



Dear Friend,

Congratulations! You are about to embark on a journey of formation and reflection, and we are delighted to be a part of this experience.

In these downloadable PDF documents, you will find:

- ❖ **A Facilitator's Guide:** Includes a course overview, step-by-step instructions and guide for each session, and a bonus session. If you are using the guide on a computer, tablet, or smartphone, the hyperlinks are enabled.
- ❖ **A Participant's Guide:** Designed for participants to follow along in the class with bulleted topics, key points, and scripture citations, as well as a place to write notes. For those who would like a more durable guide, it is available as a printed book, which can be ordered from Forward Movement at www.forwardmovement.org. Individual copies are \$10, and \$7 each for ten or more copies.

You can find additional resources at www.transformingquestions.org. We will continue to add resources and tools so please check back periodically. We also hope you will send ideas and best practices to us at editorial@forwardmovement.org so we can share them with the wider community.

Another helpful resource is *Faithful Questions: Exploring the Way with Jesus*. Based on the course lectures, this book is available as a companion for the course or for independent use by individuals or groups. It is available at www.forwardmovement.org or as an ebook at Kindle, Nook, and iBook.

The development of *Transforming Questions* was funded by a generous grant from The Episcopal Church's Constable Fund. With this financial support, we are able to offer the curriculum free of charge as a download to any Episcopal church. In addition, Forward Movement is joining with The Constable Fund to offer ten free copies of the printed *Participant's Guide* to Episcopal congregations with an average Sunday attendance of 50 or less. Please contact Forward Movement at 800.543.1813 to place the order. (Shipping is additional.)

Our mission is to inspire disciples and empower evangelists, and we hope these resources encourage, engage, and transform you on your journey of faith.



transforming questions

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Many Christians and seekers operate under an assumption that doubt is the opposite of faith. Sometimes we hear people say that to have faith means accepting things without questioning them. Others say that you can't be a "good Christian" if you have a lot of doubt. Nothing could be further from the truth. Questions are an essential part of faith.

Almost every single person in scripture who encounters God does so with a lot of questions, and more than a little doubt. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, Mary, the disciples, and Paul all ask questions, and those questions are part of their faithful response to God. In fact, it is in the act of asking questions that we wrestle more deeply with our faith, allowing ourselves to be transformed by the One whom we encounter in the midst of our doubts and questions.

Transforming Questions is a curriculum that offers the opportunity to engage in faithful questioning with the companionship of a leader and in the midst of a community. Through table fellowship, teaching, and conversation, participants wrestle with some of the most basic questions of our faith: Who is Jesus? Does God answer prayer? Why do bad things happen? In the act of asking questions, we see our faith transform, deepening and developing from something simple and superficial to something complicated and rich. And, in the act of asking questions, we see ourselves transformed, as the answers that we find, or the new questions that we discover, demand that we respond, changing not only what we think but also how we live.

Transforming Questions is a good introduction to the Christian faith for newcomers who are still seeking God. It is a good refresher on the Christian faith for longtime church members who are wondering about the basics of the faith. Above all, *Transforming Questions* helps to build community among those who are seekers and those who are members, those who are old and those who are young, those who are questioning for the first time and those who are questioning for the thousandth time. Together they will find that wherever they come from, they share the same questions; together they will discover, not easy answers, but the still, small voice of God, speaking in their very midst.

COURSE OVERVIEW

Transforming Questions is a ten-session course designed to help participants engage the basic questions of the Christian faith through a combination of teaching and conversation. Participants gather to share a meal, which sets the foundation for fellowship. Scripture tells us again and again that people grow closer to God and one another through table fellowship, and that Christ becomes known to us in the breaking of bread. After the meal, a leader gives a presentation about a central question of the Christian faith. Then, in small groups, participants are invited into deeper reflection on and engagement with the question. Prayer both begins and ends each session to set the context for the conversations that occur within each class.

Scope and Sequence

Each session of the course is devoted to exploring one of the foundational questions of the Christian faith and discovering through the presentation and conversation how these questions transform and change during our spiritual journey.

Week 1: Can we question our faith?

Week 2: Who is Jesus?

Week 3: Why did Jesus have to die?

Week 4: What do we have to do?

Week 5: How should I read the Bible?

Week 6: Does God answer prayer?

Week 7: Why do bad things happen?

Week 8: Where do we go when we die?

Week 9: Why do I need church?

Week 10: Where do we go from here?

Or/And

*Bonus Session: Where does The Episcopal Church come from? What do I have to believe to be an Episcopalian?

*Week 10 offers two options for the final session. The leader should choose which one to present based on the needs of the group or decide to add an extra session.

Format

Transforming Questions is designed so that each session lasts a minimum of 100 minutes. The session format is as follows:

- ❖ Opening collect and welcome (5 minutes)
- ❖ Meal and fellowship (25 minutes)
- ❖ Presentation (30-35 minutes)
- ❖ Small-group discussion (30-35 minutes)
- ❖ Closing collect and dismissal (5 minutes)

The meal and fellowship are an integral part of the class itself, allowing for community building and deeper engagement. If required, the sessions can be adapted to a Sunday morning formation time, provided at least 60 minutes of time is available. In that case, the session format would be:

- ❖ Opening collect (2 minutes)
- ❖ Presentation (30 minutes)
- ❖ Small-group discussion (25 minutes)
- ❖ Closing collect (2 minutes)

This format does, however, change the tenor of the gathering.

Preparing For class

REGISTRATION

Transforming Questions is not designed as a drop-in course. The sessions are related to and build upon one another, and the small-group discussion requires sustained community. Participants should be required to register in advance and need to commit to attendance at all of the sessions (one absence is permissible). Advance registration allows the leader to assign appropriate small groups and do necessary set up. It also helps underscore commitment for participants.

NAME TAGS

The leader should provide name tags for each participant for the first class. Name tags should be sorted by table group (using numbers, colors, etc.). In subsequent weeks, the leader can provide the name tags each time, or can provide name tags and markers and allow the participants to write their own name tags. It is important to use the name tags throughout the course, even if you think that members know one another. This helps ease anxiety and extends hospitality, particularly to newer attendees.

MEALS

The meal is an important part of the *Transforming Questions* course; it is a time of fellowship and community building that allows and enables deeper engagement during the small-group discussion time. The leader should provide the meal for the first class. Although the food does not need to be fancy, the leader should be aware of setting a stage for hospitality, attending to small details such as flowers on tables, nice tableware, etc.

At the first class, the leader should assign small groups the responsibility for the subsequent meals, allowing every table group to take a turn (or more than one, depending on the number of table groups). Although the course is free, this allows the participants to contribute to the classes in a meaningful way. The small groups should work among themselves both to provide the necessary food, drinks, and so forth, and also to be responsible for the set up and clean up of the meal.

When making the assignments, the leader should clearly say that anyone for whom purchasing food presents a financial burden should privately give their receipts to the leader for reimbursement. This allows everyone, regardless of financial means, to take part in providing hospitality to the group.

SMALL GROUPS

Small-group discussion is an essential part of the *Transforming Questions* course. Groups should be seated at tables of six to eight participants. Participants sit in their table groups for the meal and the small-group discussion. The table groups remain the same throughout the course, to help with building community and allow for more fruitful discussion time. Thus the leader should choose and assign the table groups carefully, giving consideration to the following factors:

- ❖ Including a mix at each table of new believers and longtime Christians.
- ❖ Including a mix of those who are quiet with those who are talkative.
- ❖ Considering grouping people who might have similar interests or background.
- ❖ Considering separating some members, so that the groups do not underscore cliques in the community.

Each small group should have a discussion facilitator, selected by the leader in advance of the course.

LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES

- ❖ The leader is responsible for organizing the course and for giving the weekly presentations.
- ❖ The leader should have a sound theological education and be confident in the material being covered.
- ❖ The leader should read each week's outline over many times prior to the class in order to prepare for the presentation.
- ❖ The leader should feel free to add personal stories or anecdotes to enhance the materials provided but should be careful not to allow the stories to overwhelm or distract from the material being presented.
- ❖ The leader should not participate as a member of a small group. This helps dissuade a group from turning to the "expert" to answer the questions and instead invites them to wrestle with the questions on their own.
- ❖ The leader should discourage questions or comments during the presentation itself. The time for questions is in the small group, as members consider the questions together.
- ❖ The leader may leave a time for questions at the end of small-group discussion. One approach is to allow each table to bring one question back from their discussion to ask the leader before the closing collect and dismissal.
- ❖ The leader should carefully select small-group discussion facilitators for each table group.

SMALL-GROUP DISCUSSION FACILITATORS

Each small group should have a discussion facilitator who is selected by the leader in advance of the course. Small group discussion facilitators should be spiritually mature individuals capable of facilitating group discussion. They are not asked to be the experts in the topics at hand but instead should be able to keep the group on track and invite the participation of all group members. Their responsibilities include:

- ❖ Encouraging people to mention their names each time they speak, until everyone knows the others' names.
- ❖ Encouraging everyone at the table to use “I” statements, and to speak from their own experience and perspective. Talking about “other people” is rarely helpful, and doesn't allow personal engagement with these important questions.
- ❖ Making sure everyone who wishes to speak has a chance to speak. This may mean asking someone who has already spoken to wait until others have had a chance to share, or directly asking someone who has been quiet if they have anything to add.
- ❖ Trying to keep the discussion on topic. If the answers are wandering too far astray, re-read the question to the group, and encourage them to return to the topic at hand. If you have finished all of the suggested discussion questions, you can return to the topic of interest, if it is appropriate.
- ❖ Being aware of the time, so that your group is able to address all of the questions. If you get bogged down in a question, encourage the group to move on to the next one. You can always come back to a particularly important question if you have time remaining at the end.
- ❖ Sharing anything that seems important with the Leader. If you are having trouble facilitating your table group, ask for his/her help in working toward a solution.

Leaders should meet with the small group discussion facilitators in advance of the first session to go over these responsibilities and talk through possible situations that might arise and how to address them.

PUBLICITY MATERIALS

Groups are welcome to adapt the following course description for use in their publicity materials.

Are you someone who has been a Christian for a long time, but sometimes still wonders about the basics? Or are you someone new to God and the Church who wants to get a better idea of what this Christianity thing is really all about? Then come join us at {name of church} on {dates} at {times} for *Transforming Questions*. In this class, we will seek to move into deeper life in Christ by engaging in some of faith's most basic questions: Who is Jesus? Does God answer prayer? How do I read the Bible? Why bother with Church? What do I have to do to be a Christian? Each week we will gather for a meal, hear a talk on one of the central questions of the Christian faith, and then join in small-group discussion. Through both listening and sharing, we will wrestle with these foundational questions in the context of faith and in the company of fellow seekers. As we do so, we will learn more about ourselves, one another, and the Jesus we are seeking.

BIBLICAL QUOTATIONS

All biblical passages are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible. The NRSV is an ecumenical translation that is widely respected among both scholars and church leaders because it is faithful to the original languages of the text while also graceful and understandable in English. The NRSV is also the translation most commonly used in public worship in the Episcopal Church. Other translations that may be helpful include:

- ❖ The New Jewish Publication Society's TANAKH (NJPS) translation of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), which is the beautiful and faithful translation of the Hebrew in use by most English-speaking Jews. It is particularly helpful in understanding some of the poetry and prophecy of the Hebrew Bible.
- ❖ The Common English Bible (CEB) is a translation of the Bible into easily readable English, less formal than the NRSV, yet still faithful to the original languages.
- ❖ *The Message* Bible is a rendering rather than a translation. It attempts to adapt the language of the Bible into contemporary idioms, so that readers can relate to the biblical texts more easily.

MATERIALS

For each class, the following materials are needed:

- ❖ Tables and chairs
- ❖ The meal (provided by the leader or supplied by one of the table groups), as well as: dishes (disposable or reusable), napkins, utensils, serving utensils, cups, condiments, etc.
- ❖ Name tags for each participant
- ❖ Copies of the handout or participant guide for each participant
- ❖ Bibles for each table (leaders can also invite participants to bring their own Bibles, but should provide extras in case they are needed).

RESOURCES

The Leader's Guide and Participant's Book for *Transforming Questions* are both available as downloads from Forward Movement (www.forwardmovement.org). A printed Participant's Book also is available from Forward Movement. In addition, *Faithful Questions: Exploring the Way with Jesus*, a book based on the course lectures, is available as a companion for the course or for independent use by individuals or groups. It is available at www.forwardmovement.org or as an ebook at Kindle, Nook, and iBook.

Visit www.transformingquestions.org for more resources.

DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

Thank you for agreeing to be a small group discussion facilitator. As the facilitator, it is not your job to be the expert on the topic of the course or to answer questions. It is simply your job to help keep the discussion at your table on track and ensure that everyone has a chance to share. Included below are a few guidelines that will hopefully help you in this task.

- ❖ Please encourage people to mention their names each time they speak, until everyone knows the others' names.
- ❖ Encourage everyone at the table to use “I” statements, and to speak from their own experience and perspective. Talking about “other people” is rarely helpful, and doesn’t allow personal engagement with these important questions.
- ❖ Make sure everyone who wishes to speak has a chance to speak. This may mean asking someone who has already spoken to wait until others have had a chance to share, or directly asking someone who has been quiet if they have anything to add.
- ❖ Try to keep the discussion on topic. If the answers are wandering too far astray, re-read the question to the group, and encourage them to return to the topic at hand. If you have finished all of the suggested discussion questions, you can return to the topic of interest, if it is appropriate.
- ❖ Be aware of the time, so that your group is able to address all of the questions. If you get bogged down in a question, encourage the group to move on to the next one. You can always come back to a particularly important question if you have time remaining at the end.
- ❖ Share anything that seems important with the Leader. If you are having trouble facilitating your table group, ask for his/her help in working toward a solution.

SESSION

1

CAN WE QUESTION OUR FAITH?

Opening prayer

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

(The Book of Common Prayer, p. 832)

Many people operate under the mistaken assumption that doubt is the opposite of faith.

- ❖ That to have faith means to accept something without questioning it.
- ❖ That you can't be a "good Christian" if you have a lot of doubt.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

- ❖ In fact, almost every single person in scripture who encounters God does so with a lot of questions—and more than a little doubt.
 - When God tells Abraham and Sarah that they will be the recipients of God's promise, they repeatedly question God and even laugh at the impossibility of God's promise. (Genesis 15:1-15; 17:17, 18:9-12)¹

¹ The biblical citations are provided for the teacher's information. You could choose to simply reference all the texts, or to have the group read and examine closely one or more texts, as best fits your church context.

- When God appears in a burning bush to send Moses to set the Hebrews free, Moses first argues with God about his unworthiness, then finally begs God, “O my Lord, please send someone else.”(Exodus 4:13)
- The psalms are full of faithful people asking questions of God:
 - ◇ How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Psalm 13:2)
 - ◇ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. (Psalm 22:1-2)
 - ◇ Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love. (Psalm 44:23-26)
 - ◇ I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? (Psalm 121:1)
 - ◇ Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? (Psalm 139:7)
- Mary’s immediate response to God upon being told that she will bear the Messiah is a question, “How can this be?” (Luke 1:34)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

- **Thomas is famous for his doubt; he will not believe the words of his fellow disciples, until he sees Jesus himself.**

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:24-29)

- **When Jesus appears to Paul in a vision, Paul responds with a series of questions.**

While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" I answered, "Who are you, Lord?" Then he said to me, "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting." Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. I asked, "What am I to do, Lord?" The Lord said to me, "Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do." Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus. (Acts 22:6-11)

- **Even Jesus himself questions God!**

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. (Matthew 27:45-50)

Questioning is not just possible for faithful people, it is essential!

- ❖ **Asking questions follows the example of those in faith who have gone before us, who have asked many of the same questions that we ask.**

- ❖ Asking and wrestling with questions is how we stay in relationship with God—bringing our thoughts and concerns and struggles to God, believing that what God has to say about them is important.
- ❖ It is how we grow and develop in our faith.
 - Jesus doesn't encounter anyone and say "stay just as you are." He is constantly challenging people to change, to be transformed.
 - Christians are "disciples." Disciples literally means students. Students ask questions, knowing that it is through questions that we learn about ourselves, about one another, about God.
 - ◇ That's why the Catechism, a teaching tool for our faith found in *The Book of Common Prayer* on pages 844-862, is in a question/answer format. It is assumed that Christians will have questions, that these questions are the starting point of faith and the path to deeper faith.

Sometimes we head to the opposite extreme.

- ❖ Instead of saying we can't/shouldn't question, we say, "Question everything."
 - Our questions stop being a way of being faithful and become a way of being combative.
 - We ask questions, not to encounter God, but to trip God up.
 - Or we simply say that "anything goes," that you don't have to believe anything specific. You can just ask an endless series of questions and not worry about finding any answers.

But that's not what faithful questioning looks like. Perhaps the best example for faithful questioning in the Bible is the story of Jacob in Genesis 32.

- ❖ Read aloud or have someone else read aloud **Genesis 32:22-31**

The same night he [Jacob] got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have

prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.

- ❖ Immediately before this story, we are told that Jacob has left the house of his father-in-law and is headed back to face his brother, whom he tricked and deceived the last time they met. Jacob stays alone by the river Jabbok at night “and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”
 - Jewish tradition has long held that Jacob is wrestling an angel, rather than a mere mortal.
 - Jacob himself seems to think that the person that he wrestled with was God; he says after the encounter that he has seen God face to face.
- ❖ All night long, Jacob wrestles with this representative of God. And as he wrestles, he asks questions:
 - He asks God for his name.
 - He asks God for a blessing.
- ❖ All night long, Jacob wrestles God, holding God close, in spite of exhaustion and frustration, not letting go.

That kind of wrestling is exactly what faithful questioning of God looks like.

- ❖ It isn’t lobbing questions like missiles from a distance, seeing if they hit the mark and never waiting for a response.
- ❖ It isn’t letting go, walking away, and saying none of it matters.
- ❖ It’s not a hands-off, no contact, long-distance activity.
- ❖ Faithful questioning is wrestling.
 - It’s sweat and breath and blood—up close and personal
 - It’s clinging on tightly, as though your life depends on it, as though it really matters.
 - It’s not letting go, in spite of exhaustion and frustration and pain.

Jacob wrestles all night long, and he doesn’t even get his answers.

- ❖ Instead he gets a new name, a new identity: Israel, one who wrestles/strives with God.
- ❖ Jacob’s willingness to cling to God in the midst of unanswered questions, to hold on and not let go, becomes his central, defining identity.

- ❖ And from Jacob—from Israel—comes the people Israel, the people understood as belonging to God. The pattern for faithfulness, for being people of God, starts with a wrestling match. God's people are called to be God wrestlers—willing to ask questions, to encounter God, and to not let go, no matter what.

So as Christians, the dilemma is not whether or not we should or can ask questions (we should, we can, we must!) but how do we ask questions about our faith? How do we ask questions of God? And what sources help us to wrestle with those questions and possibly find our way to answers?

- ❖ We ask questions in community.
 - Author Malcolm Gladwell in *David and Goliath* tells about a series of studies that have been done on ideal class size in schools. Those studies found that while a class that was too large was detrimental, so was a class that was too small. This is partly because, in a class, students learn not only from the teacher but also from one another.
 - This is fundamentally true in the life of faith as well. And it has been from the beginning. Jewish rabbis gathered in groups for teaching and debate. There were twelve disciples. The earliest Christians gathered to worship and pray and learn in community.
 - As people of faith, we learn by asking questions together. Asking questions in community
 - ◇ Reminds us that we are not alone—that all faithful Christians have questions and doubts.
 - ◇ Helps us to seek and find support in the process of discovering God and growing in our faith.
 - ◇ Helps us to learn from one another; others inspire both insights and questions.
- ❖ We ask questions of God, believing that God is big enough for our questions.
 - If we aren't asking our questions of God, then we are turning to other sources (culture, our own brains, etc.). While those sources aren't necessarily bad, they are limited.
 - You wouldn't consult a math textbook for an answer to a history question, or observe the stars to learn how to knit. Our questions about faith and God should rightly be addressed to God.
- ❖ We ask questions, consulting a variety of sources.
 - In our tradition, we don't believe that there's one-stop shopping for the answers to our questions (if answers are to be found).

- ◇ It's not enough to quote one isolated verse from the Bible.
- ◇ It's not enough to say "the church has always done it that way."
- ◇ It's not enough to say "I think/ my brain tells me it's the right thing."
- As Episcopalians/Anglicans, we believe that we are called to consult at least three sources, together, as we explore questions: scripture, tradition, and reason. (These three sources are often compared to a three-legged stool; you need all three of the sources to balance one another.)
- Both our questions and our answers are nuanced and complex—so the sources we explore are as well.
- It is the sources in conversation with one another that might help us discover what God is saying, how God is calling us.
- We do this so that not only our answers but also our exploration is balanced and rich.
- ❖ In the coming weeks we will be asking a lot of questions. That process is not the opposite of faith—it is part and parcel of what it means to be faithful.
 - So bring your questions and doubts—you are not alone in them.
 - Be prepared to wrestle with the questions in ways that will be both enlivening and difficult.
 - Be ready to discover surprising things:
 - ◇ Sometimes you'll discover an answer—possibly one more difficult and demanding than you had hoped. Maybe one more simple and surprising than you thought possible.
 - ◇ Sometimes you'll find more questions—raising a rock and finding a plethora of worms, more questions, asking for deeper engagement, drawing you further in faith.
 - ◇ Often you'll discover company and conversation. You'll find the company of the presence of God, hearing your questions, even those in the silence of your heart, and the company of companions, fellow students who will remind you that you are not alone, and challenge you with their own questions and thoughts.

Perhaps the transforming question is not "Can we question our faith?" but rather "How can we question faithfully?"

- ❖ I believe; help my unbelief. (Mark 9:24)

Concluding prayer

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray you, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

(*The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 832-833)

Small groups

- ❖ The Bible is full of stories of faithful people who question God. Read the story of Nicodemus (John 3:1-12; 19:38-42) as a group. Explore the following questions:
 - What kinds of questions is Nicodemus asking?
 - Does he receive answers to his questions?
 - How does asking questions impact his faith and actions?
 - What in Nicodemus's story do you identify with?
 - How does his story challenge you?
- ❖ What questions do you bring to this class?
- ❖ Have you ever been reluctant to ask your questions of faith? Why or why not?
- ❖ What are you hoping to get from the next nine sessions together?

Resources for further study

- ❖ *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* by Anne Lamott. Anchor Books, 2000.
- ❖ *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters* by Luke Timothy Johnson. Image, 2007.
- ❖ *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* by N.T. Wright. HarperOne, 2010.
- ❖ *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* by Marcus Borg. HarperOne, Reprint edition 2004.



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Scripture citations refer to the New Revised Standard Version Bible, although any version is appropriate.



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Welcome to *Transforming Questions*! Whether you are new to the Christian faith or a longtime church member seeking a refresher, this is the place for you. Over the next few weeks, you will be invited to engage in faithful questioning with the companionship of a leader and in the midst of a community.

In this course, as you gather for table fellowship, teaching, and conversation, you will wrestle with some of the most basic questions of our faith: Who is Jesus? Does God answer prayer? Why do bad things happen? In the act of asking these questions, we hope you will see your faith transform, deepening and developing from something simple and superficial to something complicated and rich. And perhaps, in the act of asking questions, you might see yourself transformed, as the answers that you find, or the new questions that you discover, demand that you respond, changing not only what you think but also how you live. It's an exciting journey: full of twists and turns, ups and downs, as you wrestle anew with your faith.

This book is your companion to the *Transforming Questions* course, a kind of guidebook for the journey. In the pages that follow, you'll find an outline of each class session, which includes references to the Bible passages and quotations that you will hear each week. We hope this will allow you to listen, follow along, and perhaps return to read and reflect on what you've heard. We've also included space for you to take notes, jot down additional questions, or add your own reflections. At the end of each outline are the discussion questions that you will explore in your small groups.

So come, you who are seekers and you who are members, you who are old and you who are young, you who are questioning for the first time and you who are questioning for the thousandth time. Together may you find that you share the same questions; together may you discover, not easy answers, but the still, small voice of God speaking in your midst.

Melody Wilson Shobe & Scott Gunn



SESSION



CAN WE QUESTION OUR FAITH?

OPENING PRAYER

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light rises up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your light we may see light, and in your straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

(The Book of Common Prayer, p. 832)

Confronting misconceptions

- ❖ Faith as opposite of doubt
- ❖ Faith as blind acceptance, without questioning

Biblical witness of questioning and doubt

- ❖ Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 15:1-15)
- ❖ Moses (Exodus 3:4-15; 4:1-17)
- ❖ David/psalmist
 - Psalm 13:1-2
 - Psalm 22:1-2
 - Psalm 44:23-24
 - Psalm 121:1
 - Psalm 139:7
- ❖ Mary (Luke 1:26-38)
- ❖ Thomas (John 20:24-29)
- ❖ Paul (Acts 22:6-11)
- ❖ Even Jesus himself! (Matthew 27:45-50)

Questions as expression of faithfulness

- ❖ Questions as part of relationship
- ❖ Questions as a way to grow
- ❖ Questions as part of being a student (“disciple”)
- ❖ Questions as a form of learning (Catechism)

The opposite extreme of “never question” is “question everything”

- ❖ Taking questioning too far
- ❖ Questions as weapons
- ❖ Questions as tests
- ❖ Questions for their own sake

NOTES _____
