

1. GOD

PLANNING THE SESSION

Session Goals

As a result of conversations and activities connected with this session, group members should begin to:

- examine the evidence for the existence of God;
- explore what kind of God is revealed in Scripture;
- explore the implications of why our beliefs matter;
- affirm ways we might appropriately respond to a personal Creator God.

Creedal Foundation

*I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.*

—The Apostles' Creed

Special Preparation

- On a large sheet of paper or a board, print the questions from the Introduction for the opening activity (see below).
- Make available copies of the entire ecumenical Apostles' Creed, as shown in the study book, or display it on a large sheet of paper or a board. Alternatively, plan to project it with a video projector. You will need to use the Creed in all the sessions.
- Also display the lines from the Apostles' Creed that are under consideration in this session.
- Decide if you will do any of the optional activities. For researching scientists' views, there will need to be enough smartphones that each group or pair can have access to one. Or access and print out Internet articles on each scientist. For the expressing gratitude activity, you will need large sheets of colored construction paper cut into pennant shapes, as well as colored markers. After checking with your pastor or someone from the church leadership, decide where and how to display the pennants, and get some tape as well as either string or dowel sticks.
- For the closing activity, post the following statement: If you seek a monument to the architect of the whole cosmos, look around you.

GETTING STARTED

Opening Activity

As participants arrive, welcome them to the study. If there is someone who did not bring a notebook or an electronic device for journaling, provide a notebook or paper and pen or pencil.

Gather together. If participants are not familiar with one another, provide nametags and make introductions.

Invite volunteers to respond to the following posted question from the Introduction to the study:

- What do we mean when we say we believe?

Form pairs and invite them to respond to the following questions, also posed in the Introduction to the study book:

- What are some of your deeply held beliefs or convictions?
- How did you come to hold these convictions?

After allowing time for pairs to discuss, come together in the large group. Ask each pair to comment on one insight that came out of their discussion together.

Tell participants that in this study, they will be exploring what Christians believe, why they believe it, and why it matters, using as a basis one of the oldest and most widely used creeds, the Apostles' Creed.

Opening Prayer

Eternal God, we gather here to explore what we believe about who you are. Open our minds and hearts, that together we may encounter the mystery and wonder of your being in new ways. Grant us the humility and grace to hear other viewpoints that may differ from our own, that we may deepen our own experience of the Holy. In your name we pray. Amen.

LEARNING TOGETHER

Video Study and Discussion

Briefly introduce Adam Hamilton, the book author and video presenter. From his website at www.adamhamilton.org, we learn that Adam Hamilton is senior pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. He writes and teaches on

life's tough questions, the doubts with which we all wrestle, and the challenging issues we face today. Participants can learn more about Hamilton and his other books at his website.

In Chapter 1, participants explore what we believe about God, why we believe it, and why it matters. To set the scene for viewing the video, ask participants to look for the origins of the Creed. Following the video, discuss the following:

- What does Adam Hamilton tell us about why the Apostles' Creed was developed?
- Hamilton presents us with the analogy of how a chocolate cake is created. What point is he making in using this analogy? What is your response?

Remind participants that Hamilton closes with some questions. Say that the first two questions will be considered in more depth later in the session. Then ask:

- What questions do you have about God?

Jot down these questions and plan to revisit them at the end of the session.

Book Study and Discussion

Explore the God in Whom Christians Believe

Ask participants to quickly review the first few paragraphs of the chapter under the heading "A Growing Rejection of 'God.'" Discuss the following:

- Who are some of the adversarial "evangelists" the writer cites, and what are their arguments?
- Hamilton suggests that, rather than equating belief in God with anti-intellectualism, violence, or bigotry, these represent

instead various negative impulses of human beings. How do you respond?

- Ask participants to pair up, preferably with a different partner than in the opening activity. Ask one person in each pair to scan silently Exodus 3:1-15 while his or her partner scans Acts 17:16-28, as well as review the content in the chapter under the heading “The God Christians Believe In.” Encourage pairs to briefly share the gist of each of the passages, as well as what the writer suggests each passage reveals about the nature of God.

In the large group, discuss the following:

- In addition to describing God as the force from which all things derive their existence, what attributes does Christianity ascribe to God?
- What are the implications of the phrase “God the Father”?
- How would you define the concept of *Imago Dei*?

Examine the Evidence for God

Adam Hamilton uses the example of Lawrence Krauss, author of the book *A Universe from Nothing*, a scientist among others who believe that the universe could exist without an external force. Invite participants to quickly scan the information under the heading “Evidence for God?” to find answers to the following:

- the odds mathematician John Lennox calculates for the self-organization of life on earth;
- astronomer Fred Hoyle’s analogy;
- what Hamilton believes natural selection reveals about God’s existence.

As volunteers read aloud Psalm 8 and Psalm 19:1-4, invite participants to listen and to think about aspects of the created world in

which they see God's glory and creativity. Following the reading, ask them to call out, popcorn style, words or phrases that describe what came to mind for them. List these on a large sheet of paper or a board.

Call attention to the last several paragraphs under this heading, where Hamilton enumerates several reasons why he believes in God. Invite them to jot down the phrase "I believe in God because..." and to take a few minutes to respond to the prompt, listing their own reasons for whether they believe in God. Acknowledge that for some people—perhaps including some of the participants—belief in God may be tentative or may be fraught with uncertainty. Encourage those who harbor doubts to record whatever ideas they have that provide some degree of affirmation.

Explore Why Our Beliefs Matter

Ask someone to read aloud the verses from Psalm 90 included under the heading "Why Faith in God Matters." Point out that in the understanding of science and the perspective of Christian faith, each of us is quite small in the scheme of things. Discuss some of the following together:

- Adam Hamilton notes that a belief in God as both creator and father adds an additional layer of meaning to our insignificance. Why?
- A footnote points out that while God transcends gender, in this study Hamilton nonetheless uses the language of the Creed to describe God. How do you respond to this exclusively male language? Are there descriptors beyond the word *father* that you might choose to expand an understanding of the intimate nature of our relationship to God, and if so, what are they?
- What does it mean to you that you are a child of God, and that others are also children of God?

Affirm Appropriate Responses

Call attention to what the book author affirms as appropriate responses of the creature to the Creator. Ask participants to respond to the following in their journals:

- In what ways do I care for the creator God's earth as an act of discipleship and responsibility?
- What spiritual discipline tools do I make use of in seeking to discern God's will for me and for the whole created order?
- When, where, and how do I express gratitude to God?

Encourage participants to continue to reflect on these questions before the next session.

More Activities (Optional)

Explore the Scientific Pros and Cons

Depending on the size of your group, form pairs or small groups, with at least one participant who has a smartphone in each pair or group. Assign one of the following scientists to each: Steven Weinberg, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Max Planck, or George Lemaitre. Ask them to research their assigned scientist on the Internet to get information about his views on religion, as well as review the information in the chapter. After groups research and discuss their assigned scientist's views, ask them to report to the large group. Discuss:

- Which arguments about the relationship between science and religion did you find the most compelling?
- Do you personally see a conflict between what science tells us about the way the universe works and what our faith tells us about God? Why or why not?

Express Gratitude with Prayer Flags

Recall Hamilton's comments that the appropriate response of the creature to the Creator is praise, gratitude, and worship. Distribute the prepared construction paper "flags," as well as colored markers. Invite participants to print a word or phrase on a flag that expresses something for which they are thankful to God. Encourage participants to make as many flags as they like. Tape the flags to the length of string and hang where others can see them, or have participants tape each flag to a dowel and stick them into the ground along a sidewalk.

If you like, also suggest that participants take an "Attitude of Gratitude" challenge. People on social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter sometimes challenge others to post photos or comments that indicate things for which they are thankful. Invite participants to take a similar challenge for the next seven days (or whatever the number of days until your next session).

Explore a Personal Creator God

Form two groups. Ask one group to consider God as father and to brainstorm a list of words and phrases that flesh out what it means to understand God as one with whom Jesus—and us as his followers—has an intimate, personal relationship. Ask the other group to make a similar list as they consider God as creator of all that is.

In the large group, ask participants to read over both lists. Discuss:

- With which of these ways of describing God do you resonate the most? Why?
- Put yourself in the place of the early Christians who formulated this creedal statement. Why do you imagine it was important to affirm both the intimate, personal connection to God's creatures and God's creative power, revealed in God's creation?

WRAPPING UP

Ask participants to revisit in silence the questions they discussed in the opening activity, with the addition of the words in italics:

- What are some of your deeply held beliefs or convictions *about God*?
- How did you come to hold these convictions *about God*?

Invite them to reflect on the characteristics of God's nature revealed in the opening lines of the Apostles' Creed. Ask volunteers to respond to the following open-ended prompts:

- Because I believe in God as the creator of all that is and all that will be, I will respond by...
- Because I believe in God the Father, who yearns for the intimate relationship of a parent to a child with all his creatures, I will respond by...

Revisit the questions posed in response to the video. Encourage the group to consider the questions about which they now have more information, which have generated new questions, and which are probably unanswerable. Ask them to continue to reflect on these questions in their devotional times in the coming days.

Closing Activity

Ask participants to quickly review the story with which Hamilton closes this chapter. Have a volunteer read aloud Christopher Wren's obituary. Invite participants to call out examples of monuments to the Creator, the architect of creation. Remind the group to read Chapter 2 before the next session.

Closing Prayer

Creator God, we are stunned by the breadth and depth of your creation. We acknowledge both our responsibility for it and our insignificance in the face of its magnificence. We give thanks, too, that in the vastness of the cosmos, each of us is known and loved by you, as a father loves his child, as a mother nourishes and cherishes the infant she bore. Stir us to respond with awe and gratitude. Grant us discernment as we seek to find our place in your plan. Amen.