

# CONVERSATIONS AROUND THE TABLE

Growing together as progressive Christians.

progressive  
christians  
u n i t i n g

*see. pray. act.*

**Seven Session  
Outline and  
Discussion Guide**

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## Introduction

“Conversations Around the Table” (CATT) began as an attempt to address something that seemed to be missing from our individual faith journeys—a way to connect to and be nourished by the richness of contemporary prophetic Christianity, as reflected in both the resurgence of progressive theology and in the unique experiences of fellow searchers. Many of us have felt isolated or limited in congregations or among acquaintances that could not, for many reasons, take the trip we have embarked on. We wonder how to find each other and how best to share our hopes and our frustrations. We long to stand on firm theological ground, to find support for our convictions in Scripture, in current scholarship about Jesus, and in fresh perspectives on the role of faith in the world. Above all, we want to re-engage and re-energize our faith, to proclaim a renewed vision of Christianity focused on love, justice, and peace while transcending conventional congregational and denominational limits to broader Christian community.

Taking a lesson from the earliest Christian gatherings, our answer to these needs is the formation of small discussion groups, representing a variety of church and non-church experiences, that gather monthly in a member’s home to explore central issues in contemporary discipleship and share different perspectives on faith. The first group met in March of 2009, but it is as relevant as ever today in 2016 in a world of profound oppression, injustice, and the abuse of religion to exclude “the other.” To provide some basic structure for discussions, a session outline covers topics such as the challenge of building a progressive Christian movement, the relationship of church and state, the pursuit of equality for all, the challenge of economic justice, responses to war and peace, and the future of Christianity. The discussion module is rounded out with suggested readings and discussion questions.

Your group may find that it desires to continue beyond this seven-session introduction to dive deeper in some areas and explore others for the first time—we offer this module as a starting point for conversations around *your* table. It is our hope that many new groups will use this guide to start their own unique journeys—providing the spiritual sustenance while also beginning to experiment with inter-group discussion, possibly facilitated by the Web-based resources of PCU. Indeed, each group potentially represents one of the fundamental components of a more effective, sustaining, and active network “uniting” progressive Christians. This resource is part of the larger goal of equipping people and communities to embody Jesus’ way of compassion and justice for our world, that we might together build a prophetic movement for social transformation. We offer this as a tool for both personal spiritual growth among a trusted group of friends and an introduction to a much larger fellowship.

## **Some Thoughts about this Module (Legs for the Table)**

This module provides suggested topics, readings, and discussion questions for seven consecutive sessions. It is, however, somewhat arbitrary and could certainly be extended. This is not meant to be a definitive list of progressive Christian “topics of interest.” While covering the major points, there are certainly other topics that could be included (for example, an “Interfaith” session) and many ways to reconfigure the concerns included here. Nor is the order of sessions particularly important. While the initial and last sessions are appropriate book ends for this overview, the other topics are not in any necessary sequence and can be rearranged to suit your group’s preferences and interests.

There is certainly no requirement that each of these “sessions” be covered in a single meeting. Previous groups have often found they often need additional time (especially to the extent that as the fellowship component grew in importance for us) to cover the topics sufficiently in depth. One option is to double back once the initial sessions are complete—treating this as an overview. In short, we hope this structure gives you a starting point for your own original experience—asking only that you share with us the discoveries you make so that we can continue to improve and expand this resource.

## **Some Thoughts on the Reading (Food for the Table)**

Each session has optional reading, but CATT is not designed as a “book club.” It is not intended to function like a college course with “required reading” for each “class.” Instead, we encourage deep discussion on some major areas of question or concern by offering a “tasting menu” of progressive Christian writing and thought (or other genres relevant to the issue at hand). These morsels are admittedly only a small fraction of the vast and growing banquet of inspirational and informative sources that should comprise the full “menu” for CATT.

Optional readings include online articles, especially from existing Progressive Christians Uniting reflections. Everything that is accessible online is indicated with a web address. Just click the embedded link and you should be directed to the article. Alternatively, you can highlight the address on the reading list, copy it (Ctrl+C), and paste it into a web browser (Ctrl+P). Additionally, the optional readings include multiple books of note. However, these books are not provided with this resource. Questions and discussions in sessions do not depend on having read these books, though they are certainly helpful material for further reflection if a group member has access to one or more of them.

In some instances, developments in the United States or the world may provide additional material and helped shape the discussion in unexpected ways. The same holds true for the

Questions associated with each session—they are not meant to be covered one by one in the discussion, only to stimulate your thinking about the reading before the session and provide a few potential jumping off points for discussion when your group is together.

The bottom line is that the reading list and associated Quotes and Questions are a suggested framework to help you establish and develop your own Conversation group in ways that are unique to its members' passions and experience. So, in thinking about how to integrate the reading for your group:

- Remember that the principal intention is to have a great discussion that creates connections between group members and feeds their spiritual hunger. What matters is group participation and deep listening to one another. The readings are a means, not the end. They are also supposed to function as a door into the much larger body of progressive Christian thought.
- Don't feel you have to cover every topic—let participants focus on what they are interested in. Your group may decide to cut items from some of the sessions if they seem too heavy.
- Encourage members to share supplemental articles or blogs they find online if they fit with the theme for a gathering. You never know what people will find meaningful for them on their journey!
- Please share your discoveries with us. We want the resources for this program to grow through the addition of all the amazing work we missed. Together, we can ensure that future iterations of the CATT reading list provide an increasingly useful and accessible way to explore the full depth and breadth of progressive Christian inquiry.

### **Some Thoughts on Organizing (Setting the Table)**

There are many, many ways to organize a successful and enjoyable small group discussion. We tinkered a bit and seem to have settled on the setting that works best us. Here are some of the things we learned about ourselves that might help you:

- Try to form a group of people who represent different Christian denominations and different churches within the same general geographic area. We realize this is not easy to do. PCU provides a useful network to help you find people interested in participating.

- The group should be intimate, no less than six, no more than twelve (including the convener). Start a bit bigger because a few members may drop off in the beginning.
- Someone has to take responsibility for organizing. This is the person (you, perhaps!) who initially convenes the group, sends reminders out about meetings and readings, makes copies of the readings and questions for everyone for future gatherings, etc. We strongly recommend you avoid a leader who lectures or preaches, leaving participants to listen and only chime in here and there with a question or small bit to share. Your group should be as democratic and non-hierarchical as possible. You want everyone contributing, everyone listening, everyone fully engaged.
- Try to meet once a month. You can meet more frequently but, particularly in the beginning, too much time in between gatherings may create an obstacle to both discussion and fellowship (not to mention commitment). Remember, you need “cook” time (as one of our members said) between gatherings so that all the ideas you’re reading about and meditating on can settle but not so much time that the group loses its connection and passion.
- Meet in a home. It’s more intimate and fosters an environment conducive to openness and genuine sharing. Your group can decide whether to meet in a different home each time or in the same one. Hospitality is one of the most simple and important gifts we can give each other.
- Eat together (feed your bodies as well as your spirits!). We found that nothing helps the conversation around the table more than sharing the food *on* the table. Maybe it’s only some cookies or chips and salsa. Perhaps it’s a whole potluck. Having dinner together is definitely not a requirement, but other groups have decided their time together should include a meal. We suggest that your initial gatherings not include a full meal because you’ll need the time to get to know each other and dive deeply into the content of the topic and readings. But once you’ve reached a consensus about how to handle the discussion and have established your own rhythm, think about including a meal. Of course, make sure the burden of preparing (and cleaning up after) the feast falls evenly on everyone.
- Remember that each session should provide opportunities for every member to share their experiences and thoughts with the group. We recommend starting by asking everyone to briefly talk about their life (one blessing and challenge, for instance) in the previous month—something we call “checking in.” But it is also

important to bring personal experience to bear on the reading and discussion throughout the session. Each perspective becomes a resource for the group and talking about personal concerns or triumphs helps build trust. Sharing in this way also helps to keep the atmosphere of the gathering comfortable and free-flowing rather than formal and academic.

We hope that you find “Conversations Around the Table” to be an enjoyable and profound experience. Just as this module grew out of our own curiosity and spiritual need, we want it to continue to grow as you continue your exploration and discernment. We are available if you should need any help, brainstorming power, or feedback. We request that you let us know when you form a group so we can publish it to the wider PCU network. Please let us know how you’re doing and share your additions, tips, and insights. Thank you for your interest in beginning a CATT group. May it feed your passion for pursuing God’s dream for the world!

With our very best,  
Progressive Christians Uniting staff

Progressive Christians Uniting  
634 S. Spring Street, Suite 300  
Los Angeles, CA 90014  
[www.progressivechristiansuniting.org](http://www.progressivechristiansuniting.org)  
Engaging people and communities to embody Jesus’ way of compassion and justice for our world.

## Opening Prayer

### Prayer for a People in the Throes of Martyrdom

Lord, may your gospel be for me not a book,  
but Good News, lived and shared.  
May I not be embittered by oppression.  
May I speak more of hope than of calamities.

May my denunciations be first subjected to a discernment,  
in community,  
brought before you in profound prayer,  
and uttered without arrogance,  
not as an instrument of aggression,  
but neither with timidity and cowardice.

May I never resign myself to the exploitation of the poor,  
in whatever form it may come.  
Help me to be subversive of any unjust order.  
Help me to be free,  
and to struggle for the freedom of the oppressed.

May I never become accustomed to the suffering of the martyrs  
and the news that my brothers and sisters are enduring persecution,  
but may their lives and witness ever move me to conversion  
and to the greatest loyalty to the Kingdom.

May I accept my church with an ever-growing love  
and with Christian realism.  
May I not reject it for its faults,  
but feel myself committed to renew it,  
and help it to be what you, Lord, want it to be.  
May I fear not death but infidelity.

~Fernando Bermudez, *Death and Resurrection in Guatemala*

## Seven Session Outline

### Session 1

#### Progressive Christianity: Can We Build a “Prophetic Movement for Social Change?”

General introduction; getting to know one another; reaching consensus on group direction

Optional Reading:

- Timothy Murphy, “Reclaiming Radical Faith,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=2a937866-bb3f-4ee2-a04d-ec5b5b2442d0&c=&ch=>), 3/13/2014.
- Timothy Murphy, “The Worldly Way of Jesus,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=a5abbbf0-5d2b-4f83-b238-fcd79df9d483&c=&ch=>), 2/27/2014.

### Session 2

#### Reigniting Resistance: The Role of Prophetic Action in the Dominant Society

Proposed Topics: The state of Christianity in America; Jesus’ Passion and its relevance today; the “prophetic voice” and how to use and amplify it; what procession are we in?

Optional Reading:

- Book review of “Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary,” (accessible at: <http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/reviews/view/16354>)
- Timothy Murphy, “Raised Up as Uprising, or Resurrection as Insurrection,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=6cf77fea-25d1-4a32-bace-0d7e06c8cf18&c=&ch=>), 4/10/2014.
- Timothy Murphy, “Experiencing Transcendence from Below,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=3551071d-3911-4ac9-9d86-8c0ecd6267&c=&ch=>), 7/24/2014.
- From Borg’s *Jesus*
  - Chapter 1: Jesus Today (pp. 3-26)
  - Epilogue: Jesus and American Christianity Today (pp. 293-311)
- From Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.*
  - Chapter 1: The Alternative Community of Moses (pp. 1-19)
  - A Postscript on Practice: (pp. 121-125)
- From Borg and Crossan’s *The Last Week*

- Chapter One – Palm Sunday (pp. 1-30)

### **Session 3**

#### **One Nation And Her Gods: Should There Be “Prophetic Politics?”**

Proposed Topics: Church and State; the role Christianity has played in political power and the roles it could/should play; the “Bully Pulpit?”; denominational politics; God and the American Empire

Optional Reading:

- Timothy Murphy, “When the Secular is Religious,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=7be9a1b4-fc2f-4a64-b0a4-f0324b092659&c=&ch=>), 6/12/2014.
- Timothy Murphy, “A Primer on Progressive Faith and Politics,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=9bd5f070-3933-453d-83e8-aa7b9fe10b5e&c=&ch=>), 2/21/2016.
- “Confronting The Powers: An Interview with Walter Wink and June Keener Wink. An Interview by Steve Holt” (accessible at: <http://www.guildsf.org/news/confronting-powers-interview-walter-wink-and-june-keener-wink-interview-steve-holt>)
- Selection from Crossan’s *God & Empire*
  - Prologue (pp. 1-5)
  - Chapter 1: Empire and the Barbarism of Civilization (pp. 7-48)
  - Epilogue (pp. 237-242)
- Selections from Wink *The Powers that Be*
  - Introduction (pp. 1-11)
  - Chapter 1: Identifying the Powers (pp. 14-36)
  - Chapter 2: The Domination System (pp. 37-62)
- Cobb “American Imperialism” in *Resistance: The New Role of Progressive Christians* (Cobb, ed). (pp. 97-118).

### **Session 4**

#### **The “In” Game: Unconditional Love and Unconventional Equality**

Proposed Topics: Confronting persistent racism and inequality; feminist theology and the female prophetic voice; LGBT inclusion; immigrants and the “Other;” access (to education, healthcare, opportunity) and equality

Optional Reading:

- Sean Patrick Coady, “Manufacturing Gender Roles,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=2c6cff2c-d4d1-49cd-9e2e-44e2f981cb4a&c=&ch=>), 8/7/2014.
- Paulina Piña Garcia, “The Gospel of Feminism,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1101259633550&ca=7a4be57d-76eb-4fec-a6d1-c7b0b4eec4f2>), 3/3/2016.
- Timothy Murphy, “Ally Is Action, Not an Identity,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=938beb06-4c37-4711-af8c-e4d81daaf2e7&c=&ch=>), 11/12/2015.
- Timothy Murphy, “Reform, Revolution, and Resistance,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=607a732d-dd70-4673-bb2f-67663ac2f23d&c=&ch=>), 6/27/2014.
- Timothy Murphy, “Why #AllLivesMatter Is a Cop-out,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=5c07da74-c83c-49d4-9fc8-7ff2448a47bf&c=&ch=>), 12/11/2014.
- Esquivel “Are we more devoted to order or justice? In *Dispatches from the Religious Left* (Clarkson, ed.) (pp. 120-126)
- Reuther “Feminist Theology” in *Resistance: The New Role of Progressive Christians* (Cobb, ed.) (pp. 186-203).

## Session 5

### American Idols: Capitalism, Consumption, and Corruption and the Path Toward Economic Justice

Proposed Topics: The curse of consumerism; mass culture = mass control; environmental justice (for whom?); the society of greed; American Dream turned Global Nightmare; is there a Christian “alternative?”; what is the role of the prophetic voice?

#### Optional Reading:

- Timothy Murphy, “Keystone XL and the Birth of a Movement,” (accessible at: [http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?llr=o77adubab&v=001XLulP1S4AUTO6Vy9hZfRH7\\_RGHAwIF\\_jeRwCP-vm2XCR7hltgcrszPyzfyAE3mcPGqWEJxaJP7AdqCLGRio9QHkylx0eCseuMBdsFOIGNyU0zqAho-lQyAgSnmKpmnd-TNQfRhp-xTAK8wyfgCHL42-r6x00aV1PWw1f8YTUTQG7hGvIkDDQE8ffXUbFqLRd59sdRwv\\_fBkyp3dGzidZB3uzPqLIgw5roJw5G3Z2lbjz2SfWZhDee4ylQMzX32LgnnZ42-Tm-GXlt8on0DC2fdJmvBk9A5Ud4Nqr4kM4SYro0fHcikBF3QaHDN7PpNDT3S4KdhvSEwV9NoKzS3iYcMg456utUQl8n0IQJnYEHAzPDLs-0ulA2Q%3D%3D&id=preview](http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?llr=o77adubab&v=001XLulP1S4AUTO6Vy9hZfRH7_RGHAwIF_jeRwCP-vm2XCR7hltgcrszPyzfyAE3mcPGqWEJxaJP7AdqCLGRio9QHkylx0eCseuMBdsFOIGNyU0zqAho-lQyAgSnmKpmnd-TNQfRhp-xTAK8wyfgCHL42-r6x00aV1PWw1f8YTUTQG7hGvIkDDQE8ffXUbFqLRd59sdRwv_fBkyp3dGzidZB3uzPqLIgw5roJw5G3Z2lbjz2SfWZhDee4ylQMzX32LgnnZ42-Tm-GXlt8on0DC2fdJmvBk9A5Ud4Nqr4kM4SYro0fHcikBF3QaHDN7PpNDT3S4KdhvSEwV9NoKzS3iYcMg456utUQl8n0IQJnYEHAzPDLs-0ulA2Q%3D%3D&id=preview)), 2/26/2015.

- Timothy Murphy, “Oregon Protests and Liquidating the Commons,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=5ac6a0ad-d44b-4d23-b30a-c1b2f07f87a3&c=&ch=>), 1/7/2016.
- Timothy Murphy, “Fossil Fuel Abolition and Climate Justice,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=4f6759eb-919a-4561-94e4-48f8ea23943e&c=&ch=>), 10/23/2014.
- Timothy Murphy, “Inequality, Don Corleone, and Extraction,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=7fcee7f-3bd5-49aa-aa94-d9bf2e8c3971&c=&ch=>), 11/13/2014.
- Douglass and McAfee “Consumerism” in *Resistance: The New Role of Progressive Christians* (Cobb, ed). (pp. 55-74)
- Myers “The First Temptation: Israel, Jesus and Sabbath Economics,” *Liguorian Magazine* 2009 (accessed through [www.bcm-net.org](http://www.bcm-net.org))
- Selection from Jones *The Green Collar Economy*
  - Chapter Three: Eco-Equity (pp. 61-77)

## Session 6

### To Dream the Impossible Dream: Following the Prince of Peace

Proposed Topics: The Church and war; our appetite for and culture of violence; the potential and problems of pacifism; the clarity of the Gospels and the price for practitioners; the Military-Industrial complex and the inevitability of war; the role of progressive Christians in confronting, preventing or diffusing conflict; is pacifism appeasement (and un-patriotic)?

#### Optional Reading:

- “Thomas Merton’s Call for Peace” (accessible at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-dear/thomas-mertons-call-for-p\\_b\\_7507668.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-dear/thomas-mertons-call-for-p_b_7507668.html))
- Timothy Murphy, “The Myth of Redemptive Violence: Part 1000,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=b14d3bb4-51c8-4381-8f9d-e8987296cae9&c=&ch=>), 2/19/2015.
- Timothy Murphy, “Roman Empire launches surprise assault in Bethlehem,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=b74cfd24-0a53-4ca1-a47b-a17cd411ce51&c=&ch=>), 12/23/2015.
- Timothy Murphy, “Never Saw a War They Didn’t Like,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=ccc7ee04-029b-4c8d-9123-6eda73bffb5a&c=&ch=>), 8/27/2015.
- Chris Hedges, “War Is Sin,” (accessible at: [http://truthdig.com/report/print/20090601\\_war\\_is\\_sin/](http://truthdig.com/report/print/20090601_war_is_sin/)), 6/1/2009

- Selection from Wink *Jesus and Nonviolence*
  - Chapter 5 (pp. 57-95)
- Selection from Friesen, Langan, and Stassen *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Stassen, ed.).
  - Introduction “Just Peacemaking as the New Ethic for Peace and War” in (pp. 1-37).
- Selection from Soelle *Essential Writings* (Oliver, ed.)
  - “Peace not Security” (pp. 80-86)
- Selection from Merton *Essential Writings* (Bochen, ed.)
  - “The Way of Nonviolence” (pp. 122-134)
- King, Jr., transcript of address on All India Radio, March 1959

## Session 7

### **Emerging Church, Embracing Discipleship—Building a Prophetic Movement for Social Change from Inside and Beyond the Emerging Church**

Proposed Topics: Building a progressive Christian movement: re-discovering/reclaiming the relevance and power of Jesus for personal and societal transformation. Beyond the congregation: Finding, connecting, and fortifying progressive Christians in the United States. How do we get there from here (and can CATT play a role)?

#### Optional Reading:

- “Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth,” The Accra Declaration of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches – 2004 (accessible at: [http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy\\_url/6049/Accra-new-final.pdf?1418430421](http://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/unitedchurchofchrist/legacy_url/6049/Accra-new-final.pdf?1418430421))
- Timothy Murphy, “Reclaiming Salvation for Today,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=f47d2d3e-b1f4-42ea-84f9-64b76b7a2179&c=&ch=>), 10/29/2015.
- Timothy Murphy, “Selma and Participatory Eschatology,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=662a466f-7c76-42a5-8e2b-b028860cc8c6&c=&ch=>), 1/15,2015.
- Timothy Murphy, “Follow the Planetary Gospel,” (accessible at: <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?ca=0c62c106-4008-4c33-a3f7-186c147b0b65&c=&ch=>), 10/2/2014.
- Selection from Borg *The Heart of Christianity*
  - Chapter 11 (pp. 207-226)
- Selections from Butler Bass *Christianity for the Rest of Us*
  - Chapter 17 and Epilogue (pp. 255-284).

- Selections from *Resistance* (Cobb, Jr., ed.)
  - Afterward “Forms of Resistance” by Douglass (pp. 245-249)

## Discussion Guide

### Session 1

#### Progressive Christianity: Can We Build a “Prophetic Movement for Social Change?”

The new human being in Christ is a resister, a revolutionary. She knows that for which she lives and gives her life. He is a fighter for the city of God. The new human being is a loving being who participates in the three forms of creation as a co-creator. He and she are committed to the renewal of the earth, to our liberation from bondage, and to resistance against death and all the powers of death. The third creation is as unfinished as the other two. All three creations continue still.

~Dorothee Soelle

The point of ministry is not that the church may prosper but that the world may live (and not die) and rejoice (and not cower). Only the church on its better days—and the synagogue and the mosque on their better days—is able to mediate irascible holiness, evoke consequent ambivalence, manage that ambivalence toward newness, and then wait.

~Walter Brueggemann

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion

Your Journey—

What authors or clergy people have influenced your spiritual development— your progressive faith—most? What Biblical passages, stories, or “authors?” Do you have a “motto?”

Was there an event or experience that galvanized your progressive attitudes or turned faith into action/engagement? In other words, did something in your life “radicalize” you?

Do you identify with terms like “radical discipleship” from Ched Myers or “revolutionary” used by Marcus Borg to describe Jesus’ ministry? Why or why not?

What does the word “prophetic” mean to you? Who are the “prophets” (Biblical, historical, and/or contemporary) who have influenced you? Is the time of “prophecy” past?

However you describe yourself, what do you see as your role (calling, ministry)?

Do you know other people like you (i.e., who share your progressive views) in this region? Are they in your congregation? Are they in your town? Are they as active as you?

Progressive Christianity—

PCU defines “progressive” Christianity as expressing the following characteristics:

- 1) actively work for social justice;
- 2) fully affirm LGBTQ participation in church life;
- 3) respect the wisdom of other religious traditions;
- 4) seek to embody Jesus' way of compassion and justice for our world.

Why are these important? What do they mean to you? Is something missing that you find crucial? Why?

Was Christianity ever a “movement?” Is it now or should it be again? Can/should progressives be “evangelical” for the values they care about? If we are called to proclaim good news, what does that good news look like in our community?

Do you feel that progressive Christian views are well represented in the local, regional, and national dialogue about faith (in the media, popular culture, politics, etc.)? Where do you see our voice? What can/should we do to strengthen this public witness?

Are there certain subjects or parts of our modern lives that faith/religion should stay away from? Should there be a religious dialogue about war (even a “just” war) during a war? When should religious voices “critique” or criticize the government or secular society if those human structures fall short of “God’s dream” for humanity?

Are there better and worse ways to follow Jesus, or is it up to each individual? When, if ever, should religious people criticize other religious people? For beliefs that exclude? For practices that oppress? How do we address disagreements and multiple views in compassion and with an openness to learn from one another?

WWJRD (What would Jesus *really* do?)—

If Jesus were to begin his ministry this year in the United States, what would he preach/teach about? Who might he dine with? Who are the new Philistines, the new Samaritans, the new lepers? What “demons” would he try to cast out? Who is “Caesar” and what Empire (and its collaborators) would Jesus oppose? Who are the “least of ours?” What would he think of “Christianity” as he found it in our region?

## Session 2

### Reigniting Resistance: The Role of Prophetic Action in the Dominant Society

Two processions entered Jerusalem on [Palm Sunday]. The same question, the same alternative, faces those who would be faithful to Jesus today. Which procession are we in? Which procession do we want to be in?

~Marcus Borg, (*The Last Week*, p. 30)

If one could pose the question, “What does it mean to be a human being?” and Thoreau were allowed to answer, his answer would imply at least three things. First a refusal of the world as it stands. Second a recommitment to fundamentals. What does it mean for a human being to need a house? Food? Clothing? Is the prefabricated suburban box a human home? Third, an understanding that to stand before these fundamentals requires spirit. Thoreau called it awareness. This awareness is nearly a form of prayer, and our culture is nearly bereft of it. “Attention deficit” is a cultural disorder, a debasement of spirit, before it is an ailment in our children to be treated with Ritalin.

~Curtis White, (“The Spirit of Disobedience,”  
*Harper’s*, April 2006)

All Americans – not only those of faith – who care about our open society must learn to speak about [the Christian Right] with a new vocabulary, to give up passivity, to challenge aggressively this movement’s deluded appropriation of Christianity and to do everything possible to defend tolerance. The attacks by the movement on the rights and beliefs of Muslims, Jews, immigrants, gays, lesbians, women, scholars, scientists, those they dismiss as ‘nominal Christians,’ and those they brand with the curse of ‘secular humanist’ are an attack on all of us, on our values, our freedoms and ultimately our democracy. Tolerance is a virtue, but tolerance coupled with passivity is a vice.

~Chris Hedges, (*American Fascists*, p. 211)

The crisis is not only in our society. The crisis is in our churches. With notable exceptions, people of faith and churches in our land have failed to recognize and adequately respond to the idolatries that abound. The very identity of our churches has long been inseparable from the identity of the state. We have readily assimilated the values and priorities of U.S. culture. Thus, too often our churches know who we are and to whom we belong. For the churches, too, this is a *kairos* moment in which we are called to conversion, our structures, values, habits, and assumptions in need of basic transformation.

Instead of challenging the status quo, the church tends to reinforce, if not bless, things as they are, usually under the guise of being “politically neutral.” It accomplishes this by spiritualizing, privatizing, and generally undermining God’s option for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized. Issues of power, class, gender, and material interests contained in the biblical texts have been too often ignored, even suppressed.

~*On the Way: From Kairos to Jubilee*, 1994,  
a document created by the Kairos/USA working  
group formed in 1992.

### Questions for Thought and Discussion

*Jesus—*

Do you agree with Marcus Borg’s idea that our culture wars are actually “Jesus wars,” that we are fighting over the nature of guilt and punishment? Is “the Left” holding its own or even really engaged? What are some of the effects of this warfare on politics, society, and American views of Christianity? Is there any way to end this “war” or are human beings naturally inclined to guilt and punishment?

What was your childhood picture of Jesus? Was he a warrior returning to defeat evil? A teacher who inspires action? The lamb who takes away the sins of the world? What songs or stories resonated with you and remain a part of your image of Jesus?

What is more important to you: personally following Jesus’ vision for the world, expressed as compassion and justice, or sharing with others his unique qualities that make him worthy of emulation? How can adult theological “re-education” help us “reclaim the basis of Christian identity and formation” while dispelling earlier exclusive images of what Jesus means?

Do you accept Jesus Christ as your *political* Lord and Savior? What would doing so mean? Can we really de-emphasize “beliefs” about Jesus in favor of committing to follow his “way?” If the “church” is central to Christian life, how can it be reengaged or repurposed to accomplish both personal and political transformation?

Do Americans need the Kingdom of God/Divine Commonwealth? Do they want it? What are we willing to abandon in our civic faith (“The American Dream”) to fulfill God’s dream? Is Jesus’ passion at odds with American exceptionalism and individualism? Does “the way of the cross” inevitably conflict with “the American Way?” Can Christianity (of the emerging type) ever be “patriotic?”

*The Prophetic Imagination—*

Is (or would) “a community rooted in energizing memories and summoned by radical hopes a curiosity and a threat in [our consumer culture]”? Could Christianity be such a community again? How could a renewed progressive Christian vision be a “threat?”

Taking Walter Brueggemann’s hypothesis—“*the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us*”—at face value, is prophetic ministry **always** to be marginal (a voice in the minority or “in the wilderness”)? Can the task ever be finished? While the Christian Left is certainly critical, does it provide a compelling positive “alternative?”

Does social radicalism need the “nourishment” of theology, “sanctions deeper than human courage and good intentions,” to succeed? Is “doxology” necessary for justice and compassion—“to transfigure fear into energy?” If our activism is not rooted in faith commitments, how can we maintain a counter-cultural attitude across generations?

It is tempting to suggest that today, Empire is not only not listening but it has succeeded in supplying such a level of superficial palliation (“managed reality”) that the oppressed have lost the desire to cry out. Are we numbed to our bondage today? How is our Empire keeping the pretense that everything is all right alive? Do we have just enough freedom to complain that “no real grieving and no serious criticism” can take place? In other words, is “mobilizing people to their real restless grief” the key prophetic task today?

*The Last Week—*

The New Testament writers (and perhaps Jesus himself) appropriated and subverted the language and symbols of empire in offering their alternative vision. How could we do this today and what are the core terms of our Empire (America’s lexicon of domination) that we should coopt?

How are the three features of the traditional “domination system”—political oppression (or rule by a few), economic exploitation, and religious legitimization—at work in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America? What does our “normalcy of civilization” look like? What is the role of “the Church”—how is Christian theology used to justify the domination system? Don’t the prophetic themes of justice, prosperity, and security apply just as much to our situation today?

Are the “debt shoppers” of today the socioeconomic (and spiritual) equivalent of the “share croppers” of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine? How can we repent (change our practices and priorities) to find (or rediscover) the “way” (*hodos*)? How are issues of debt, income disparity, educational and employment opportunity, consumerism, access to healthcare, etc., theological concerns? What should individual Christians or progressive Christian congregations do?

### Session 3

#### One Nation and Her Gods: Should There Be “Prophetic Politics?”

We can love our nation... not blindly, but critically, call [it] back time and again to [its] own highest self-professed ideals and identities.

~Walter Wink, (*The Powers That Be*)

Let us march on ballot boxes until we send to our city councils, state legislatures, and the United States Congress men who will not fear to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.

For all of us today the battle is in our hands. The road ahead is not altogether a smooth one. There are no broad highways to lead us easily and inevitably to quick solutions. We must keep going.

~Martin Luther King, Jr. (Selma, Alabama, March 1965)

#### Questions for Thought and Discussion

What is *American* imperial theology today? Is it “religion, war, victory, peace” like it was in Roman times? If Jesus were to come today, how would he live out his counter-program of “religion, nonviolence, justice, peace?” Is that the role of “prophetic politics?”

How has the “myth of redemptive violence” not only shaped our political culture but also co-opted Christianity itself?

Walter Wink suggests that we think about the powers of our world as simultaneously institutional systems and the internal spiritual drive of these systems, even being sometimes demonic when oppression is great. They are the “personalities” of institutions without necessarily being “persons.” Do you find Wink’s idea about the Powers compelling? Useful? Is “recalling the Powers” to their created purpose in the world a more important role for the Church than personal salvation? If the Church should be focused on the latter, who or what will “recall” the Powers?

Did you find anything in the reading that helped illuminate the significant debates currently raging in politics? (whether Muslims should be banned from the United States; state legislatures creating religious exemptions to nondiscrimination laws for LGBT persons; creating a wall on the United States-Mexico border; how much power do corporations and their interests wield in our political system; whether and when Congress

should consider a replacement for the US Supreme Court vacancy [certainly a rich topic for next session], etc.)

Should clergy weigh in on social/political/economic debates from the pulpit, even if they are reasonably convinced that certain members of their congregations might object? When, if ever, do they have a *responsibility* to weigh in?

## Session 4

### The “In” Game: Unconditional Love and Unconventional Equality

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

~Paul’s Letter to the Galatians 3:28  
(NRSV)

I think fear is indigenous to empires... We always need an enemy... A well-defined enemy helps to justify the trappings of empire. It doesn’t matter who the enemy is as long as there is one. And so we move from one fear to another, one enemy to another. After the Berlin Wall fell in 1980, we were in a desperate search for new enemies. What we came up with were illegal aliens and gay and lesbian folks. But they couldn’t justify the military arsenal. Then after 9/11, we were off and running.

~Rev. John Fife  
(Interviewed in *Reflections*, Fall 2008)

Christianity along with other religions must either adapt to changing conditions and altered awareness of the human condition or risk becoming irrelevant, increasingly decadent, and merely reactionary

... adopting a justice lens involves intentionally viewing the world from the perspective of those who are made to suffer and are now rising up, as best they can, to resist their oppression.

~Marvin Ellison  
(*Same-Sex Marriage?*)

Jesus never issued a demand for uniformity. Rather, he beckoned people to follow with a promise of healing, transformation, and love – that he would make known to his disciples “the way of life.”

Diversity is more than a political condition; it is something Christians do. Christians pursue diversity because it models creation, embodies love, and through the related practice of reconciliation, aligns our lives with God’s dream of harmony.

Diversity is, after all, a foretaste of heaven. God’s dream here and now.

~Diana Butler Bass  
*(Christianity for the Rest of Us)*

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

Rosemary Radford Ruether contrasts “reform” with “resistance.” Do you agree with her assessment of the pace and consequences of reform versus the vigilance and energy of resistance when it comes to addressing inequality (this is certainly reminiscent of MLK’s frustration in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail cited by Kety Esquivel)?” How do we “transform” rather than “reform?”

What commonalities between the struggles, socio-political discourse, and the theological influences of justice movements (particularly feminism, immigrant rights, civil rights, and LGBT rights) do you find most compelling? Particularly with scriptural support, how can immigrants, the elderly, women, ethnic and racial minorities, and queer communities, better see their individual struggles as one great struggle for human justice (for “God’s dream”)? What is our particular role as progressive Christians in helping make those connections (“linkages”) obvious and natural to people without condescending?

Why is “sexual justice” so feared? How can we reorient Christianity to focus on the “diversity of human sexualities,” the “use and misuse of power” in sexual relationships, and the enhancement of the “dignity of persons” rather than the “sin of sex?”

How do we best overcome the “not like us” (Us vs. Other) mentality? How do we make diversity a virtue—an engine for justice (because the alternative—“just like us”—is both impractical and undesirable)—without reducing it to an empty slogan? How do we structure and nurture a “living and justice-making community?”

Ellison defines justice as “the virtue of seeking abundant life for all.” Does abundance for all always have to come at the expense of those who already experience it? Is that the underlying, universal tension? Does “justice for all” require constant struggle?

## Session 5

### American Idols: Capitalism, Consumption, and Corruption and the Path Toward Economic Justice

And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

~Luke 12:15  
(*NSRV*)

Time *may* be money, but one thing seems certain: money eats time. Forget the visions of sanctioned leisure: the view from the deck in St. Moritz, the wafer-thin TV screen. Consider the price. Sometimes, I want to say, money costs too much. We are impoverishing ourselves, our families, our communities—and yet we can’t stop ourselves. Worse, we don’t want to.

~Mark Slouka  
 (“Quitting the Paint Factory,” *Harper’s*,  
November 2004)

Consumerism is destroying us spiritually. It supports a socioeconomic paradigm that is profoundly unjust and destructive of human community. It hastens degradation of the natural environment and the coming of ecological catastrophes. It is an extreme form of idolatry. If ever Christianity needed to reassert its living message it is now.

~From Gordon Douglas and Ward McAfee  
 (“Consumerism” in *Resistance*)

Built on the background of the term [*aphiemi* – “release from” or “forgiveness of”] in Jubilee traditions, one can see that it is in social, political, and economic arenas that the sovereignty of God finds its primary expressions, breaking the stranglehold of the old order on those we have come to recognize as “the poor.”

~Sharon Ringe  
 (*Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee*)

Article 25:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including the food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness,

disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

~Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible....Hence the poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order.

~Gustavo Guitierrez  
(*The Power of the Poor in History*, quoted in Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*)

The great challenge of the twenty-first century is to raise people everywhere to a decent standard of living while preserving as much of the rest of life as possible.

~E. O. Wilson  
(*The Creation*)

Something deep within us recognizes that the true worth of creation can never be reduced only to its value in the human marketplace. And yet it is precisely the people...who try to reduce every value to a dollar value, those who try to measure beauty with a calculator – to whom we have given great authority in our national life and global affairs.

~Van Jones  
(*The Green Collar Economy*)

### Questions for Thought and Discussion

Do you agree with Douglass and McAfee that consumerism is the most fundamental challenge to Christianity today? Is consumerism the new dominant religion (are we really a *Consumerist Nation*)? Is “living well with abundance” or the “dilemma of plenty” the most important and thorny modern problem? Why is *American Idol*—and the whole consumptive, exploitive, cynical, and dehumanizing ethos of reality TV (including political news becoming ever more like a reality TV show)—more compelling and relevant than American Christianity?

How does consumerism impact justice? It is portrayed as choice—even freedom or liberty (pursuit of happiness now conflated with acquiring things), something everyone can aspire

to. However, does consumerism below most modern forms of economic, social, political, and spiritual injustice?

Many authors offer (or cite) a number of “alternatives” to our consumption economy, such as God’s model from Exodus, in which “sustenance” is supposed to *circulate* rather than *concentrate*, described by Myers. Is there an alternative to capitalism, or can we only tinker around the edges? What other models, including communitarianism, ecological civilization, or social, are appealing to you? Do any of these offer a way to “save” capitalism from consumption or do we need to abandon a system based on profit and growth altogether?

To paraphrase Myers: “having internalized imperial appetites and desires, can we even imagine life apart from the very system that enslaves us?”

Sabbath economics as described by Myers seeks to tie economic justice to environmental justice, in that the day of rest, the seventh year and the Jubilee, while leveling the economic playing field, also ensure that “our artificial human economy, with its addictive-compulsive tendencies, does not destroy the economy of nature.” Is there something practical in this idea, a way of letting nature rest so human beings can live more harmoniously on the planet and with each other? What about “the principle of the remainder” (Lev 19:9)? Is “eco-equity” (principally through access to the “bounties of the green economy”) a more practical model for elevating the poor and saving the planet than periodic redistribution?

Should progressive Christians oppose “debt” (especially consumer debt) as the root of all inequality? Again, the domination system points to debt as a critical tool of growth (even “freedom”) and, historically, consumer credit allowed millions of Americans to own cars, homes, etc., to enjoy the “American Dream.” But do both recent experience and our theology put this in question? What’s the alternative?

What should the role of Christianity or faith communities in general be in fanning these flames? Can we count on the pulpit? Paraphrasing Jones (who is referring to changing governments), do we need to “march into the halls of holiness and rewrite the rules” first?

What is the role of individual responsibility in all of this? Can churches play a unique role here? What about “corporate responsibility?” Is that a lost cause?

Ultimately, do we really just need to give each other and our planet more time and attention? Has our economic system (and the consumerist lifestyle) left both (human beings and the environment) behind, “functioning as if we have a disposable planet – and disposable people?”

## Session 6

### To Dream the Impossible Dream: Following the Prince of Peace

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the work of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

~Isaiah 2:3-4  
(*NSRV*)

There is, in fact, no other way to God for our time but through the enemy, for loving the enemy has become the key both to human survival in the age of terror and to personal transformation.

~Walter Wink  
(*Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*)

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

~Nelson Mandela

Today, we no longer have a choice between violence and non-violence; it is either non-violence, or non-existence.

~Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.  
(*Radio Address to India, All India Radio, March, 1959*)

This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every Statehouse, every office of the Federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. Our toil, resources and livelihood are all involved; so is the very structure of our society.

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

~President Dwight D. Eisenhower  
(*Farewell Address to the Nation, January 17, 1961*)

The utter failure of nearly all our religious institutions – whose texts are unequivocal about murder – to address the essence of war has rendered them useless.

~Chris Hedges  
(*War is Sin, posted on TruthDig.com on June 1, 2009*)

Unilateralism contains an existential moment when the rationalism of business sense is abandoned.

~Dorothee Soelle  
(*"Peace, Not Security" in Essential Writings*)

...the coming of the Kingdom is made clear and is "realized" in proportion as Christians themselves live the life of the Kingdom in circumstances of their own place and time.

~Thomas Merton  
(*"The Way of Nonviolence" in Essential Writings*)

Peace, like war, must be waged.

~Glenn Stassen, et al.  
(*Just Peacemaking*)

Questions for Thought and Discussion

When, if ever, should violence be exercised by the state? By an individual? Do you believe that wars can be just? Can we imagine a reality in which war or violence is never the answer?

To lift a line quoted by Hedges, "what does the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' really [or practically] mean?"

Do the churches with which you are familiar have an active peace-seeking or peace-promoting ministry? How well supported is it? What are its practical aims? Is it linked into a denominational or networked effort?

Are churches today providing the “solid metaphysical and religious basis both in being and in God” that Merton says Gandhi believed were necessary for the “fully consistent practice of non-violence?”

What are the differences between Gandhi’s (and King Jr.’s) *satyagraha* (truth force) and the “just peacemaking” approach advocated by Stassen, et al.? Is the latter more practical for today’s world or does it represent a retreat from the earlier philosophy? Is it simply an evolution of non-violent direct action? How do both of these approaches compare to Jesus’ “Third Way” (to use Wink’s term)?

Is the complete conflation of military and commercial (or “military/industrial”) interests—combined with the general failure of effective government or civic oversight—a sign that we’ve lost the struggle that Eisenhower warned about in his farewell address? What will these “powers” do when the current wars in Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and others are over?

Does our trust in “smart bombs” (if not “THE Bomb”) and the growing use of “human bombs” (martyrs) by our opponents suggest that Soelle’s analysis of our new gods (as faith in the power of violence) remains correct?

Is faith today, rather than being a deterrent to violence, war, and killing, actually a useful tool to get people to fight and encourage them in battle? Does believing that God is on your side or has your back (or will forgive you all your sins) allow you to overcome your natural aversion to killing other human beings?

Do we really have an opportunity to replace defense jobs with forms of a “vibrant peace time economy?” After all, communities near military industries and bases fight tooth and nail to prevent expenditure reductions. What can faith communities do?

Is there any conflict between Wink’s claim that loving the enemy is in our “deepest self-interest” and Merton’s that non-violence “excludes mere transient self-interest?”

Do you agree with Merton that “Christian non-violence... remains perhaps the only really effective way of transforming... human society?”

## Session 7

### **Embracing Discipleship – Building a Prophetic Movement for Social Change from Inside and Beyond the Emerging Church**

I do not believe that we may gain spiritually and those that surround us suffer. I believe in the essential unity of humanity and for that matter of all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one person gains spiritually, the whole world gains with that person, and if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent.

~Mohandas K. Gandhi  
(in *Essential Writings*, J. Dear ed.)

In the congregations I visited, politics was being redefined as communal practices of service, grassroots social transformation that works “up” toward larger change... these churches started with a theological vision of God’s reign, found their strength in spiritual disciplines of prayer and worship, and embarked on public involvement from a distinctly Christian sense of identity.

~Diana Butler Bass  
(in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*)

To right the social wrong by charity is like bailing out the ocean with a thimble... We must readjust our social machinery so that the producers of wealth become also owners of wealth...

~Ballington Booth

True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice.

~Martin Luther King, Jr.

We commit ourselves to seek a global covenant for justice in the economy and the earth in the household of God.

~Article 33 of the Accra Declaration of the  
World Alliance of Reformed Churches – 2004

## Questions for Thought and Discussion

In this age of science, religious pluralism, consumerism, cynicism, etc., how do you answer Marcus Borg's question: "Why be a Christian?" Does this question or its answers ever trouble you? Are you comfortable explaining your answer to other people? How can you share a gospel message that is good news in this world and transforming of lives?

Has exposure to or understanding of another religious tradition enriched your understanding or experience of Christianity?

Do you see yourself engaged in "liturgical politics?" Is your congregation active in this way?

Assuming that your congregation is a mix of conservative, centrist, and progressive views, how can we organize a larger movement that draws progressives together across congregations, denominations and regions? Without competing with traditional church communities, would this add something to the experience of being Christian?

Is it too late to reclaim Christian identity in the names of justice, peace, and tolerance? If not, what gives you hope in the journey? Should adherents of this form of Christianity be more vocal, demand a greater share of the national dialogue on faith? How?

Do you see statements of principle like the Accra Declaration having any impact on the focus or activities of your church specifically or the broader Christian community generally? What are some of the barriers to adoption of these high-level calls for justice and peace at the grassroots? Has your congregation adopted, endorsed, or emulated such a framework? Which one? Is it complete in your mind (i.e., does it reflect a comprehensive contemporary roadmap for the Kingdom of God or Divine Commonwealth)?

How could CATT, or small gatherings like it, play a role in building the prophetic movement for social transformation? Could you lead a CATT group? Should CATT groups always aim to be cross-denominational? What would you like to see changed for future groups?

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