



Creating Imaginative Projects About the Word

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Doing religion projects with children can be a bright spot in the week—a time to anticipate with pleasure. The pleasure is doubled when the parents or teachers are creatively involved in the planning of the session and try to elicit free expression from the children. Children have an innate instinct to create, because they are made in the image of God, the only true Creator of all. Most of them spontaneously love picture-making or manipulating materials to express ideas. All of them actually *need* this outlet to help in the whole process of learning to read, write and understand their world. If we adults are excited about a religion lesson, are affectionately involved in presenting it and knowledgeable about the creative possibilities, the children will warmly respond, each in a special way.

Very simple projects are the most successful, since children enjoy quick results. A picture to paint, a figure to model, a few bits of paper to cut and paste, some treasures from nature to combine, all can have magical meaning. It's a way to catch the affections in powerful ultimates, which are concrete forms that can be seen and shared in the world. If stories from the Word are enlivened in this way, loves are stirred, the understanding is expanded, and the experience becomes a foundation of happy memories to be built on through the years.

But how to begin? If we want to make the most of these precious opportunities and accept the fact that they can have telling impact on developing minds, how can we rise to the challenge with little or no knowledge of how to inspire creative expression? An outlined picture to color, cut, or paste, complete with explicit directions, created by someone else, seems the safest and easiest solution. But could there be another way?

We think there is, and offer these suggestions, especially for those families and Sunday Schools who have requested help. The ideas have been used extensively in some of our Church schools, homes and Sunday School classes. Those of us who have tried them wish to share our

experience with others who may feel unsure because of what they feel is inadequate background in the arts.

It takes courage to begin, and we must not expect instant exact results. The children's work will always be far less "perfect" than projects made by adults. Remember, what is "real" to a child is not necessarily what looks natural to an adult. However, soon you may come to prefer the charming, spontaneous, often ingenious and unexpected results. The children will solve problems in their own Individual ways. Most of us tend to have misgivings about a freer approach, but this is not unbridled freedom. It's freedom *with structure*, which promotes happy compliance. Succeeding with this approach can be a revelation.

There are three important aspects involved in creative lesson planning: *motivation* or inspiration, appropriate selection of *materials*, and *methods* or ways to encourage and lead the children to the best results. These ideas are an adaptation from *Art in Education*, which is available from the General Church Education.

I. MOTIVATION

Motivation, the process of building a mental picture to Inspire and arouse the Imagination, Is the most important part of the lesson. It should be brief, vivid and quite specific, with the children immediately taking part and suggesting ideas:

After introducing and briefly retelling the story, ask many questions:

- How many people are in this story?
- What are the people doing? (Bending down? Sitting? Lying down? Walking?)
- How are the people dressed? What colors might we use?
- Where are the people? (Inside a house? On a mountaintop? By a river?)
- What time of day is it? (Bright sunshine? Dark? Sunrise? Sunset?)
- How do you think the people feel? (Happy? Sad? Afraid? Surprised?) When asking what is going on or how the people feel a little play-acting can catch and set the scene.

Sometimes pictures or ideas can be shown, if available. These should not be copied, but merely used as reference and then put away. Again ask questions:

- What kind of clothes are the people wearing?
- What type of shoes?
- Do their houses look like ours?

Try to narrow the scope of the project and concentrate on the most important part.

- A slingshot, and five small stones for David and Goliath.
- A mountaintop with dark clouds and lightning for the giving of the 10 Commandments.
- A rainbow and a dove for the story of Noah.

Demonstrate the possibilities of the medium. This may seem to be an aspect of "methods," but in reality a very short demonstration can be inspiring *motivation*. It can light the spark of creativity, especially if the process or technique is being introduced for the first time.

II. MATERIALS

(General ideas about how to manage them. A separate list of basic supplies is attached)

Manipulation of materials is never more important than the ideas presented. Children do not need expensive, complicated or sophisticated things for the best results. The simpler and more direct they are, the better. Very often the most exciting projects will evolve from the imaginative use of pure trash. Only occasionally is it wise to add the exotic touches, and then merely as a special treat or the final highlight of an already beautiful product.

Think about how the ideas can best be expressed. Would the project be better in two dimensions or in three? Is fine detail needed, or large areas?

All materials should be carefully selected and suitable for the current project. They should be simple and appropriate for the desired results. Nothing is more frustrating than trying to achieve an effect with the wrong medium. For example, background paper needs to be selected carefully, with regard to color, texture and size, according to the medium to be used and the mood to be set.

Experiment yourself. Never try something on the children without trying it first yourself, that is, the *technique*, not the *manner*, since a child's eye view cannot be duplicated by an adult. Try to anticipate their difficulties with the medium itself, and therefore eliminate some of the frustrations. However, do not confuse your own inability to express what is suggested with the children's response. They will try anything and do a better job than you can. Their fresh vision will give you strength to go on, and add new dimensions to your own way of seeing.

Supplies should be ready for instant use after the motivation. With little children everything, should be dispensed as completely as possible. With the older ones, there can be more choices, and they can be given responsibility for collecting what is necessary from a center table.

Note: Try to gauge the time involved so that if the project must be continued next time, the break comes at a logical point. Take into consideration drying time, or a change of material for finishing details, or further instructions about the process which have not been given as yet.

Organize materials so they are readily accessible. Special shelves or drawers or boxes set aside for the purpose would be a good idea.

III. METHODS

Here a warm quiet relaxed atmosphere is the key. If parents or teachers are tense or worried or hesitant, the children will sense it.

The cardinal rule is: *encourage at every step*. Show unbounded enthusiasm. Tell them what they are doing is beautiful, lovely, "great." Say: "Don't be afraid" "Fill the 'space.'" "Love all parts of your picture." "Make it big so we can really see it." If nothing is on the page, tell them you can't wait to see what they're thinking. If there's one line on the page, say it's a good start. If the space is filled, commend them for quick work.

Emphasize that each picture will be different and not like any other one, and be watchful for copying. Ideas should spread, but not the exact manner of expressing them.

If there is a group of children, they can be made to feel you are very interested in their work. A smile or a nod or a pat on the shoulder for each one goes a long way toward ultimate success.

Stop the session in time for orderly cleanup, with definite directions for how to proceed. Each child can be given a small job, and no one should feel over-burdened. Try to relax about the mess; it's all for a good cause.

Whenever possible, display the work. If at home, put up a small bulletin board just for that purpose. If at Church, find a wall in the society room so the congregation can admire and encourage. Try to mount each picture on a bright flattering color. Work that is treated with care from the beginning will be less likely to land in the wastebasket.

IV. BASIC SUPPLIES

Supplies for creative projects are varied and personal. Selections depend on experience, availability and individual preferences. Simple things can be effective and usually are completely adequate. There are so many ways to interpret any story from the Word, and no one way is preferred over another. The circumstances of the moment will dictate choices. Some homes or church situations will already have many of the supplies suggested here. Others will have nothing and will have to build slowly. Always remember, the success of the venture will have little to do with resources and a lot to do with the direction given by the adults. This list includes only the simplest suggestions: many things could be added or eliminated. Choose what suits you and your budget. All of these materials should be available in local stationery stores, school supply catalogs, business offices, lumber yards, home improvement centers, hobby and craft shops, Mom's sewing basket, an attic or basement, and the great outdoors.

PENCILS Any type, especially the softer leads and some colored ones.

CRAYONS Large sets or small ones. Explore the possibilities of broken pieces. Peel off the paper and use the tip, the blunt end, the edge, the side.

CRAYPAS Or oil pastels which have both the brilliance of chalk and the permanence of crayons. They produce vivid effects, and can be combined with watercolor washes in the "wax-resist" process.

FELT MARKERS Water-based ones are best for little children. They come in several sizes and are very popular.

PAPERS White drawing and construction in all colors. Large rolls of paper for murals are useful in Sunday Schools, as are newsprint and manila: 12" x 18" is a good basic size. It can always be cut smaller or pasted together for larger projects.

PAINT Instant powdered pigment, easy to mix. Stores well. Primary colors (red, yellow and blue) plus black and white. All other colors can be mixed from these. Use thick consistency for regular painting; water it down for washes.

BRUSHES Square-tipped bristle brushes - small (1/4"), medium (1/2") and large (3/4").

WATER COLOR BOXES Good for older children

CLAY Moist ceramic clay and plasticine. Ceramic clay dries hard and can be painted. Plasticine has an oil base, remains soft, and can be re-used.

SPECIAL PAPERS Tissue, foils, gift wrapping, wallpaper scraps, shiny magazine papers, *etc.*

YARN Bright colors, all types

PIPE CLEANERS Bright colors

WIRE Medium gauge, malleable

BURLAP Natural

FELT Many colors

STICKS Tongue depressors, popsicle sticks, toothpicks, *etc.*

FABRIC SCRAPS All kinds

SMALL WOOD SCRAPS Many shapes and sizes

SHOE BOXES Filled with exciting things

NATURAL OBJECTS Pebbles, feathers, seeds, cones, shells, twigs, dried weeds, leaves, *etc.*

INTRIGUING SCRAPS Ribbons, laces, cording, binding, braiding, *etc.*

USEFUL MAN-MADE "JUNK" Buttons, lids, bottle caps, small boxes, all kinds of packaging materials, cardboard.

TOOLS AND EQUIPMENT Scissors, glue, rulers, wire cutters, utility knives (only for older children), staplers, orange juice cans, and various stationery supplies, such as tacks, paper clips, pins, scotch tape, *etc.*

EXAMPLE OF PROCESS

Story: The Lord Walking on the Water (Matthew 14:22-33)

MOTIVATION

After reading the story, discuss these questions:

- Where was the Lord walking? Who was walking toward Him?

- What was happening to Peter?
- How could we show the storm at sea?
- How did the Lord save Peter?
- Was it daytime or nighttime in the story?
- Would you like to show the boat in the distance?
- Think of what it would feel like to be sinking in the water, and then have the Lord's strong arms pull you out.

Give a short demonstration of sweeping brush strokes quickly applied to make choppy waves and a stormy, dark sky.

MATERIALS

Have all of these items set out on newspapers, ready to use:

white paper

(cut to 11" x 17" so that it can be mounted on standard 12" x 18" blue construction paper)

large brushes

paint, dispensed a little in juice cans that each have its own brush

(mix several tones of blue by adding different amounts of black)

smaller sheets of white paper

felt markers

glue

scissors

METHOD

1. Let's first paint our background. Then we can let it dry while we work on the figures.
2. "Beautiful" "I can just see the big waves" "Swing those brush strokes all across the page to fill the whole space."
3. Good, now we're ready to draw the Lord and Peter. Use the small pieces of paper and the markers. Show the Lord's strong arms and Peter's terrified face. That's it—just a few lines can show so much.
4. Now, let's just cut our figures and paste them on the sea. Let's cut along the edge of one wave so we can slide Peter down in the water. Or can you think of a better way to do it? Maybe show just part of Peter as he sinks in?

And so it goes. Each session will bring its own rewards. That powerful force in education—the as-of-self principle—will be at work, and the children will remember with pleasure the religion lessons of their childhood when the letter of the Word came alive under their fingertips.