

Wrestling with the Big Questions

FACILITATORS GUIDE

Office of Children's Ministry
Office for Ministry Development

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*“For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.”
-I Corinthians 2:10*

Group Size

The optimal size gathering for these types of conversations is probably from twelve to twenty participants (with smaller groups best for children). If possible two trained facilitators, one male and one female are preferred especially for larger groups.

Location

It is important that locations be chosen for what Parker Palmer calls “Graceful Ambiance” (in [A Hidden Wholeness](#), p.85ff). Attractive and welcoming surroundings promote trust in leaders' care and competence.

Length of Gatherings

With adults it is best to allow at least four hours for this retreat. Obviously adaptations for children and some other groups will require knowledge of sensitivity to their special needs.

Welcome and Introductions (approximately 20 minutes)

There are many good ways to say welcome and ask for initial introductions. The important thing is to create a safe and inviting environment from the very first moments. Reading Parker Palmer's excellent discussion on “Creating Circles of Trust” (in [A Hidden Wholeness](#), Chapter 5) is good preparation for deciding how to begin your gathering.

Retreat Purpose and Ground Rules (approximately 30 minutes)

Some “talking points” for stating the **purpose** of these gatherings include:

- The purpose of these gatherings is to create safe environments for people to name and share ‘big questions’ that really matter to them.
- Communities of faith should be places where such questions are invited, honored and responded to.
- This gathering is *not* for arguing or debating church doctrine or politics.

- It is for: *Reflecting* on our own ‘big questions’
Sharing them in a safe community
Listening with appreciation to others’ ‘big questions’
Offering ‘big questions’ to educators and formation leaders called to help folk wrestle with them faithfully.

Before going further it is important for the group to agree on a few **ground rules**. Groups tend to take ownership of ground rules *they brainstorm* better than those facilitators hand them. If near the end of the exercise the facilitator feels that something important has been left out she/he can offer it in the form of a question like, “Do we have or need a specific ground rule about not critiquing or giving answers to each other’s big questions?”

Some ‘talking points’ for setting up the ‘brainstorm’ on ground rules includes:

- In order for people to be really honest about their big questions they need to feel at least three things:
- *Welcome* to express *any question* that comes from their heart.
- *Safe* from threats of judgement or attack.
- *Safe* from pressures to speak or agree.
- So, what are *the most important ground rules* we all need to observe in order for these three conditions to be met?

Once the facilitator records the ground rules on newsprint and the group is satisfied with them (there should probably be no more than 8-10 once grouped together and summarized), the list should be prominently displayed and referred to as necessary throughout the meeting.

Bible Study and Community Building

“Jesus’ Big Questions and Ours” (approximately 40 minutes)

The purposes of beginning with a Bible-study like the one suggested here are to:

- Help provide spiritual grounding for the conversations to come.
- Show that the Bible asks and invites big questions.
- Show that wrestling with ‘big questions’ is near the heart of Biblical faith.
- Begin community building around participants’ connections with Jesus’ big questions.

To introduce this Bible-study and Community Building exercise you might comment that:

- Asking and inviting questions was one of Jesus’ favorite ways of teaching.
- Jesus always treated people and their questions -even the most challenging one’s- with utmost respect.
- The Bible is meant for *stimulating* not discouraging spiritually inquisitive hearts and minds.

Next, invite participants to mark the questions that strike a chord with them as you slowly read Jesus’ questions out loud and in a deeply inquisitive tone. It may help to read through the questions twice.

Next, invite participants to journal 5 minutes on the connections they made with one or two of the questions they marked.

Then, invite participants to share whatever thoughts and feelings they are comfortable sharing in groups of three (for 20-30 minutes).

Finally, invite the whole group back together for a general discussion about what they learned/experienced while engaging Jesus' big questions (15 minutes). The exercise can be closed with prayer for the participants, their big questions and the conversations to come.

Many variations on this Bible-study and community building exercise are possible. Creativity is especially needed when adapting it for children, young people or other special groups.

For example, here are a couple of suggestions for leaders of children's gatherings:

- Instead of reading Jesus' big questions, explore one or two that have special relevance for children using creative story-telling techniques such as "Godly Play" (consider Luke 15:4; Matt. 8:18; Matt. 7:3 or Luke 10:36).
- Use creative story-telling to help children imagine being in the company of Jesus (Mark 10:13-16). Comment that in such situations children always like to ask questions. Next ask the participants, "What kinds of questions do you think the children in this story may have asked Jesus?" and "What questions would *you* like to ask Jesus?"

Big Questions Journaling Exercise (approximately 45 minutes)

The purpose of this exercise is to give participants quiet time to reflect on their big questions and where they turn for help with them.

To introduce this exercise you might use some or all of the following talking points. You may also want to use one of the quotations found at the end of this guide.

- Having and wrestling with 'big questions' is a sign of spiritual vitality not weakness.
- St. Paul intimates this when he writes: "*For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.*" (1 Corinthians 2:10).
- If the "*Spirit searches everything*" there are no 'out of bounds' questions. There are no 'bad' or 'stupid' questions.
- Every question is a *good question* as long as it is not just for showing how clever we are or how stupid someone else is.
- Every question is a *good question* as long as it *comes from the heart*.
- In our daily lives we are occupied with so many mundane questions, we need opportunities to step back, remember and reflect upon questions that really matter to us.

Next invite participants to find a comfortable place to write down their responses to the following questions (approximately 20 minutes). Assure them that they will only be asked to share what *they are comfortable sharing* of what ever they write:

- If you could ask God three big questions, what questions would you ask?
- Where do you turn for help when these questions feel most pressing?

- How does your faith, your church or the Bible help you with these questions?
How do you wish they helped you more?

Small Group Sharing (approximately 20-30 minutes)

When the group reconvenes comment on the importance of having opportunities to *reflect* on our big questions *as well as* to *share* them *in community*.

Next invite participants to gather into groups of three or four to share whatever they would like of their responses to the questions above. Ask them to review the ground-rules done earlier before beginning their conversations.

Whole Group Dialogue - What Has Been Learned from Reflecting and Talking about Big Questions (approximately 30 minutes)

Next invite the group-as-whole into a general discussion around themes such as:

What was it like to write about and share big questions?

What was surprising, difficult or satisfying?

What common themes emerged?

What can/should church leaders learn from conversations like these?

Resources

During the wrap up discussion invite the participants to share resources (books, opportunities in their own church or Diocese etc.) they think would be helpful to those who want to continue listening, talking and learning in the ways they have today.

Closing

In closing find ways to review and affirm the contribution participants have made to each other and the wider church. Emphasize the importance of finding places to own and explore life's big questions.

SOME QUOTATIONS

“...’fides quarens intellectum’. Faith struggles for the clarity of its cause... The scholastic formula speaks of seeking, questioning faith. It is not a faith free of doubt which deceives itself in naïve optimism over its own difficulties with God. ‘Quarens’ (in search of) also means that faith cannot exist without its shadow, doubt. Faith without doubt is not stronger, but merely ideological. The search into which living faith throws us cannot be content with cheap grace, naïve trust that all will go well, superficial charity which does not get to the root of things. A faith which seeks practical understanding of itself as participation in the reality of God cannot spare itself the trouble of rational grappings with the conditions for worthwhile human life...It is not a sign of strong faith but of weak faith if our quest ends quickly and if faith shuns the light of reason”

-Dorothee Solle in Thinking About God-an Introduction to Theology.

“As long as Christians remain pilgrims of faith, they will continue to raise questions- hard questions- for which they will not always find answers. Rather than having all the answers, believers often find that they have a new set of questions. This is surely the experience of the men and women in the Bible. The Bible is no easy answer book, although it is sometimes read that way. If we are ready to listen, the Bible has the power to shake us violently with its terrible questions... If faith raises ever new questions, then the theological task of the Christian community is to pursue these questions, to keep them alive, to prevent them from being forgotten or suppressed. Human life ceases to be human not when we do not have all the answers but when we no longer have the courage to ask the really important questions. By insisting that these questions be raised, theology serves not only the community of faith but also the wider purpose of God ‘to make and to keep human life human in the world’”

-Daniel L. Migliore in Faith Seeking Understanding

“Don’t start looking in the Bible for the answers it gives. Start by listening for the questions it asks. We are much involved, all of us, with questions about things that matter a good deal today but will be forgotten by this time tomorrow—the immediate wheres and whens and hows that face us daily at home and at work—but at the same time we tend to lose track of the questions about things that matter always, life-and-death questions about meaning, purpose, and value. To lose track of such deep questions as these is to risk losing track of who we really are in our depths and where we are really going. There is perhaps no stronger reason for reading the Bible that that somewhere among all those India-paper pages there awaits each man and woman, whoever they are, the one question which (though for years they may have been pretending not to hear it) is the central question of his or her own life:

- What is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? (Matt. 16:26)
- Am I my brother’s keeper? (Genesis 4:9)
- If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)
- What is truth? (John 18:38)
- How can a man be born when he is old? (John 3:4)
- What does a man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? (Ecclesiastes 1:3)
- Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? (Psalm 139:7)
- Who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:29)
- What shall I do to inherit eternal life? (Luke 10:25)

When you hear the question that is your question, then you have already begun to hear much. Whether you can accept the Bible's answer or not, you have reached the point where at least you can begin to hear it too."

-Frederick Buechner in Wishful Thinking-a Seeker's ABC

"Let us consider, first, the need for a tough mind.... The tough mind is sharp and penetrating, breaking through the crusts of legends and myths and sifting the true from the false. The tough-minded individual is astute and discerning...Who doubts that this toughness of mind is one of man's greatest needs? Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think."

-Martin Luther King, Jr. in Strength to Love

By becoming more skilled in the art of questioning, you will discover new ways to ask the questions that have vexed and perplexed you the most. In turn you will discover new and more fruitful answers. And these new answers in turn will generate a whole new host of questions. And the cycle keeps repeating itself—not in a vicious circle, but in an ever-ascending and ever expanding spiral that gives you a continually new and replenished outlook on life. ... The possibilities are limited only by the questions your imagination and sense of wonder enable you to come up with. They don't have to be the 'big questions'. Or, at least the big question may turn out to be something like 'What are the big questions, and what makes them so?By becoming a more adept questioner, by developing a long love affair with the art of questioning, I'll wager that you'll be able to answer more expertly than ever that question of questions, 'Who am I'"

-Christopher Phillips in Socrates Cafe

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