



## Wondering with Children & Youth Learning to Think Theologically A 30- 45 Minute Session

This session has been adapted from the 2016 Practice Discipleship Curriculum on *Wonder*. The full session can be downloaded at [www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship](http://www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship) or [www.practicediscipleship.org](http://www.practicediscipleship.org)

### **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 education 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 way of helping children, youth and their families to think theologically.

### **MATERIALS NEEDED**

Copies of Prayerful Wondering handout  
Copies of Wondering about God & Life Handout  
Copies of Wondering about Good News handout  
Whiteboard, chalkboard or large paper

### **LESSON PLAN FOR SESSION**

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 *Prayerfully Wondering*, is immediate and ongoing. The second exercise, *Wondering About Good News*, 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?



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## 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 help 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

<b>BROKENNESS</b>	<b>CORE BELIEF</b>	<b>GOOD NEWS</b>
List ways people in your community experience brokenness and bad news.	Which of your core beliefs address these experiences of brokenness?	What would this core belief have to look or sound like in order to be good news for those experiencing brokenness in this way?
<b>CALL</b>		
<p>Given what you have discovered in this exercise, who is God calling your faith community to be? What is God calling your faith community to do?</p>		