how-to" formula will replace the leading of God's Spirit in your own heart as you prayerfully seek to follow Jesus' command "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matt. 19:14).

### **Q. Is it my job as a church school teacher to lead a child to Jesus?**

A. Yes! That's your main purpose for teaching church school. Through all you do in the classroom, you are seeking to bring children into a living, growing relationship with Jesus, recognizing always that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convince a child to respond to the gospel message you present. But note these specifics:

- It may be important for you to follow up with individual children—particularly if you notice from their participation in the class that they may be ready to take another step in their faith journey.
- Nurturing children's faith is first and foremost the task of believing parents. In the case of children from a Christian home, your role is to support, reinforce, and enrich what happens there, fulfilling a promise your church family made at the child's baptism.
- If a child comes from a non-Christian home, you may have to take more initiative in guiding the child's faith journey. But be sure to include the family as much as you can. Invite parents or family members to participate when you talk with the child. Or encourage the child to share her initial commitment to Jesus with her family.
- Enlist the support of the pastor or other church leaders and mentors as well. Keep them informed so that they can encourage the child in the step she has taken.

### **Q. Should I encourage a child to make a specific commitment to Christ?**

A. Possibly. It depends on the age level of the child and on the child's sincerity. In seeking a specific commitment, we can make two mistakes:

- We can manipulate children to make a commitment they are not ready to make. For example, young children are eager to please their leaders. If you ask them to make a commitment to Jesus, they will readily do what they think you want them to do. Keep in mind that doing so before they are ready will be meaningless because they will not understand what they are doing.
- We can ignore clear signs of a child's desire to express his commitment to Jesus. By doing so we miss a God-given opportunity to direct him in taking this next, crucial step of verbalizing, in an age-appropriate way, his commitment to Christ.

**Q. Should I try to convert the child?**

A. No way! You couldn't if you tried! Conversion comes by way of the regenerating work of God's Holy Spirit in the child's heart. You can present God's Word in a way that is meaningful to the child. You can show the way by modeling your own faith. But only God's mysterious work can give a child saving faith. What you can do, when appropriate, is

- pray for the child.
- present the gospel to the child in an age-appropriate way.
- answer the child's questions.
- clear up any misunderstandings.
- help the child understand and respond to the Spirit's work within him.
- allow the child to express her desire to belong to Jesus and personally accept Jesus' saving work for her.
- help the child to pray.
- help the child to follow up on her commitment.

**Q. How do I know when a child is ready to make a commitment to Jesus?**

A. Pray, observe, and ask questions.

*Pray that the Lord will*

- empower you, through your teaching to the entire group, to nurture every child's love for Jesus.
- lead you to the specific child or children who need your personal attention.
- provide you with the opportunity to meet the child's need.

*Observe which child*

- knows very little about the Bible or the Christian faith.
- shows a keen interest in learning more.
- ponders what you say and asks carefully thought-out questions.
- peppers you with questions you don't have time to answer in class.
- is eager to talk to you before or after class.
- professes a desire to know Jesus better or to "join the church."
- struggles with doubts or fears about his relationship with God.

Ask questions to help you gauge the child's relationship to God. This allows you to draw alongside the child at her unique place on her spiritual journey. You may wish to talk to her after class or at some other church function. If you do, make sure you do so in a safe, public place where you will not frighten the child or create a suspicion of impropriety. Even better, arrange for a visit in the child's home, where you can get to know her family as well.

The questions you ask should be age-appropriate and based as much as possible on your prior observations of where the child is in her spiritual life. For young children, you might want to ask questions based on a Bible story about Jesus. Reinforce what you teach in class: Jesus loves us, Jesus is good, we can always trust Jesus, Jesus wants us to follow him. Reviewing a favorite story or song will communicate much more effectively than a thematic presentation of the way of salvation. Remember, you are building the foundation on which a mature commitment will one day rest.

Older children will be more aware of their relationship with the Lord and may be able to respond to more specific questions like these:

- What do you find exciting about getting to know Jesus?
- Do you know what you have to do to follow Jesus?
- Why do you think Jesus wants to be your Savior? How can that happen?
- Do you want to give your life to Jesus? Why?

**Q. What do I do if a child is far enough along in his spiritual journey to want to commit his life to Jesus?**

A. Review, pray, point, and celebrate.

Review with the child the heart of our faith with simple and personal statements like these:

- God loves us very much and made us very good.
- We sinned and deserve to be punished.
- God sent Jesus into the world to die for our sins.
- Jesus rose from the dead so that we can live with God forever.
- Through Jesus we are children of God. We can live forever in love and obedience to him.
- God gave us the Holy Spirit to make us able to live that way.
- God will always remain faithful to us, even if we don't do the things God wants us to do.
- When we die, God will take us to live with him forever in perfect happiness and holiness.

Put this brief review in your own words, and talk it through with the child to be sure he "gets" it. Clear up any misunderstandings, and allow time for some questions.

Pray when you know the child is ready to make a verbal commitment. Encourage him to say a prayer asking Jesus to be his Savior and Lord. Ask him if he wants to have a parent, other family member, or friend present for that prayer as well. If not, do encourage the child to tell his family about his commitment later, or if possible, go with the child to share the good news about the child's decision.

Offer to help young children pray a prayer along these lines:

*Dear Jesus, thank you for loving me. I know that I disobey you and do wrong things. I am sorry for my sins. I know that God loves me and forgives my sins. I want to love you more. Amen.*

Older children may want to write down what they want to pray so that they can think about it carefully. Or they may want you to suggest words for them to use. If they are really shy or simply don't know how to pray, offer to pray with them, but ask what they would like you to pray about. Here's an example:

*Dear Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross to take away my sin. Thank you for making me God's child. I know that I don't deserve that, because I've done lots of things that don't please you. But I trust your promise, and I want to live my life for you. Please come into my life and be my Savior and Lord. Show me how to live, and give me your Spirit so I'll do what you want me to do. Help me when I do the things that you do not want me to do. Keep me trusting you every day. Amen.*

Then point out the road ahead in some of the following ways:

- Give younger children a storybook that reinforces the good news of Jesus' love for them. Or suggest a Bible storybook the child's family could use for family devotions.
- Explain to older children how they can continue to grow in their faith and build on their commitment. Encourage them to spend time with Jesus by reading their Bible and praying. (You might give them a Bible if they don't have one or a devotional book to get them started.) Ask them to attend worship (even if they don't always "get" it) and church school faithfully. As they grow in their faith, they'll have the opportunity to share their commitment to Jesus with others as well.
- If the child has already been baptized, suggest that she consider making her commitment to Jesus known to the church. That's called making a public profession of faith. If the child is responsive to your suggestion, ask the pastor or an elder to visit the child and her family. If she hasn't been baptized and would like to join the church, ask for a similar visit to discuss this with the child's family. Public profession and baptism are joyous occasions where the child can share God's goodness in her life with God's family.

Celebrate! Express your happiness and joy and assure the child that Jesus receives him in love. Make this an ongoing celebration, using every opportunity to remind the child how blessed you were to share in his commitment. Ask how he's doing, and encourage him to keep on growing. Assure him that you will continue to pray for him—and that you'll do so long after you stop being his church school leader. A phone call or note of encouragement from you can mean a lot over the years.

Help the child understand that a lifelong walk with Jesus will have its ups and downs. Many, many recommitments will be required during his lifetime. But assure him that Jesus will always be there, ready to forgive and to move on. For Jesus truly is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by him" (John 14:6).