

We Believe in God

Session Focus

This session explores our belief in God: “I believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible” (Nicene Creed). It engages the participants in examining how they think of God—their concept of God—and their images of God. The way people think of God and their images of God shape their relationship with God and their understanding of the Christian life. Participants will consider a variety of images of God from the Old Testament and reflect on the implications of believing in and completely loving the One God with all their being—hearts, minds, and souls.

Learning Objectives

The session on God guides learners of all ages to...

- name their personal understanding of God; describe Biblical images of God and their meaning for us today
- recognize the significance of their understanding of God and their image of God for their faith and life as Christians
- identify the implications of believing in and loving the one true God for their lives as Christians

Session Overview

Part 1. (15 minutes) Gathering and Opening Prayer Service

Part 2. (25-30 minutes) All Ages Learning Experience: Images of God

Part 3. (75-90 minutes) In Depth Learning Experience: God Is Alive in Our Lives!

- Option 1. Whole Group Format - all participants remain in the same room.
- Option 2. Age Groups Format - participants go to separate rooms for parallel learning: families with children, adolescents, adults.

Part 4. (15 minutes) Sharing Learning Experiences

Part 5. (5 minutes) Closing Prayer Service

Design Options for In-Depth Learning

Option 1. Whole Group Format

This format guides the entire assembly through each of the learning experiences. You might choose this format if you have:

- a large physical space with good acoustics/sound system and furniture to comfortably accommodate the learners

- a competent large group facilitator/master of ceremonies able to provide clear directions and to manage the dynamics and energy of a large group
- a group of catechists who feel comfortable moving through the assembly offering assistance, or a large enough team of table leader catechists to have one catechist work with each table group
- a learning topic that lends itself to everyone learning the same thing at the same time, but in different ways, in the same space

Facilitation Tips for This Format:

Guide small groups through each of the activities at the same time.

- Organize people into table groups based on age groupings: families with children (grades 1-5), middle school adolescents, high school adolescents, young adults, and adults.
- The lead facilitator guides the entire group through each of the learning experiences. All presentations and activity instructions are given to the whole group.
- The age-appropriate learning activities within each learning experience are conducted in table groups.
- Where needed, catechists and small group leaders facilitate the work of the table groups.

Option 2. Age Group Format

This format provides for three separate parallel learning programs. Though age groups are separated, each one is focusing on the same topic. You might choose this format if you have:

- an adequate number of meeting spaces for the various groups to gather
- an adequate number of competent facilitators and catechists to work with each group
- a topic that is best explored through age-specific learning

Facilitation Tips for This Format

- Organize participants into three or more parallel learning groups: families with children (grades 1-5), adolescents (grades 6-12), and adults.
- If there is a significant number of adolescents, divide them into two groups: middle school and high school.

Organize separate groups for young adults, adults, and older adults. Or you can give the adults their own choice for forming small groups.

- Direct the adolescents and adults into small groups. Give them all the handouts and learning materials needed for the learning experiences
- Guide the families with children into table groups of two or more families. Give each table all the handouts and learning materials necessary for the learning experiences.
- A facilitator must guide all the of the families through each learning experience, while catechist move from table to table assisting.

Materials Needed

Gathering

- Name tags
- Community building activities
- Opening Prayer Service Handout

- Bible
- Prepare a prayer space that visually represents Moses and the Burning Bush, e.g., a large cluster of candles to represent God's presence and a pair of sandals.
- Find the *Prince of Egypt* segment online.
- Projection equipment: multimedia projector, speakers, and large screen.

All Ages Opening Learning Experience

- Handouts #1-3
- Symbols of each of the sixteen images of God
- For art images of God: Illustrate the images of God by creating a PowerPoint presentation with photos, religious art, or icons. Use Handout #2 with the participants and Handout #3 with the Scripture passages.

In-Depth Learning Experience

- Handouts #3-7
- For the family learning plan: The materials families will need are determined by which activities are selected. A list of materials is included with each activity.
- For the adolescent learning plan: Pens/pencils, paper

Closing

- Closing Prayer Service

Session Plan

Part 1. Gathering (15 minutes)

Preparation

Prepare a newsprint sheet or handout that lists the order of the activities or create a PowerPoint presentation that guides people through the session.

Registration and Hospitality

- Welcome people and ask them to sign in for the program.
- Provide name tags or invite people to make their own.
- Distribute any handouts participants will need for the session.
- Invite people to share a meal; depending on time of day, the program may end with a meal instead.

1. Group Formation

Organize people into intergenerational small groups of approximately eight people for the All Ages Learning Experience. Ask all members of the same family to sit together in these intergenerational groups. Each group should have as many of the following categories as possible: family (parents, children, teens), young adults, adults without children, and older adults. If members of the same family are intergenerational—children, teens, parents, and grandparents—keep them together in one group.

For the In Depth Learning Experience (Part 3) organize the participants into three types of table groups: family clusters of two or more families, groups of adolescents, and groups of adults. See the session plans for adolescents and adults for more instructions on organizing groups.

2. Opening Prayer Service

Preparation

Prepare a prayer space that visually represents Moses and the Burning Bush, e.g., a large cluster of candles to represent God's presence and a pair of sandals.

Identify three readers for the Exodus reading: Narrator, Moses, and the Voice of God.

Go online to find the scene from the *Prince of Egypt* of Moses before the burning bush.

Light the paschal candle and the cluster of candles in the prayer space to begin the prayer service.

Ask everyone in the room to take off their shoes.

Gather

God of mystery, we come together to learn more about you,
and to grow in our relationship with you.

We know that despite our best attempts to understand you and your role in our lives,
you remain a mystery beyond our ability to fully comprehend.

Open our hearts and minds to you and each other
that your love and grace may touch our lives.
Amen.

Listen

Show the *Prince of Egypt* excerpt.

Proclaim the Scripture reading: Exodus 3:1-15

Narrator

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said,

Moses

“I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

Narrator

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush,

Voice of God

“Moses, Moses!”

Narrator

And he said,

Moses

“Here I am.”

Narrator

Then he said,

Voice of God

“Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Narrator

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said,

Voice of God

“I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

Narrator

But Moses said to God,

Moses

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

Voice of God

“I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

Narrator

But Moses said to God,

Moses

“If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”

Narrator

God said to Moses,

Voice of God.

“I Am Who I Am. Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I Am has sent me to you. The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’

This is my name for ever,
and this my title for all generations.

Respond

Offer the following reflections on the reading from Exodus, using the words below or your own words.

Exodus 3:14 reveals certain things about God. First, God promised to be present in the world with the Israelites, God’s people. That promise stands. It has the weight of God’s word behind it. It is up to Moses, to the people of Israel, and to us to live faithfully with that truth. Second, God’s presence may be counted on, though its manner is unpredictable. God will be present as God wills, not as dictated by history or religion or sacred texts.

The community’s identity is bound up in God’s identity. God goes forward into the wilderness with escaped slaves; out there they will discover the one God and themselves. In the wilds, they will find themselves transformed as a people into a new and better community by the God who promises a continuing presence in their community. Like the community’s, Moses’ identity is bound up with God’s. Thus, when Moses asks: “Who are you?” and “What is your name?” he simultaneously asks: “Who am I, what is my identity?” These same questions are repeated by the Israelites, the people led and represented Moses.

Moses is in trouble, for being in God’s presence is awesome but manageable as long as he knows where he stands. He thought he knew enough about the God of his ancestors to handle being in the divine presence. Now, before the burning bush, his old definitions crumble as he gropes in a fog to understand. Therefore, he asks a sincere question of God—ostensibly for a name. In reply, Moses is told: “I will be who I will be,” more and less than a name.

Arthur Zannoni, Tell Me Your Name)

Go Forth

God of our ancestors,

You revealed yourself to Moses in the burning bush.

Give us the eyes and ears to see and hear you today in our daily lives.

Help us to recognize your life-giving presence in our lives and world.

Transform our lives with your love.

Amen.

Part 2. All Ages Learning Experience: Images of God (25-30 minutes)

The focus of the All Ages Learning Experience is to consider many of the most important images of God from the Christian tradition by reading passages from Scripture, exploring art, and listening to or singing hymns.

Preparation

Using the **Images of God Planning Form** in the handouts, try to integrate all three approaches—Scripture, music, and art—to provide a multi-sensory experience for the participants. Make the list of sixteen images of God from the Hebrew Scriptures your guide to decide on which images you will present through reading Scripture, playing/singing a song, or sharing photos/artwork. You can combine media: present the images of God with Scripture passages and hymns, accompanied by photos and artwork in a PowerPoint presentation.

Illustrate each image of God through pictures, photos, and so on. Display these images at the front of the room.

1. The All-Powerful
2. Creator
3. Defender of the Poor and Oppressed
4. King
5. Shepherd
6. Rock, Fortress, Refuge
7. Eagle
8. Liberator
9. God of Justice
10. God of the Covenant and Relationship
11. Parent, Father, Mother
12. God of Caring and Compassion
13. Potter
14. Wisdom
15. Love
16. Teacher

For reading the Scriptures: assign one person to read each Scripture passage that you have selected from Handout #3. For art images of God: illustrate the images of God by creating a PowerPoint presentation with photos, religious art, and/or icons.

Handouts

Use the “Images of God Planning Form” to help you determine which images of God you want to present, and which medium (Scripture, Art, Music) you will use to present that image.

Distribute Handout #2 (worksheet) and Handout #3 (Scripture passages) to all participants (parents, teens, adults).

Introduction

Introduce the images of God, using the words below or your own words.

How do you imagine God? Where do these images come from? What do they tell you about who God is and who you are?

The Scriptures are full of images that attempt to give us insight into who God is: light, running water, breath, fire, love. God is a rock, a gentle breeze, a bird, a king, a father, a judge, and a savior. God speaks, hears, creates, heals, sees, cries out like a woman in labor, gives birth, makes promises, and answers when people call.

God has a face and hands and acts in the world at all times. God has wisdom and power. God is just, sincere, good, forgiving, kind, and gracious. God is the host of a great banquet, the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, the vineyard owner who pays all the workers the same regardless of how long they work, and the father who embraces his wayward son with love.

If we mull over these images in our minds, they give us a glimpse into the mystery that we call God. A glimpse, of course, is not a full picture. It is more like a hint. “No one has ever seen God,” as the Gospel of John affirms (1:18). Though Jesus has revealed God to us, God remains a mystery beyond our ability to fully comprehend. The images we use to talk about God are at best a partial answer to the question of who God is.

Nevertheless, like those who lived in biblical times, believers today are compelled to think about and share their experiences of God. So we use the language available to us, that is, words and images, sometimes from Scripture, sometimes from ordinary life, that come closest to capturing our experience of God. All the while we recognize that they never fully illumine the nature of God.

Reflection

Invite the participants to complete the reflection questions on Handout #1. Parents should assist younger children with the activity. Explain the activity using your own words or the words below.

All our language about God relies on image, metaphor, and story. God can be found in any of them. Use your own language skills—however developed or not—to discover what others down through the centuries have known: God can be found in the words and pictures we use.

What images, words, or stories would you use to tell other people who God is for you today? Select one or more of the following ways to identify your images of God. Families with children should work together to complete the activity.

Picture. What pictures reveal who God is to you? Think of photos, paintings, stained glass windows, statues. If you had to create a picture, what would it look like?

Metaphor. Complete this sentence: “God is like . . .”

Story. What is your favorite Old Testament story? What does that story tell you about God? What is your favorite Gospel story? Again, what does that story tell you about God?

The most meaningful and important images of God for me are . . .

In intergenerational groups invite the participants to share with each other their images of God using their reflections from Handout #1.

Biblical Images of God

Introduce this with the words below or your own words.

Exploring images for God . . . is like changing the lenses of a microscope. What is on the slide—in this case, the mystery of God—remains unchanged; what changes are the lens used to observe. Biblical writers knew and understood that divine mystery is beyond human comprehension, and so understood that whatever lens is used or the image it produced was but a perception of God and not the reality of God. (Arthur Zannoni, *Tell Me Your Name*)

Explain how to use Handout #2 to record each image of God presented in the session. Families should work together to identify the image they just experienced.

Assign one person to each Scripture reading. You can combine reading the passages with a visual presentation by using a PowerPoint to show icons, statues, paintings, etc. The images of God should illustrate the image presented in the Scripture passage. Handout #3 contains the Scripture passages. Participants will use Handout #2 to record the images presented. Families should work together.

1. God the All Powerful: Psalm 29:1-4
2. God the Creator: Genesis 1 (Additional: Psalm 104:1-30, Psalm 65:9-13)
3. God the Defender of Poor and Oppressed: Psalm 146:5-9 (Additional: Psalm 68:5-6, Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14)
4. God the King: Psalm 95:3-7 (Additional: Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14)
5. God the Shepherd: Ezekiel 34:11-12, 30-31 (Additional: Psalm 23, Psalm 78:52-53, Psalm 100:1-3, Isaiah 40:11)
6. God the Rock and Fortress and Refuge: Psalm 18:1-2, 31-32 (Additional: 1 Samuel 2:2, Psalm 91:1-2, 3-4, 14:16)
7. God the Eagle: Deuteronomy 32:10-14 (Additional: Exodus 19:3-6)
8. God the Liberator: Exodus 3:7-12, 16-17 (Additional: Exodus 6:1-13 and 14:5-31)
9. God of Justice: Micah 4:1-4 (Additional: Psalm 72:1-4, 12-14; Psalm 146:5-9)
10. God of the Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Additional: Genesis 17:1-8, Exodus 19:1-8)
11. God the Parent: Hosea 11:1-9
God the Father: Psalm 103:13-14 (Additional: Psalm 68:5-6, Luke 11:1-4, John 14:1-12)
God the Mother: Isaiah 49:14-16 and 66:13
12. God of Caring and Compassion: Isaiah 43:1-2 (Additional: Psalm 145:8-9)
13. God the Potter: Isaiah 64:8 (Additional: Jeremiah 18:1-6)
14. God of Wisdom: Wisdom 7:23—8.1
15. God of Love: 1 John 4:7-12, 16
16. God the Teacher: Deuteronomy 10:12-13 (Additional: Exodus 20:1-17)

Part 3. In Depth Learning Experience (75-80 minutes)

God Is Alive in Our Lives! (Families with Children)

Preparation

Select two or three learning activities to conduct with the families. Each activity is a separate handout so it will be easy to select and copy the materials you need. Each activity will take about 25 minutes. It is recommended that you conduct Activity 1: God from A-Z, an art activity (2, 3, or 4), and a prayer activity (5 or 6). If music was not part of the All Ages Opening, then you may want to conduct Activity 7: Images of God in Music.

These activities may be conducted simultaneously at table groups or at individual learning activity centers. Learning activity centers are facilitated by a leader. Tables and chairs (or floor space) are essential so that individuals and families can learn, create, and discuss. Divide the large group into a number of smaller groups that corresponds to the number of activities you will conduct. Each small group begins with a different activity. After 25 minutes, they rotate to the next activity, and so on.

Advance preparation varies depending on which activities are selected. Review the activity to determine materials and preparation requirements.

Guide families through the following process. Handouts provide the information for parents to use with their families.

Begin by inviting families into a discussion about images of God:

Discuss as a family your reflections on the opening experience of the images of God:

- Which images of God were new for you? (You had never thought about God in this way before.)
- Which images helped you to name your own understanding of God?
- Are there any personally important images of God that you would add?
- How has your understanding of God been expanded and/or enriched?
- Which images would you like to know more about?

Conduct two or three of the following activities with families:

Activity 1. God from A-Z

Activity 2. Image of God Poster

Activity 3. A Prayer Banner

Activity 4. Images of God Mobile

Activity 5. A Prayer of Praise to God

Activity 6: Contemporary Scripture Passages

Activity 7: Images of God in Music

Activity 1: God from A-Z

Materials Needed

- Handout #4
- pens/pencils, marking pens

Invite families to engage in the “God for A-Z” activity by using your own words or the words below.

The purpose of this activity is to create a chart using a different letter of the alphabet to recall the variety of images of God. Your family will begin this activity in the session and continue it at home. Go all the way from A to Z.

Begin by reviewing the sixteen images of God on Handout #3. Using the alphabet as a guide, generate ideas for images of God or characteristics of God that fit the letters. Here’s an example:

For *C*, God is *Compassionate*. God is gracious and merciful. His compassion comforts us. We know God loves us always. (Isaiah 43:1-2, Psalm 145: 8-9)

For *R*, God is our *Rock*. We build our family’s life on our faith in God. God is our strength, even when we are weak. When we have times of trouble we turn to God. God’s love never fails. (1 Samuel 2:2; Psalm 18:1-2, 31-32; Psalm 91:1-2, 3-4, 14:16)

Write your entry into the appropriate box on the handout and add a phrase from Scripture, identify a Scripture passage to read, and/or write a personal message. If there is enough space, children can add a picture or symbol.

Activity 2: Image of God Poster

Materials Needed

- Handout #5
- poster board for each family
- art supplies: colored construction paper, crayons, markers, ribbon, glue, tape
- pens/pencils
- scissors
- magazines with pictures

Guide families in making an “Image of God” poster by using your own words or the words below.

The purpose of this activity is to create a poster of your family’s most important images of God. Imagine the poster as a stained-glass window of your family’s images of God. Like the artists who created stained glass windows or those who created the great religious art masterpieces, utilize art to express the meaning of your family’s images of God.

The poster should include at least one image of God from each family member, as well as images that the whole family embraces. You can use the sixteen images from the Bible, re-phrase a traditional image in contemporary language, or add a new image from your family’s own experience of God.

First, parents and children draw a picture, cut out symbols, and/or find pictures in magazines to illustrate each image. Second, identify a Scripture passage to accompany each image (see Handout #3) and summarize the passage or select a key phrase from the passage. Parents or children can write the passage on the banner.

Activity 3: A Prayer Banner

Materials Needed

- Handout #6
- poster board or newsprint, paper
- pencils/pens, crayons, markers, glue
- magazine pictures
- scissors

Guide families in making a Prayer Banner by using your own words or the words below.

The purpose of this activity is to create a prayer banner that expresses in prayer the family's most important images of God.

The prayer banner can include different forms of prayer:

- Prayers of adoration express the greatness of God. Prayers of adoration can begin with the phrase: *We give you praise God for . . . or We praise you God for . . .* (Example: Creator God, we praise you for creating all the good things of the earth.)
- Prayers of thanksgiving express the things for which we are thankful to God: people, creation, blessings, etc. Prayers of thanksgiving begin with the phrase: *We give you thanks God for . . . or Thank you God, for . . .* (Example: God of love, we give you thanks God for loving us always and forgiving us when we turn away from you.)
- Prayers of petition or intercession express concern for others. Prayers of petition begin with the phrase: *We ask you God to . . . or God, we pray for . . .* (Example: God of justice, we pray for all those without food or shelter in our world.)

The prayer banner should include at least one prayer for each important image of God from each family member, as well as images that the whole family embrace. You can use the 16 images from the Bible, re-phrase a traditional image in contemporary language, and/or add a new image from your family's own experience of God.

Once you have identified your images, review the Scripture passage that accompanies your image. Then compose at least one prayer for each image. Write these prayers on the banner. Children can illustrate the prayers by drawing pictures, cutting out symbols, and/or finding pictures in magazines.

Activity 4: Images of God Mobile

Materials Needed

- Handout #7
- coat hangers
- string or yarn for hanging objects
- construction paper, markers, pens/pencils, crayons
- scissors
- glue

Guide families in making an “Images of God” mobile by using your own words or the words below.

The purpose of this activity is to create a mobile of your family’s most important images of God.

The mobile should include at least one image of God from each family member, as well as images that the whole family embraces. You can use the sixteen images from the Bible, re-phrase a traditional image in contemporary language, and/or add a new image from your family’s own experience of God.

The family works together in creating and assembling the mobile, as well as selecting the items to make up the mobile. The mobile should include objects or pictures that reflect the most important images for both individual family members, including parents, and for the family as a whole.

If you are drawing pictures or using symbolic objects, talk about what the objects or pictures tell us about the images of God. Children and parents should identify a Scripture passage to accompany each image (see Handout #3) and summarize the passage or select a key phrase from the passage. Parents or children can write the passage on each picture or attach the passage to an object on the mobile.

Activity 5: A Prayer of Praise to God

Materials Needed

- Handout #8
- paper, pens/pencils, crayons, markers
- paper with a colored border to write the completed Psalm

Guide families in creating a “Prayer of Praise to God” by using your own words or the words below.

The purpose of this activity is to create a family prayer of praise to God using Psalm 103 as a model.

Many of us pray when we want to ask God for something either for ourselves or for someone else. Sometimes it is difficult to just give compliments to God. Prayers of praise give glory to God’s goodness, mystery, and majesty. This form of prayer challenges us to think about God in terms of someone who deserves our praise. It forces us to not take God for granted. Prayers of praise reflect our own attitude and ability to recognize others for their goodness, and especially our ability to just praise God for being God.

Psalm 103 is a priceless treasure that becomes more precious as we spend time with it in reflection and contemplation. The Psalm has four main parts:

1. Personal blessings received from God (1-5)
2. National blessings received from God (6-14)
3. A reminder of our human frailty and utter dependence upon God (15-18)
4. A declaration that all creation praises God (19-22)

Begin by reading the Psalm as a family or table group. Ask one person to read verses 1-5, a second person to read verses 6-14, a third person to read verses 15-18, and a fourth person to read verses 19-22.

Use Psalm 103 as a guide for writing your family's own psalm of praise to God. Write your prayer in four parts, using the structure of Psalm 103:

Work together as a family generating ideas for the prayer, then write the prayer on paper and, if desired, decorations.

After your family completes the prayer of praise to God, take a few moments to talk about how it felt to offer God praise. Talk about when you can pray your family psalm at home.

Activity 6: Contemporary Scripture Passages

Materials Needed

- Handout #9
- paper, pens/pencils, crayons, markers
- paper with a colored border to write the completed Scripture passage

Guide families in the following activity by using your own words or the words below.

The purpose of this activity is to write modern-day Scripture passages on the images of God using the Scripture passages we explored in this session.

One way to give children insight into a Scripture passage is to have them rewrite it. Creative writing can lead children to understand more deeply the meaning of the Scripture and help them to remember it.

Working together as a family, identify several of the most important images of God and select the corresponding Scripture passage from Handout #3. Read each Scripture passage and ask yourselves:

- If we were writing this Scripture passage today, what words would we use to communicate this image of God?
- How can we update this image of God so that it speaks to people today?

Take notes on your discussion and then rewrite the Scripture passage using a contemporary setting and language. Children may want to decorate the passage with an image or symbol.

Variation

You can rewrite a Scripture passage as if it were a personal letter from God. Read the Scripture passage and imagine that it is God's letter to your family. Write the letter in contemporary language using the message in the Scripture passage. Use a format such as: *Dear (family name), I am writing to share with you. . .*

Concluding Activity

Materials needed:

- Handout #10
- Bible

Introduce the concluding activity by reading the two Scripture passages and introducing the five reflection questions and "Commitment to God" activity. (In the Whole Group Format, guide families in reading the Scripture readings and doing the activity.)

Use the words below to guide families through the concluding activity.

We are challenged to put God first in all things—to love God completely: heart, soul, and mind.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

"When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'" (Matthew 22:34-40)

Believing in, and completely loving the One God has enormous consequences for our whole life—as individuals and as families.

It means coming to know God's greatness and majesty. Discuss:

- How do we love and serve God first?
- What can we start doing as a family to love and serve God first?

It means living in thanksgiving. Everything we are and have comes from God. Discuss:

- How do we respond to God's graciousness (goodness) in our lives and family?
- What can we start doing to give thanks to God?

It means knowing the unity and true dignity of all people. We are all made in the image of likeness of God. Discuss:

- How do we protect and respect the dignity of all people—at home and around the world?
- What can we start doing to protect and respect the dignity of all people?

It means making good use of created things. How will we resist dependence on material goods while positively using them in our lives and families? Discuss:

- How do we make sure that God is first, not material things?
- How can we “de-clutter” our lives so that God is first?

It means trusting God in every circumstance, even in adversity. Discuss:

- How can we live in complete trust that our faith in God is all that we need in life?

Complete the “Commitment to God” as a way to summarize how your family will put God first.

My Commitment to God

To put God first in all things—to love God completely: heart, soul, and mind, we will do the following as individuals and as a family:

(Examples: say my morning or evening prayers each day, seek forgiveness from anyone I’ve hurt, engage in works of mercy and justice for others, participate fully in Sunday worship, be accepting to others at school and on the job.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

God in Our Lives (Adolescents)

Preparation

Each small group of young people should have an adult leader to help guide the work of the group. In the Age Group Format, a leader will guide the entire group through the process with small group leaders facilitating table groups. In the Whole Group Format small group facilitators guide the entire process.

Conduct Activity 1 and then two or three additional learning activities. Each activity is a separate handout so it will be easy to select and copy the materials you need.

- Activity 1: I Believe in God . . .
- Activity 2: Meditation on the Burning Bush
- Activity 3: Praying with Music
- Activity 4: Praying through Creation
- Activity 5: A Letter to God

You might want to adapt one or more of the following activities from the Family Learning Session to use with adolescents, especially middle-school or junior high adolescents.

- Activity 2. Image of God Poster
- Activity 3. A Prayer Banner
- Activity 5. A Prayer of Praise to God
- Activity 6: Contemporary Scripture Passages

Advance preparation varies depending on which activities are selected. Review the activity to determine preparation requirements.

Make copies of only the activities that you are going to conduct.

Introduction

Materials

- Handouts #3 and #11

Begin by reviewing the biblical images of God presented in the All Ages Learning Experience using Handout #3. Ask the young people if they have any questions about the images or if there were images they would like to know more about.

Discuss the meaning of the images of God using Handout #11. You can distribute this handout to the young people or use it as your presentation notes.

Engage the young people in discussing the images of God using the following questions:

- Which images of God were new for you? (You had never thought about God in this way before.)
- Which images helped you to name your own understanding of God?
- Are there any personally important images of God that you would add?
- How has your understanding of God been expanded and/or enriched?

- Are there any personal images of God that you would like to move beyond?

Share with the young people the following reflections, using the words below or your own words.

Our concept of God matters. There are major consequences for how we think of God. It can make God seem credible or incredible, plausible or highly improbable. It can also make God seem distant or near, absent or present. How we conceptualize God also affects our sense of what the Christian life is about.

Our images of God matter. How we imagine God shapes not only what we think God is like but also what we think the Christian life is about. People who think of God as a warrior may become warriors themselves. People who think of God as compassionate are likely to emphasize compassion. People who think God is angry at the world are likely to be angry at the world themselves.

Guide the young people in discussing the implications of their images of God. Take several images that surfaced in your discussion—ones that are important to the young people—and ask them to identify the consequences of these images.

If (image of God) is important to you, what are the implications of this image for your relationship with God? What are the implications for how you live? What are the implications for how you see God at work in the world?

Biblical Images of God

1. God the All Powerful
2. God the Creator
3. God the Defender of the Poor and Oppressed
4. God the King
5. God the Shepherd
6. God the Rock, Fortress, Refuge
7. God the Eagle
8. God the Liberator
9. God of Justice
10. God of the Covenant and Relationship
11. God the Parent, Father, Mother
12. God of Caring and Compassion
13. God the Potter
14. God of Wisdom
15. God the Teacher
16. God of Love

Give them several minutes to examine their images of God and reflect on the implications of these images for their relationship with God, for how they live, and for how they see God at work in the world.

Invite the young people to share their reflections. Ask them if they are considering adopting new images of God based on their experience in the session.

Activity 1: I Believe in God . . .

Materials Needed

- Handout #12

Conduct the following activity using your own words or the words below.

Belief: placing trust or confidence in another; accepting a conviction as true, especially a particular tenet or a body of tenets accepted by a group of persons.

Believing: to have faith, confidence or trust; to have confidence in the truth or value of something:
We believe in....

We are all familiar with the Nicene Creed. It begins with our beliefs about God: “I believe in one God the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is visible and invisible.” In addition to the central images of the Christian tradition—God as Father, Almighty (All Powerful), and Creator—you have experienced other biblical images of God as defender of the poor, king, shepherd, rock, eagle, liberator, justice, compassion, potter, wisdom, teacher, and love.

What do you believe about God? Write your own statement of beliefs in God. Here are two examples from other young people.

I believe in the God of heaven and in the God inside all of us.
I believe in Jesus Christ, the savior and the light of our life, who came to us in this world to guide us to the Reign of God.
I believe in the miracle of life and of the everyday things we see here on earth.
I believe in the guidance of God as I ride this roller coaster called life.
I believe in the goodness of people, even those who do not show goodness in their heart, for they too are children of God.
I believe through the grace of God I will have success in my life and in this uncertain world.
Irish E. Trinidad, Ramona Convent Secondary School, Alhambra, CA

I believe in one God,
Both father and mother,
Who synchronized the events of Creation.
I believe in the Son
And in the Spirit who fills us with love.
I believe that all three beings are one.
I believe Jesus Christ was born and that he died for us;
Living his life in the full holiness of God,
And by his death opening the gates of heaven.
I believe that Jesus rose again
And that one day all will be judged in the fairness of God.
I believe in the forgiveness of sins
And in the existence of heaven.
Sarah Korkowski, Holy Names Academy, Seattle, WA

Activity 2: Meditation on the Burning Bush

Materials Needed

- Handout #13
- Instrumental music

Tell the young people that they are going to spend time meditating on their relationship with God through the story of Moses and the Burning Bush in the Book of Exodus. (This is the same reading that opened the session.)

Ask everyone to take off their shoes.

Help the young people settle into the place of prayer. Encourage them to sit with their spine straight, feet on the floor, hands on lap, eyes closed. Ask them to breathe deeply and slowly, to be aware of the sounds around them, to quiet themselves and be still. Play some quiet instrumental music to set a prayerful environment.

Remind the group that they are in God's presence. Ask them to feel the warmth and the love. As they slowly inhale and exhale, ask them to pray to God to open their hearts to the Scripture reading and what God is saying to them today.

Ask the young people to step into the story and become part of it. Imagine they are Moses entering the cave and seeing the burning bush. Have them listen as God speaks to them.

- What do you see and hear?
- What are you feeling?
- What are you thinking?

Read the Scripture passage slowly and meditatively.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!"

And he said, "Here I am."

Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you. The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you:'

This is my name for ever,
and this my title for all generations."

Ask the young people to reflect on these questions:

- What word is being spoken to you in this Bible passage? What is God saying to you?
- What do you want to say to God? What do you want in your relationship with God?

Now invite the young people to resolve to do something about the insights they have gained:

What is God sending you out to do?

Concluding by inviting the young people to share their feelings and reflections on the meditation experience.

Ask them to thank God for the moments in prayer and for any insights they received.

Activity 3: Praying with Music

Materials Needed

- Handout #14
- Selected contemporary Christian song

Contemporary Christian music can be an excellent way to introduce young people to prayer. Here is a simple process that helps young people to pray with contemporary music.

Take a few minutes to help the young people settle into the place of prayer. Encourage them to sit with their spine straight, feet on the floor, hands on their laps, eyes closed. Ask them to breathe deeply and slowly, to be aware of the sounds around them, to quiet themselves and be still.

Remind the group that they are in God's presence. Ask them to feel the warmth and the love. As they slowly inhale and exhale, ask them to pray to God to open their hearts to the Scripture reading and what God is saying to them today.

Play the song. Ask the young people to listen to the words and to pay attention to the feelings and images the song stirs up in them.

Invite the young people to reflect on the song by asking them to consider these questions.

- What are you feeling?
- What are you thinking?
- What is the main point of this song? What is it saying to you?
- How does it speak to your life right now?
- What is God saying to you through this song?

Invite the young people to resolve to do something about the insights they have gained from praying with music:

How can you apply the insights you gained from the song to your life?

Ask them to thank God for the moments in prayer and for any insights they received.

Concluding by inviting the young people to share their feelings and reflections on the meditation experience.

Activity 4: Praying through Creation

Materials Needed

- Natural items such as a leaf, flower, water, rock (only needed if participants cannot go outside) and/or pictures of nature
- Bible or song celebrating God’s creation

This activity can be conducted outdoors or indoors. When conducted inside, provide a prayer space that is representative of and utilizes aspects of creation—leaves, rocks, flowers, branches, grass, or even pictures of mountains, beaches, sunsets, and so on.

Invite the participants to enter a state of peacefulness. Offer a relaxation or breathing exercise.

Begin with a Scripture reading on creation, such as excerpts from Psalm 104, or with a hymn or song that celebrates God’s creation.

Give the youth a short period of time to walk around and simply “attend to” the elements of creation around them: touching leaves or trees, putting hands into dirt, or even watching a bird or squirrel. Ask them to consider the intricate and limitless connections behind the reality they are observing or touching: the water that was needed to grow the tree, the photosynthesis that occurs in the green leaves, the food chain necessary to keep the squirrel alive. Invite them to consider the balance that each item is a part of and to connect with God who is behind it all.

If indoors, direct the group to pass natural items around and consider the same reflections—a leaf, a stone, a flower, and so on.

The participants could also be invited to keep a prayer phrase, or mantra, in mind while they walk or consider the natural realities. This could be a word—“God,” “Creator”—or a phrase—“Thank you, God,” “All creation sings your praise,”. Invite them to let it be a backdrop to their sensory experiences and see what happens as a result.

At the conclusion of the walk/reflections, ask the participants to spend one or two minutes in “conversational prayer” with God about the experience they just had. Instruct them to simply talk to God as they would to a friend and tell God what they are feeling or thinking.

After the experience, invite the participants to name their feelings. If time allows, invite discussion on the content of their prayer.

Activity 5: A Letter to God

Materials Needed

- Handout #15

Engage the young people in writing a letter to God. This will make a good closing activity. Use the format below.

“Ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For the one who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. The one who knocks, enters” (Matthew 7:7-8).

Dear God,

Even with all my questions and worries about life, I want to have faith in you. The way I will try to get to know you better in the coming weeks is....

When dealing with those who are having a tough time believing in you or hearing about your love for all persons and the whole world, I will tell them for you that....

The thing I am looking for most in life right now is....

I ask you, my God, for the hope and the strength to go after this personal dream. The thing I most want to do for you is....

I'll promise now to be in touch again real soon. I'm glad you are always there for me. And I am glad that our relationship can continue to grow every day too.

Your loving daughter/son,

Concluding Reflection: Making God First

Materials Needed

- Handout #16
- Bible

Guide young people through the concluding experience to engage them in examining how to put God first in all things. Begin by reading the two Scripture passages and then take each question, one-by-one, giving the young people time to reflect on the question and then to share insights and reflections with the group. To help young people enter into this activity, share examples for each question from your own life or your work with young people.

We are challenged to put God first in all things—to love God completely: heart, soul, and mind.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

“When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:34-40)

Believing in, and completely loving the One God has enormous consequences for our whole life. Take a moment to reflect on the following:

It means coming to know God’s greatness and majesty.

- How do you love and serve God first?
- What can you start doing to love and serve God first?

It means living in thanksgiving. Everything we are and have comes from God.

- How do you respond to God’s graciousness (goodness) in your life?
- What can you start doing to give thanks to God?

It means knowing the unity and true dignity of all people. We are all made in the image of likeness of God.

- How do you protect and respect the dignity of all people—at home, school, and around the world?
- What can you start doing to protect and respect the dignity of all people?

It means making good use of created things. How will we resist dependence on material goods while positively using them in our lives and families?

- How do you make sure that God is first, not material things?
- How can you “de-clutter” your life so that God is first?

It means trusting God in every circumstance, even in adversity.

- How can you live in complete trust that your faith in God is all that you need in life?

Ask each young person to complete a commitment card to summarize how they will put God first in their lives.

My Commitment to God

To put God first in all things—to love God completely: heart, soul, and mind, I will do the following:
(for example: say my morning or evening prayers each day, seek forgiveness from anyone I’ve hurt, engage in works of mercy and justice for others, participate fully in Sunday worship, be accepting to others at school and on the job.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

God in Our Tradition and Our Lives (Adults)

The adult learning plan has been created as a self-directed small group activity. Facilitators can guide the adults through the learning activities as outlined below and on Handout #17. Write the essential instructions on newsprint or create a PowerPoint presentation with the instructions.

This session plan can also be utilized as a series of large group presentations with small group discussions and activities. Presenters can utilize the commentary in the session plan as source material for their presentation. A facilitator can guide the participants through the activities and discussions in the session plan.

Materials Needed

- Handouts #3, #11, #17

1. Reflection and Discussion of the Biblical Images of God

Conduct the following reflection using your own words or the words below.

Let's review the biblical images of God presented in the All Ages Learning Experience (see Handout #3). You can read more about the meaning of these images of God by reading Handout #11).

Biblical Images of God

1. God the All Powerful
2. God the Creator
3. God the Defender of the Poor and Oppressed
4. God the King
5. God the Shepherd
6. God the Rock, Fortress, Refuge
7. God the Eagle
8. God the Liberator
9. God of Justice
10. God of the Covenant and Relationship
11. God the Parent, Father, Mother
12. God of Caring and Compassion
13. God the Potter
14. God of Wisdom
15. God the Teacher
16. God of Love

Take a moment to reflect on the questions below. Then share your reflections with your group. This is a storytelling experience so be sure to give each person time to share without interruptions or discussion.

- Which images of God were new for you? (You had never thought about God in this way before.)
- Which images helped you to name your own understanding of God?
- Are there any personally important images of God that you would add?

- How has your understanding of God been expanded and/or enriched?
- Are there any personal images of God that you would like to move beyond?

2. Implications of Our Images of God

Materials Needed

- Handouts #1 and #18

Conduct the following activity using your own words or the words below.

Our concept of God matters. There are major consequences of how we think of God. It can make God seem credible or incredible, plausible or highly improbable. It can also make God seem distant or near, absent or present. How we conceptualize God also affects our sense of what the Christian life is about.

Our images of God matter. How we imagine God shapes not only what we think God is like but also what we think the Christian life is about. People who think of God as a warrior may become warriors themselves. People who think of God as compassionate are like to emphasize compassion. People who think God is angry at the world are likely to be angry at the world themselves.

Reflection

Take three or four of your most meaningful and important images of God (from Handout #1) and reflect on them using the following questions.

Image of God: _____

- What are the implications of this image for your relationship with God?
- What are the implications for how you live?
- What are the implications for how you see God at work in the world?

Reflections:

Group Sharing

Share at least one reflection on an image of God with your group. Give each person time to share without interruptions or discussion. Conclude by discussing your insights into why our concepts and images of God matter so much for our relationship with God and the way we live.

3. God—The Beyond in Our Midst

Materials Needed

- Handout #19

Conduct the following activity using your own words or the words below.

In the Hebrew and Christian tradition, God is revealed as both transcendent and immanent. “The prophet Isaiah masterfully describes God’s transcendence as entirely other than creation: ‘For my

thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.' (Isaiah 55:8). In Genesis, God's immanence is described: 'They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of evening breeze' (Genesis 3:9). The Hebrew Scriptures and the faith of ancient Israel hold in balance God's transcendence and immanence, thus seeking to avoid the extremes of either removing God entirely from the world or making God too mundane, thereby limited divinity." (Arthur Zannoni)

"God is both transcendent and immanent. *Transcendence* means that God is not to be identified with the creatures God made—God is not just another being. God's *immanence* means that God is no distance God; God is in *all* reality as its source. God is the ground of being and love in which all reality continues to exist. God is distinct from the world but not separate from it. For everything that is, is in God. Separated from the ground that sustains it, it would simply cease to be. God, transcendent and immanent, is needed close at hand." (William Shannon)

Transcendent Images of God

God is eternal:

"Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable" (Isaiah 40:28).

God is unique:

"I am the Lord and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:18).

God is omnipotent:

"For I know that the Lord is great; our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the Lord pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps" (Psalm 135:5-6).

God is immense:

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27)

God contains all things:

"She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (Wisdom 8:1). In the Book of Wisdom, God and Lady Wisdom are synonymous.

God cannot be praised enough:

"Where can we find the strength to praise him? For he is greater than all his works? (Sirach 43:28)

Immanent Images of God

God cannot be avoided:

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast" (Psalm 137:7-10).

God chooses the Hebrew tribes and makes them a people:

“It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

God establishes a covenant with God’s people:

“The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today” (Deuteronomy 5:2-3, also: Genesis 6—9; 15, 17; Exodus 19—24; and Deuteronomy 5—7).

God frees the Hebrews from Egypt

I [God] have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . ” (Exodus 3:8).

God gives the people of Israel a land:

God tells Joshua: “Pass through the camp, and command the people: Prepare your provisions; for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God gives you to possess” (Joshua 1:11).

God sends prophets to guide and sustain the people:

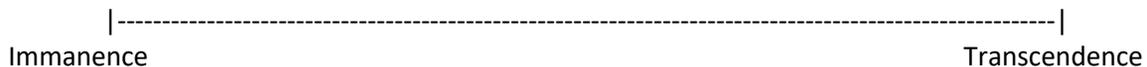
“Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7).

God sustains the chosen people in Babylon and restores them to Israel:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” (Isaiah 40:1-2).

Reflect

If you think of immanence and transcendence as a continuum, do your personal images of God emphasize immanence, transcendence, or a blend of both. Write your images on the continuum below:



- What did this exercise tell you about your concept and images of God?
- If you tend to think about God as immanent *or* transcendent, what are the implications of this view for your relationship with God?
- If you think about God as both transcendent and immanent, as the beyond who is “right here,” what are the implications of this view on your relationship with God?

Discuss

As a group, discuss the implications of seeing God primarily as immanent, primarily as transcendent, and as both transcendent and immanent.

Read the following reflections and then discuss how seeing God as both transcendent and immanent leads to a relational understanding of the Christian life.

Thinking about God as both transcendent and immanent, as the beyond who is “right here,” leads to a relational understanding of the Christian life. Thomas Merton captured this balance when he said:

“Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God shows Himself everywhere, in everything—in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without Him. It’s impossible. The only thing is that we don’t see it.”

(audiotape of Merton made in 1965, quoted in *The God We Never Knew* by Marcus Borg.)

The Christian life is about turning toward and entering into relationship with God who is already in relationship with us—with God who gave us life, who has loved us from the beginning, and who loves us whether we know that or not, who journeys with us whether we know that or not.

The Christian life thus has at its center becoming conscious of that relationship. It is a response to the words of the prophet Isaiah (43:1-5):

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, who formed you:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.
. . . you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,
Do not fear, for I am with you . . .”

4. Believing In and Loving God

Materials Needed

- Handout #20
- Bible

Conduct the following activity using your own words or the words below.

We are challenged to put God first in all things—to love God completely: heart, soul, and mind.

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

“When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’” (Matthew 22:34-40)

Believing in, and completely loving the One God has enormous consequences for our whole life. Take a moment to reflect on the following.

It means coming to know God’s greatness and majesty.

- How do you love and serve God first?
- What can you start doing to love and serve God first?

It means living in thanksgiving. Everything we are and have comes from God. Discuss:

- How do you respond to God’s graciousness (goodness) in your life?
- What can you start doing to give thanks to God?

It means knowing the unity and true dignity of all people. We are all made in the image of likeness of God.

- How do you protect and respect the dignity of all people—at home, at work, and around the world?
- What can you start doing to protect and respect the dignity of all people?

It means making good use of created things. How will we resist dependence on material goods while positively using them in our lives and families?

- How do you make sure that God is first, not material things?
- How can you “de-clutter” your life so that God is first?

It means trusting God in every circumstance, even in adversity.

- How can you live in complete trust that your faith in God is all that you need in life?

Complete the “Commitment to God” to summarize how you will put God first.

My Commitment to God

To put God first in all things—to love God completely: heart, soul, and mind, I will do the following:

(Examples: say my morning or evening prayers each day, seek forgiveness from anyone I’ve hurt, engage in works of mercy and justice for others, participate fully in Sunday worship, be accepting of others at home and on the job.)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Concluding Group Sharing

Take a moment to summarize your learning from this session:

What did you learn about your relationship with God by reflecting on these five key consequences or implications of believing in and completely loving the One God —heart, soul, and mind?

Conclude the session by sharing with the group your response. Share at least one way you will put God first in your life in the coming weeks. This is a storytelling experience so be sure to give each person time to share without interruptions or discussion.

Part 4. Sharing Learning Reflections (15 minutes)

The whole group sharing experience provides an opportunity for each age group to share something they have learned with the entire group. Ask the participants to rejoin their intergenerational groups from the All Ages Learning Experience.

First, ask each age group to share what they learned in their sessions. For example, since each group completed the concluding activity (putting God first in all things, loving God completely: heart, soul, and mind), families and individuals can share their reflections from what they learned about their relationship with God and one idea from their “Commitment to God.”

You can also use a large group presentation by selecting a cross-section of families to share their projects, representatives from the adolescent groups to present a project (their Creed), and a panel of adults to share ideas for putting God first in our lives (“Commitment to God” activity).

Second, present the following information using the words below or your own words:

Think of everything we have done in this session to understand God. To help us take our learning from this session and live it in our lives and homes, reflect on the following questions and share your thoughts with your group.

- What new insights about God and your relationship with God did you discover through this session?
- Do you need to revise or expand your understanding of God because of your learning?
- How will your learning influence your faith in God and your ability to see God at work in your life, the Church, and the world?

Invite participants to take several minutes for small group sharing.

Closing Prayer Service (5 minutes)

Gather

Let us pray to our God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God, we praise you:

Father all powerful, Christ Lord and Savior, Spirit of love.

You reveal yourself in the depths of our being,
drawing us to share in your life and your love.
One God, three Persons,
be near to the people formed in your image,
close to the world your love brings to life.

We ask you this, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
one God, true and living, forever and ever.

Listen

1 John 4:7-12, 16 (God is Love)

Respond

Gracious God, we give you thanks for creating us in your image and likeness.

Response: We are your people!

Gracious God, we give you thanks for gathering us as your people and writing your law on our hearts.

Response: We are your people!

Gracious God, we give you thanks for being the defender of the poor and oppressed of our world and calling us to work for justice.

Response: We are your people!

Gracious God, we give you thanks for caring for us, especially in difficult times, and loving us unconditionally.

Response: We are your people!

Gracious God, we give you thanks for teaching us the way to live.

Response: We are your people!

Go Forth

Lord,
we rejoice that you are our creator and ruler.

As we call upon your generosity,
renew and keep us in your love.

Grant this through Christ our Lord.

Response: Amen.

Lord, come, live in your people
and strengthen them by your grace.
Help them to remain close to you in prayer
and give them a true love for one another.

Grant this through Christ our Lord.

Response: Amen.