

Teach Peace Pack

Assembly 4: The Christmas truce



Aim: to learn about a remarkable story from World War I and encourage children to think about reaching out in friendship across divides.

Planning/Preparation: you may like to find images of WWI trenches to display during the assembly.

1 Introduction: Football

Ask the children: Who likes playing football? [Show of hands] What do you like about it? [Look for answers about friendship and fun]

Explain that you want to tell a story about an extraordinary game of football that took place 100 years ago...

2 Tell the story of The Christmas Truce

It was 24 December 1914 – Christmas Eve. Many children were getting ready for Christmas without their fathers. Earlier that year, in August, war had broken out right across Europe and around the world. Germany had invaded the next-door country of Belgium. Britain had agreed to help defend Belgium and so hundreds of thousands of men had set sail to France.

Before very long they were facing German troops in a long line of trenches. These deep trenches were dug to protect soldiers on both sides from the guns of the enemy. Even so, already thousands of men on both sides had been killed.

Explain to the children that it was Christmas Eve. Ask: What would the soldiers be thinking of? [Look for answers like friends, family, wives and girlfriends.] So were the Germans.

3 Continue the story...

As the British soldiers kept watch, they heard something which surprised them. It was not gunfire but singing. As dawn broke, instead of the guns starting up once more there was a strange calm. Someone in the German trenches raised a board on which they had written the words, “You no fight, we no fight”. Along the line, a German officer raised a white flag. Nervously, some British soldiers stood up above the trench – and nothing happened. Cautiously they began to advance, without their guns, towards German lines. The Germans, too, came forward and began to greet their enemies with warm handshakes. “Happy Christmas, Fritz!” and “Merry Christmas to you, too, Tommy.”

By that afternoon, thousands of soldiers on both sides were talking and laughing and singing. Some showed their new friends pictures of their loved ones. Some Germans had been working in England just before the war and one soldier asked a British officer if he would take a letter back to his English girlfriend. There was much swapping of small presents such as cigarettes, tinned food, plum puddings, and even helmets! Someone else found a football and a game began. Other games started and where there was no ball, tin cans or sandbags stuffed with straw were used. And all the while, carols continued to be sung in both languages. This truce had been started by ordinary soldiers not wishing to fight on Christmas Day. The officers who were fighting with them joined in the truce but officers higher up were not at all pleased.

4 The Generals

Ask the children: Why do you think the generals, those running the army, were unhappy? [Look for answers about them not being happy because being friendly with the enemy was not a good idea. How can you fight with someone who is a friend?]

When the Generals commanding the war got to hear of it, they were very angry. They feared that their soldiers would lose the will to fight because they could see that their enemies were people just like themselves.

The army commanders acted quickly to prevent this ever happening again. Orders went out that there was to be no more contact with the enemy and before long, sadly, the shooting began again. Many people had hoped the war would have been over by Christmas that year. Sadly, it went on for another three and a half years. By this time, millions of soldiers around the world, and even more civilians, had died.

5 Conclusion: Building peace

Explain to the children that you want them to think about reaching out across divides. Ask: *Have you ever helped someone new settle into your class, or stood up for someone who has needed it, even though you didn't really know them. Have you been a friend to someone who needed you?* When you do this sort of thing you are building peace. So keep doing it...

Follow up activities/resources:

- Read more about the Christmas Truce, see: 'Truce: The Day The Soldiers Stopped Fighting' by Jim Murphy, 2009
- Think of times when people around you might want you to do things which you are unhappy about. How hard is it to stand out and refuse? Why is that? What can help us to be courageous about our ideas and beliefs?
- During World War I and in every other war, newspapers and others on all sides, spread terrible lies about the enemy and what they had done. Why do you think this is? Think about when groups of people are suspicious of each other and what can be done to help break down the barriers. Why do you think some people do not want these barriers to come down?
- Learn more about World War I and the experiences of conscientious objectors – people who refused to kill from the start, not just on Christmas Day. See: www.quaker.org.uk/education and www.quaker.org.uk/ww1map.
- Learn how to make a Peace Mala – a symbolic bracelet that promotes friendship, respect and peace between the faiths and all people in our world, see: www.peacemala.org.uk.