



When did we
See you?

MATTHEW 25: 31-46

Talking with Your Youth About Ukraine

This resource was made in response to the Russian military aggression in Ukraine but can be adjusted and referenced for a variety of conversations with youth about war, violence, and other difficult topics.

Let Your Youth Tell You Where to Start

In the world of K-12 education, teachers are often told to “meet your students where they are.” This may sound like an obvious statement, but sometimes as adults we make assumptions about what young people know and do not know, how they are feeling, or what they might need from us. We may make the mistake of trying to meet them where *we* are before even checking in with them. As Dr. Deborah Gilboa shares with parents in the article *How to talk to children about war*, “[w]e tend to assume that our kids feel a particular way and we’re wrong a surprising amount of time.”¹

Instead, meet your youth right where they are. Avoid assumptions about what they know, are feeling, or want to know – just ask them! Also avoid assumptions about whether or not your youth have a personal connection to the topic. Sometimes our assumptions affect how we frame conversations which can lead to unintentionally alienating those most affected or needing a safe place to talk. Keeping these things in mind, you do not need to be an expert to have a meaningful discussion with youth about difficult topics. You just need to be willing to show up and facilitate authentic conversations.

Holy Listening

An important way to show up for youth is through *holy listening*. As Gina Yeager-Buckley explains on the podcast, *New Way*, “most of the time when we are ‘listening’... we’re just waiting to talk, and sometimes that’s a good thing... but particularly when you’re the person in ministry, you’re the adult... you want to be more skilled at listening fully and not putting your own conclusions onto people’s stories.” Holy listening requires us to quiet our brains while someone else talks so that we can fully listen.

For some youth this opportunity to be listened to and fully heard may provide a much-needed outlet to process and share what has already been on their minds and in their hearts. For others it may allow them to consider new things and begin to explore their thoughts and feelings. For adults practicing holy listening may even take off some of the pressure they feel to have all of the answers. As Gina states, “I’ve learned that it’s very challenging, but when you invite people to do it, there’s a sigh of relief — ‘I don’t have to be smart, I don’t have to share my opinion. I’m going to truly listen.’”²

¹ Holohan, Meghan. “How to Talk to Children about War: An Age-by-Age Guide.” TODAY.com, TODAY, 24 Feb. 2022, <https://www.today.com/parents/how-talk-children-about-war-age-age-guide-t171381>.

² Hayden, Sara, host. “Season 8, Episode 1: Gina Yeager-Buckley, Part One.” *New Way*, 1001 New Worshiping Communities, 5 Oct. 2021, <https://www.newchurchnewway.org/podcast/home/2021/9/26/gina-yeager-buckley>.

You Don't Need All of the Answers

If your youth do ask questions that you do not feel equipped to answer, use it as an opportunity to learn with them. As noted in the UNICEF Parenting guide, *How to Talk to Your Children about Conflict and War*, “[r]emember it’s OK to not have the answer to every question. You can say that you need to look it up or use it as an opportunity...to find the answers together.”³ You can demonstrate responsible research, encourage asking someone else for help, and challenge youth the find their own answers.

Presbyterians as Peacemakers

While your youth should help guide where your conversation begins, Jesus’ example of empathy and compassion and the Presbyterian Peacemaking Affirmations can help you to guide the conversation from there.

Ask your youth what they think following Jesus’ example might mean today. If it’s helpful, you may first ask some questions that encourage empathy. For example, what might it feel like to be a teenager in Ukraine right now? What about in Russia?

Ask your youth what they think God is calling us to do as Presbyterians. You may find it helpful to read over the *Five Peacemaking Affirmations* approved by the 222nd General Assembly.⁴

Five Peacemaking Affirmations *abridged* (full text at [presbyterianmission.org/resource/five-peacemaking-affirmations](https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/five-peacemaking-affirmations))

1. Peacemaking is essential to our faith.
2. We have sinned by participating in acts of violence.
3. We follow Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace and Reconciler, and reclaim the power of nonviolent love.
4. We commit ourselves to studying and practicing nonviolent means of conflict resolution, nonviolent methods for social change, and nonviolent opposition to war.
5. We will practice boldly the things that make for peace.

What do the affirmations mean for us and the current situation? What action is God calling us to take?

Immediate Actions

Come prepared to share one or two ways your youth and church can help right now. Find out if youth are already doing things at school, etc. Ask them to brainstorm any other ideas they might have. Here are a few ideas to share for helping in Ukraine:

- **Donate to Presbyterian Disaster Assistance**
 - PDA is working with partners established in the region who are there for the long haul.
 - You can find out more by visiting: pda.pcusa.org/situation/ukraine
- **Advocacy**
 - The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness (OPW) has issued the following Action Alerts regarding Ukraine:
 - [Call on Congress to Stand With Vulnerable Ukrainians and Uphold Protections for the Displaced](#)
 - [Tell US leadership to uphold international law and human rights](#)

³ “How to Talk to Your Children about Conflict and War.” UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/how-talk-your-children-about-conflict-and-war>.

⁴ “Five Peacemaking Affirmations.” Presbyterian Mission Agency, 8 Feb. 2019, <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/five-peacemaking-affirmations/>.

- **Learn More** – There are many ways to learn more. Here’s one resource:
 - ["When Did We See You, Ukraine?" Webinar](#) with a short introduction to the region, questions submitted by youth, and answers by Ukrainian youth worker & peacemaker, Alla Soroka.

- **Prayer** by the Rev. Dr. Laurie Kraus, Director, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance

God of mercy, justice and peace:

Our spirits are heavy with sorrow, our souls shocked

At the sudden and breathtaking violence,

the invasion of Ukraine by their neighbor, Russia.

We pray for lives caught in the grip of war,

who hear the bombs in the night,

the ominous movement of troops on the road into town

the whistle of incoming shells,

for a cry from a desperate neighbor or a shout of warning.

For those who huddle in subways and basements

or flee for the borders, clutching their children’s hands

We pray for families separated from fathers, brothers and sons

who must remain to fight and protect their homeland.

We pray for neighbors in Eastern and Central Europe

As their hearts and doors open to these refugees

That strained resources will become an abundance of hope

That fears and struggles with racism will yield to a generosity of profound welcome

That communities of faith within Ukraine will be protected from harm

and sustained in their efforts to feed and shelter their neighbors.

That peacemakers and protesters in Russia will be heard and their lives preserved.

May we undergird our prayers with tangible resources to help.

May we reach deeply, give generously, and welcome extravagantly.

May we lift our voices in a strong and unified advocacy.

May we all, even as we breathe in lament, breathe out mercy, hope and peace.

And in this Lenten season, when we walk the way toward death and resurrection, repent our complicity in cultures of violence and renew our efforts toward justice and peace.

Practicing Peace

Share with your youth that peacemaking is a lifelong pursuit. While many conflicts may feel bigger than us and out of our control, we still have a significant role to play in creating peace within ourselves and our communities daily. This may be especially important to share with youth who are distressed and feeling overwhelmed by the topic you are discussing. Offer them immediate coping skills such as taking deep breaths, prayer, and limiting media intake. Help to teach all of your youth ways that they can begin to create peace for themselves, their communities, and the world - not just as a response to a crisis, but as an ongoing and regular practice.

Practicing Peace Activities

- Regular Prayer and Spiritual Practices
- Taking Deep Breaths
 - As explained in *How to Talk to Your Children about Conflict and War*, “[a]bdominal breathing is very calming and helps us to draw oxygen deep into our lungs.”
 - With your hand on your stomach, “[t]ake 5 deep breaths, spend 5 seconds breathing in and 5 seconds breathing out, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.”⁵

⁵ “How to Talk to Your Children about Conflict and War.” UNICEF, <https://www.unicef.org/parenting/how-talk-your-children-about-conflict-and-war>.

- Exploring peace through journaling, digital/paper collages, and playlists:
 - Use the 5 senses as prompts for your youth:
 - What does peace feel like? Look like? Sound like? Smell like? Taste like?
 - Use “who, what, when, where” as prompts for your youth:
 - Who do you feel peaceful around? What do you feel at peace doing? When do you feel at peace? Where do you feel at peace?
 - Youth can answer the questions through writing, images (digital or from magazines), or through songs.
 - Put on some peaceful music and set a timer. Give youth time to reflect as they write, gather images, and/or choose songs (using headphones).
 - When the timer goes off, ask them to share their results. What does peace mean to them?
 - Ask them to come up with and commit to one regular peace practice based on their reflection.
 - If youth are interested and you have time, they can take this one step further by creating:
 - a poem, personal statement, or group statement for peace
 - a small collage or collaborative art installation for peace
 - a personal or group-wide peace playlist
 - whatever else they come up with!
- Brainstorming ways to promote peace in our communities and beyond:
 - If they have not done so already, ask your youth to broaden their thoughts from the last activity to include their community.
 - ...their family, church, school, and local community.
 - ...their state, country, and world.
 - What do people need more of to practice peace? What do they need less of?
 - What needs to change so that everyone has the opportunity to practice and know peace?
 - How is our own sense of peace interdependent with that of others?
 - Does peacemaking always feel peaceful?
 - Based on their answers, ask them to commit to a way of practicing peace regularly in their community and beyond. This may already be part of the personal practice they committed to from the first activity, may build off of that, or may be a totally different practice.

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