

# Wondering with Children & Youth

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## **PRE-LESSON INFORMATION:**

### **SESSION DESCRIPTION**

The most important thing we can do for children and youth is help them think theologically. Thinking theologically does not require us to memorize and recite Martin Luther or James Cone. Rather, it requires us to see our world through the lens of biblical faith that is humble, prophetic and hopeful. Brazilian educational theorist, Paulo Freire claims all education is always either about domestication or praxis. Christian education in service of domestication spoon-feeds dogma and doctrine to young people for the sake of initiation and institutional maintenance. Christian education in service of praxis draws from the lived experiences of our young people, helping them understand, interpret and draw power from these experiences as encounters with earthly forces of death and God's power of resurrection and redemption. Douglas John Hall defines theology as God's people seeking to discern good news that will actually displace someone's bad news. Helping young people think theologically empowers them to proclaim Christ's good news into their neighbors' lives. This lesson will help you imagine ways of helping children, youth and their families to think theologically.

### **ELCA FAITH PRACTICES**

Learning to think theologically helps young people live out their baptismal covenants in the following ways.

1. *Hearing the word of God* – by interpreting God's promises in light of our lived realities.
2. *Proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed* – by discovering what the good news of Jesus Christ might sound like in our day and age.
3. *Serving all people, following the example of Jesus* – by developing a theologically and biblically informed understanding of what it means to serve the neighbor.

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Participants will . . .

1. Understand what it means to think theologically
2. Value the theological process as proclamation of good news into peoples' bad news
3. Be able to initiate experiences that help children, youth and families think theologically

### **BIBLICAL FOCUS**

- 1 Samuel 3:1-21

## **MATERIALS NEEDED**

- Lesson Plan
- Video
- Photocopies of 1 Samuel 3:1-21
- Copies of Prayerful Wondering handout
- Overhead screen, Copies of Wondering about God and Life handout
- Copies of Wondering about Good News handout
- Whiteboard, chalkboard or large paper

## **LESSON PLAN:**

### **Welcome (5 minutes)**

1. Welcome the participants to today's workshop
2. Explain to them that today's session is intended to help them (1) understand the importance of helping kids think theologically, and (2) begin imagining how they might do this with the children and youth at their congregation.

### **Ice Breaker (10 minutes)**

1. Have the participants quickly get into groups of 3. Encourage them to team up with other participants they don't already know.
2. In their groups of three, each participant will share his or her first name and a word that describes God and begins with the same first letter and the person's first name. Give them 2-3 minutes for this.
3. Once each person has shared his or her name and word describing God, have them explain to their group why they chose this word. Give them 2-3 minutes for this.
4. Gather again as a large group and ask for some examples of the words that were chosen.
5. Explain to them that they were doing theology. They were making certain claims about God. Many people make claims about God everyday. Some of these claims are well informed, some of them aren't. Some of these claims are good news some of them are not. Today's session is going to help us develop skills for thinking theologically with children and youth so the claims we make about God can truly be good news.

### **What Does It Mean To Think Theologically? (10 minutes)**

1. Introduce this video by describing it as “mini-lecture” that will introduce the group to some foundational ways of thinking about what theology should be.
2. The video will be a 7-10 minute video introducing the following concepts as foundational for understanding what theology should be.
  - a. Domestication vs. Praxis (Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed)
  - b. Reflection on God’s Action (Root’s Christopraxis)
  - c. Good News that Displaces Bad News (Douglas John Hall’s Contextuality)
  - d. Two Prongs of Theology (Historical & Existential)

### **Children & Youth as Theologians (15 minutes)**

1. Distribute photocopies of 1 Samuel 3:1-21 to all participants or have them find it in their own Bibles.
2. Ask the participants to take a few minutes to read over the text on their own, marking all the words that have to do with the senses of sight or hearing. (i.e., word of the Lord, visions, eyesight, could not see, lamp of God, called, speak, listening, see, ears, hear, etc.)
3. Discuss these questions as a large group.
  - a. What point, or metaphor, do you think the author was trying to make by using all these sensory words? (The author is describing our inability to hear God’s word as an inability to see, even though “the lamp of God has not gone out”.)
  - b. Why doesn’t Samuel know it is God who is calling to him in the night?
  - c. What does Eli do to help Samuel?
  - d. How might this story serve as a parable for us as we strive to help our young people think theologically and hear God’s voice?
4. Point out that things do not turn out very well for Eli. We must be committed to helping our young people think theologically and hear God’s call even if it turns out to be bad news for us, the “adult” church.

### **Learning to Think Theologically (45 minutes)**

*Instructions:* Tell the group you will introduce them to three ways they can help children, youth and families begin to think theologically. One exercise, the *Prayerful Wondering*, is immediate and ongoing. The second exercise, *Wondering About God & Life*, is more involved and could be used over multiple sessions. The third exercise, *Wondering about Good News*, is something to use after your group has been practicing the *Awareness Examen* and working through *Wondering about God & Life* for some time. Point out that they might

need to revise some of these exercises and questions to make them work better for their audiences.

1. Prayerful Wondering: The Awareness Examen (15 minutes)
  - a. Distribute the Prayerful Wondering handout. Summarize its introduction and then give the group time to practice.
  - b. Give the participants 10 minutes to sit in silence reflecting on how they have experienced sin (or brokenness) and hope (or healing) over the past day or week.
  - c. Take some time to discuss these questions as a large group:
    - What was this like for you?
    - What did you learn?
    - What would it be like to use this with your young people?
  
2. Wondering About God & Life (15 minutes)
  - a. Distribute the Wondering About God & Life handout. Summarize the introduction and then give the group some time to practice.
  - b. Give the participants 5 minutes to answer one of the questions on their own. They can choose which question to answer.
  - c. Give them another 5 minutes to pair up and share a summary of what they wrote with their partners.

Discuss as a large group: How could you see using these questions with the young people in your congregation?

3. Wondering About Good News (15 minutes)
  - a. Distribute the Wondering About Good News handout and spend a couple minutes summarizing it.
  - b. Take 5 minutes as a large group to brainstorm some ways in which young people experience sin and brokenness in their lives. Write these ideas on a chalkboard, whiteboard or large sheet of paper.
  - c. Once you've created a list of ideas, give the participants a few minutes to ponder this list in light of the answer they wrote on the Questions about God & Life handout. Ask them to consider how what they wrote might provide some hope in the midst of this list of brokenness.
  - d. Have the participants share their thoughts.
  - e. Discuss: How do our theological hopes influence our interpretation of brokenness and, in turn, inform our practice of ministry?

### **Goals & Prayer (5 minutes)**

1. Put these three questions in front of the participants either on an overhead screen, whiteboard, chalkboard or large sheet of paper. Give them a few minutes to ponder these questions on their own.
  - a. What will you stop doing because of this workshop?
  - b. What will you start doing because of this workshop?
  - c. What is one tangible thing you can implement right away?
2. Have the group stand in a circle and hold hands. Tell the participants you will begin and end the prayer but you will also give them space in between to lift up a word or phrase out loud or in silence that summarizes their reflection on their goals.

## PRAYERFUL WONDERING The Awareness Examen

In *Thinking the Faith* Douglas John Hall reminds us of the philosopher Heidegger's critique of optimism and pessimism as "childish categories" and, instead, urges us to use the biblical categories of sin and hope when reflecting on life. When we ask kids to share their highs and lows we are limiting them to the childish categories of optimism and pessimism. We miss the chance to help them develop the skill of reflecting theological upon their days. The *Awareness Examen* offers us a theological alternative to highs and lows.

The *Awareness Examen* is an old way of reflecting prayerfully over one's day. It was developed in the 1500's by Ignatius of Loyola as a form of prayer to be practiced twice daily by his order of Jesuits. It is now a form of prayer that is used broadly across most Christianity.

The *Awareness Examen* accomplishes three things.

1. It helps us develop eyes to see and ears to hear God at work in our world.
2. It helps us hear and see God at work in our world in both sin and hope.
3. Overtime it changes our very being, converting us into people who expect to see God working in our world in strange and mysterious ways.

When practicing the *Awareness Examen* . . .

1. Sit comfortably but upright with your spine straight, your feet flat on the floor and your hands in your lap.
2. Sit quietly with your eyes closed for a minute, allowing your muscles to relax, taking long deep breaths.
3. Prayerfully look back over a specific period of time (a day, a few days, or a week). Ask God to help you see the moments where you encountered sin, or brokenness in your life.
4. When you identify this moment, spend time pondering what was going on and how God was at work in that situation.
5. Again, prayerfully look back over the same period of time, asking God to help you see a moment when you encountered hope or healing in your life.
6. When you identify this moment, spend time pondering what was going on and how God was at work in that situation.
7. Give thanks to God for this time.
8. When practicing with a group it is good to give group members the chance to share their moments with one another if they wish. You can do this in many ways including allowing them to draw pictures of the moments that came to mind, or write poems, journal, strike poses, etc. before sharing with the group.

## WONDERING ABOUT GOD & LIFE

Everyone holds their own beliefs and theological views about God and life. We miss an opportunity to form community and faith when we falsely assume our young people (or the adults for that matter) all hold the same theological convictions as one another simply because they attend a Lutheran church.

Most theological systems will attempt to explain the Trinity, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, humankind, Sin, the Church, and life after death just to name a few. However, thinking theologically does not necessarily mean subscribing to a particular theology. It means developing a framework that allows one to view his or her world as if God is present and active within it. We do not need to be a famous theologian to do this. These questions will our young people discover their core theological convictions.

You might want to encourage parents and young people to complete these questions together. You might want to use in a retreat format. Or you might want to simply spend a few minutes on one question each week.

Over time these questions will help young people identify the way they believe God works in the world. Awareness of one's theological framework helps us see, understand and proclaim God's work in the world – work that makes ears tingle.

Encourage your young people to reflect on these questions.

1. How would you describe God to a friend who does not believe in God?
2. How would you describe Jesus to a friend who does not believe in Jesus?
3. How would you describe the Holy Spirit to a friend who does not believe in the Holy Spirit?
4. What do you think God's vision is for humanity's relationship with God? Does reality match God's vision? How? How not? Why? Why not?
5. What do you think God's vision is for humanity's relationship with one another and the rest of creation? Does reality match God's vision? How? How not? Why? Why not?
6. Explain how your Christian faith influences the things you say and do.
7. Who will go to heaven? Who won't? Why?

## **WONDERING ABOUT GOOD NEWS HANDOUT**

Available as separate file

## **SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION**

### **SUGGESTED RESOURCES**

1. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Paulo Freire. New York: Continuum, 1990.
2. *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross*. Andrew Root. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014
3. *Thinking Theologically: Foundations for Learning*. Eric Barreto. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015.
4. *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers through Stories*. Frank Rogers. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2011.
5. *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*. Douglas John Hall. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Jeremy Myers teaches youth and family ministry at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, MN. His current academic interests include articulating a vocational understanding of youth and a public understanding of church. He lives with his wife and two children in St. Paul, MN. Bluegrass music, strong coffee and huge pancakes are a few of his favorite things.



**PRACTICE  
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