About this Guide

This Leader Guide and companion Participant Handout offer the tools needed for a one-hour discussion on the theme of connecting what we believe (theology) with how we live—the theme of Faith’s Wisdom for Daily Living, by Herbert Anderson and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore.

The guide also provides suggestions for expanding the one-hour general discussion of theology and practice to a series of sessions based on each chapter in Anderson and Miller-McLemore’s book. For a more in-depth study of Faith’s Wisdom for Daily Living, see “Digging Deeper” at the end of this guide.

To get the word about an upcoming study of Faith’s Wisdom, download the Publicity Flyer and customize it to fit your needs.

Pre-Session Preparation

Prior to the session, read Faith’s Wisdom for Daily Living, and reflect on the “Key Points” presented in the box at right. Read through the Leader Guide and the Participant Handout, and choose options from the materials presented to use with your group. Gather the materials you will need for the study:

- Bibles
- Copies of the Participant Handout (a companion piece available on this website)
- A white board, large pad of paper, or other writing surface (helpful but not essential)
- Name tags, if desired
- Copies of Faith’s Wisdom for Daily Living (Participants will get the most out of the conversation if they have read the book, but the one-hour session is designed so that you can welcome and include guests who haven’t done the reading.)

This book and other Lutheran Voices titles may be purchased by calling (800) 328-4648, in Canada: (800) 265-6397, ext. 215. Discounts are available for bulk purchases of as few as five books of a single title.

Key Points

- Practical theology—faith’s wisdom, defining our beliefs—offers pragmatic guidance that enriches our lives and helps us address our problems.
- Spiritual practices can help shape the dispositions of the soul, which in turn strengthen the connections between faith and daily living.
- In a world where diversity and uncertainty may confuse and frighten us, Lutheran theology offers the “paradox perspective,” including the notion that we are simultaneously righteous and sinful before God. A practice of embracing ambiguity can replace futile efforts to be certain with the security that comes from faith.
- When we suffer from others’ actions or feel frustrated by our own shortcomings, a renewed Christian understanding of sin can help us understand our frailty. Helpful practices include prayer and care of the sick and dying.
- The belief that sacrifice is noble has unjustly encouraged people to accept abuse. But a careful study of Jesus’ suffering and our salvation offers ideas for treating others—and ourselves—in healthy, life-giving ways.
- Taking care to see the world through a lens of wonder and awe awakens us to recognize God’s grace at work. We aid this perspective by cultivating humility, gratitude, a willingness to struggle, and a capacity to be moved.
Single-Session Plan

The following ideas suggest how to use the Participant Handout in leading a one-hour discussion of Faith’s Wisdom for Daily Living.

Opening (3 minutes)
Introduce yourself and welcome the participants. Pray the opening prayer together, or invite someone to lead the prayer. Option: Read Proverbs 8:1-11 before the prayer.

Getting Started (10 minutes)
Invite the participants to briefly introduce themselves and to answer this question: What’s a wise saying that you heard when growing up or that you use nowadays? If the group is large, have participants introduce themselves and respond to the question within smaller groups of 4–5 people. Note that today’s discussion focuses on a different source of wisdom: Christian theology.

Points to Ponder (45 minutes)
Use questions from the Participant Handout as a framework for discussion. These introduce the idea of practical theology and then skim lightly over the topics of Chapters 2–5. You may wish to keep the conversation moving from one topic to the next in order to introduce them all, or if the group is particularly interested in one of the topics, you may prefer to spend the session there and merely point out the other topics. Either way, keep in mind that “Digging Deeper” offers ideas for further discussion of each topic.

- Questions 1–3 (9 minutes): Have someone read the definition of theology aloud, and verify that it is clear to everyone. Use question 1 to learn about the group’s background knowledge. If some participants have taken a class in theology, they might have a lot to say about questions 2 and 3. Participants for whom theology is a new subject may be curious to hear definitions for the topics listed (a Bible dictionary would help), or you can simply note that these are themes the authors believe have practical value, studied as “practical theology,” and that this discussion will provide a taste of applying these ideas.

- Questions 4–6 (9 minutes): For question 4, the content of particular differences is less important than noticing how diverse ideas and views can challenge—and possibly frighten—us. Possible responses to question 5 include being humble as created beings and being responsible and thankful for the position granted us by God. For question 6, one idea consistent with Anderson’s chapter is to listen with a sense that the truth may be more complex than any individual’s viewpoint can express.

- Questions 7–9 (9 minutes): Participants’ experiences may range from heavy criticism of particular sins to avoidance of the topic altogether. Either extreme could distract from the gospel. For questions 8 and 9, redefining concepts such as sin may be exciting to some participants but unnerving to others. You might need to clarify that you aren’t encouraging people to “stop believing” in sin as they understand it, but rather to check whether their thinking about this topic is maturing along with their thinking about other issues. They might identify fresh insights or clarify why their existing ideas still work for them.

- Question 10–12 (9 minutes): Miller-McLemore’s concern is that valuing “sacrifice” has been a basis for justifying the suffering of relatively powerless people and reinforcing oppressive roles especially for mothers.
  - The idea that sacrifice is good may be so ingrained that participants are uncomfortable debating its merits. If conversation is difficult, try listing what was good about Jesus’ sacrifice. Ask: Is being crucified a good thing? Was Jesus’ suffering good simply because it was a sacrifice, or because of what it accomplished? Accept the idea that some situations call for putting aside our own needs for the sake of others, but ask when or under what conditions such behavior is good.
  - Ask: Does a better understanding of sacrifice help you decide how to love your neighbor as yourself?

- Questions 13–14 (9 minutes): Participants may think of inspiration from nature, the arts, and babies or other signs of new life. Note that making a point of noticing and giving thanks can be a beneficial spiritual practice that draws us closer to God.

Closing (2 minutes)
Note that topics such as these can be intellectually and spiritually challenging, but that as we deepen our knowledge of God and God’s ways, we may grow in awe of and love for God. Invite the group to express that hope by praying the closing prayer.

If you plan to continue the discussion of Faith’s Wisdom for Daily Living after this session, announce the place and time for the next meeting. Ask participants to prepare by reading the chapters of Faith’s Wisdom you plan to cover at the next meeting. Suggestions for subsequent discussions begin on the following page, “Digging Deeper.”
Digging Deeper

After working your way through the single-session plan, use the following suggestions along with the chapter questions in *Faith’s Wisdom for Daily Living* to dig deeper into an understanding of how our beliefs can shape the way we live and how our habits of living can develop our faith. These suggestions provide a framework for a chapter-by-chapter discussion of *Faith’s Wisdom*, though it’s your decision as to how many chapters to address each time the group meets.

The single-session plan included the content of Chapter 1, so these ideas start with Chapter 2.

**Chapter 2: Embracing Ambiguity**

- Read the definitions of *ambiguity* (p. 16, 2nd and 3rd sentences of last paragraph) and *paradox* (p. 17, 3rd sentence of last paragraph). Verify that everyone understands both definitions. The following ideas should help to clarify:
  - Note that ambiguity exists because we are in relationships with people who have different experiences and views. Ask participants to recall a situation where different people experienced the same thing in a different way. (If you need an example to start the conversation, here’s one: A friend says she recalls receiving many gifts for Christmas, while her brother recalls receiving few. Their parents gave to them equally, and an objective observer could have counted the number—an unambiguous truth—but whether the gifts were “few” or “many” seems to be related to something more ambiguous, such as each child’s feelings about what a child needs or what a happy home is like.)
  - Review the example of paradox at the bottom of p. 17: All people are human and so essentially the same, yet we are all individuals and therefore different. Discuss the consequences of ignoring one statement or the other when relating to people. Group members may value one statement more than the other, but ask: Is there still truth in the other statement?

- On the board, large sheets of paper, or handouts you prepare for the group, write the following pairs of statements, and ask the group to vote on whether one, both, or neither statement is true in each pair.
  - God acts with justice. / God acts with mercy.
  - Jesus is God. / Jesus was a man.
  - Holy Communion is bread and wine. / Holy Communion is the body and blood of Jesus.
  - Jesus’ death reconciled us to God (made us saints). / We are all sinners.

While opinions may differ, note that Lutheran theology traditionally holds both statements in each pair to be true. Rather than trying to explain away the paradox, this theology embraces it as God working in ways beyond our understanding. Invite reactions to that point of view.

- Pray the hymn “Christus Paradox” by Sylvia Dunstan (p. 22) as your closing prayer.
  - Options: For a link to all 4 stanzas, visit [http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/choral.php](http://www.calvin.edu/worship/stories/choral.php). To hear a choir perform an excerpt, go to [http://www.wels.net](http://www.wels.net), link to Worship, then to Choir Music Samples, and find “Christus Paradox” with the selections for Christ the King Sunday.

**Chapter 3: Facing Frailty**

- Ask: Is confession of sins part of your worship experience? If so, how does that experience affect you? How is that experience different from (or the same as) other situations in which you feel aware of your shortcomings or seek out forgiveness?

- Read the descriptions of human shortcomings in Amos 5:11-13, 21-24; Luke 11:37-48; and Romans 7:14-25. For each passage, ask: How does this description compare with ways you have thought of sin and with your own life experiences?
• Note that before the Enlightenment (a philosophical movement of the 18th century), children in the Western world were seen as depraved, in need of correction, while children more recently have been portrayed as pure and innocent before the world harms or corrupts them.
  o Ask: How well do these descriptions fit with how you remember your own childhood or how you experience children today? Do you think children have the freedom and ability to choose what is best? How well does each of these descriptions help you as parents or other adults relating to children?
  o Note that Miller-McLemore offers an alternative view: children as morally and spiritually frail, needing to be nurtured in faith. Ask: How well does that understanding help you relate to children? How, if at all, does it add to your understanding of sinfulness? When, if ever, have you felt morally or spiritually “frail”?
• Ask: When you pray the Lord’s Prayer, do you typically pray “Forgive us our sins,” “Forgive us our trespasses,” or “Forgive us our debts”? What associations do you have with each word? Do the words trespasses and debts help you understand sins?
• Develop a group definition of sin. Write the word on the board or a large sheet of paper, and invite contributions to the definition. Modify it as participants share their insights. Does one phrase describe your group’s understanding, or do you need more than one definition? Ask: Has your definition of sin changed as a result of our discussion? If so, how?
• Pray Psalm 51 as a closing prayer.

Chapter 4: Salvaging Sacrifice
• Note that Miller-McLemore points out that Christianity has offered several explanations for salvation (p. 66). Ask: What would you say Jesus did or accomplished by dying on the cross? Most likely, someone will say Jesus sacrificed himself, dying in our place to bear the cost of our sins.
  o Encourage other responses as well; when the group runs out of ideas, review the basic alternatives described in the bottom paragraph of p. 66. For reference, write the names of these theories on the board or a large sheet of paper. Read the quote from John Calvin on p. 67, and invite reactions. Ask: Do you relate most to the image of being captives to one’s own sin, captives to the pain inflicted by others’ sin, debtors to God, guilty, or unclean?
  o Note that while the satisfaction theory is popular today, it was not spelled out until the 11th century, and no major church tradition insists on this view. However, it is important to discuss because it has shaped the way we view sacrifice today.
• Note that the idea of Jesus’ crucifixion being a sacrifice has led many Christians to conclude that self-sacrifice is good. Ask: When do we expect people to “sacrifice themselves” for the sake of others? What are we expecting them to do? Today and in history, would you say we usually expect similar sacrifices from men and women, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, or are there differences? Probe for examples of sacrifice, and ask whether these examples seem to be of “Christlike” behavior.
• Read Philippians 2:1-11. To address the idea of how well or when self-sacrifice is following Christ’s example, ask: What was the outcome of Jesus’ sacrifice? Was he rewarded? Was his sacrifice a lifelong state of being or a temporary act? Was crucifixion something Jesus welcomed or something bad that he endured? (See Matt 26:36--44; Luke 22:39-44.) Return to the previous examples of expecting people to sacrifice themselves, and ask: How well do those situations match the example of Jesus as we have just described it?
• Note that seeing limitations of sacrifice should not necessarily cause us to conclude it has no place in the Christian life.
  o Note that Miller-McLemore suggests that a proper role of sacrifice is as one of the efforts that may be involved in “just love.” Ask: What kind of love is “just” (i.e., fair)?
  o Invite the group to evaluate these criteria for justifying a sacrifice: (a) A privileged person is sacrificing for someone less privileged; (b) Someone in greater need has an apparent or self-evident claim on another; (c) Peoples’ acts of sacrifice can be balanced out over the long run. Ask: How would these criteria apply to parents and children? to spouses? to friends? to our relationship with the poor?
• Ask: How, if at all, does rethinking the value we place on sacrifice affect your feelings about Jesus’ death on the cross? Does the glory given to Jesus (Phil 2:9-11) subtract from or add to the value of what he did?

Chapter 5: Witnessing Wonder
• Gather pictures online, in books, or from magazines to show places and things that inspire wonder and awe at God’s creative power. For example, you might have pictures of a baby, fall colors, an astonishing creature such as a platypus or octopus, mountains, lovers, and stars (for amazing photos taken by the Hubble space telescope, click on Multimedia at http://www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/hubble/). End your collection with a picture of the crucifixion. Show the pictures to the group to inspire imaginations and memories, and then ask participants when they have experienced a sense of awe and wonder. Ask: What were your feelings toward God at that time? Did you feel closer to God? More humble before God? More or less afraid?
• Read Job 38:4-7, 22-27. Ask: What qualities or actions of God amaze and awe you? Write the ideas on the board or on a large sheet of paper.
Participants might want to distinguish wonder and amazement from awe and fear. **Option**: Take time to discuss fear, if this is a concern of your group. You might ask: Is the idea of an all-powerful God more comforting or more frightening? How do you expect God to use power? What qualities of God might predict the way God will use power?

Whether or not you discuss fear, next ask: How does awareness of God’s power, creativity, and grace help you when you are suffering or feel overwhelmed?

- Ask: Is a sense of awe and wonder something you feel constantly, frequently, occasionally, seldom, or never? Read the example of Anderson’s elderly parishioner on pp. 74–75. Ask: Why might it be important to take time for awe and wonder? On the board or a large sheet of paper, write and invite comments about each of the dispositions of the soul that Anderson says will strengthen wonder (pp. 81–84): (a) humility; (b) a willingness to struggle; (c) the capacity to be moved or changed; and (d) gratitude. Ask: How can a person develop these qualities?
- Invite the group to imagine that they feel humble, awed by God’s power, and grateful for God’s goodness as they face each of the following situations, and ask how those feelings would shape the way they approach the situation: (a) getting along with family members; (b) learning about climate change (global warming); (c) welcoming new members at church; and (d) supporting someone who is grieving a loss.
- Close by singing “How Great Thou Art” (#856, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*).

**Deeper Still: Further Resources to Explore**

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