

ROCK, SHEPHERD, FRIEND



ENRICHING OUR IMAGES OF GOD
A FOUR-SESSION STUDY

PREPARED BY THE GENERAL COMMISSION
on the STATUS AND ROLE OF WOMEN
OF THE UNITED Methodist Church

The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women of The United Methodist Church
Work Unit on Issue Development, Education and Advocacy

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ROCK SHEPHERD FRIEND:

ENRICHING OUR IMAGES OF GOD

This is a four session study designed to help Christians look at the ways we envision and talk about God.

- The first session explores the images of God we use now – in prayer, in creeds, in worship and in our daily spiritual life.
- The second session opens up the Bible to explore the rightness of biblical language about God.
- The third session is a look at the United Methodist Hymnal and its wide-ranging imagery for God in the hymns we sing in worship. It also looks at the creeds we use in worship.
- Session four gives seekers an opportunity to explore and expand their own images of God, both for corporate worship and for private prayer.

This leader's guide gives background material as well as a lesson plan for each session. The leader's role in this study is to facilitate discussion and to provide an environment that will enable group members to explore their images of God.

It also includes worksheets for group members. The worksheets should be duplicated so that each group member has one.

SESSION ONE:

EXPLORING OUR IMAGES OF GOD

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

J.B. Phillips wrote the book Your God Is Too Small in 1961. In it, he challenged Christians to take a careful look at how they understand God. He noted that when Christians cling too long to only their earliest images of God, they become blind to the richness and variety of ways in which God chooses to touch them now.

Phillips said, "Let us fling wide the doors and windows of our minds and make some attempt to appreciate the 'size' of God."

Other theologians have expressed similar concerns about the ways we envision God. Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Catherine Gonzalez are some who have written and taught widely about God's size, shape and form.

Explain to participants that this four-session study is an attempt to do just that – to fling open windows and doors so that they may see the many ways, the many forms, and the many faces of the God who seeks them.

The first session is an exploratory one. It contains some exercises for helping participants become acquainted with one another, in case members of the study group are new to each other.

SESSION PLAN

1. Ask group members to find a partner and tell each other the following about themselves: Give their name, their reaction to the purpose of this first study session, and their most familiar image of God.
2. Have the partners introduce each other briefly to the entire group, giving their name, a one sentence summary of their partner's reaction, and their partner's most familiar image of God.
3. Hand out two sheets of construction paper to each participant, along with crayons or magic markers. Ask each to answer the following questions on the first sheet of paper:
4. What is your earliest memory of God?
 - a. Can you remember a time when you were afraid and needed God's help?
 - b. Can you remember a time when you felt closest to God?
 - c. When was the time you felt most alone, deserted by God?
 - d. Who has been a friend-in-faith, a spiritual companion, to you on your faith journey?
5. Ask them to draw, on the other sheet of paper, two images of God. First, have them draw their earliest image of God. Second, have them draw how they envision God now.
6. Call the group back together. If your group is small enough, have each person share their answers to the faith journey questions and their two drawings of God. If time does not permit the group to share as a whole, break down into two or more groups and share.
7. As a total group, have individuals call out as many ways of talking about God as they can. List these on newsprint as they are mentioned. See how many different images the group can come up with, based on their previous sharing and their own experience.

8. Read the following excerpt from “Tell Me What Your God Looks Like,” a sermon by The Reverend Sue Anne Steffey Morrow, Associate Dean of the Chapel at Princeton University. (Currently at The Lawrenceville School: www.lawrenceville.org).

Celie and Shug, two women in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple who grow to become friends, are talking on the porch one night when Shug looks at Celie and asks her the question, “Tell me what your God looks like.”

“Tell me what your God looks like.” What images of God operate in your life – is God someone with a large protective shoulder to lead against, or is God a strong warrior who will help you fight your way through? Does your image of God give God great majesty, high and lifted up, stained glass leaving you awe-struck, or does your image keep God close to your heart? Does God hold you in an embrace, soothe you and comfort you through it all? What face is on your image of God?

Is your God cold and forthright, ready to chew you out for each misdemeanor, or is your God’s face calming and capricious with eyes that are deep with love? Maybe your God is a grand ethicist seeking justice and peace, a balance in the nature’s environment, the anti-nuclear freeze. Maybe your image of God is not human like those I have mentioned; maybe it is God as a cave or a harbor, a place of refuge or a place of fire? Is your God an animal, stalking or sniffing us out like prey, or as the Psalmist pictures God, like a great bird with wings under which we might hide?

“Tell me what your God looks like,” and whether your images are sufficient to get you through the long tough days and dark nights...

Celie [in The Color Purple] ...had been so badly abused by all the men in her life [that] she needed to be able to imagine God in a way other than male, so Shug paints another picture of God for Celie. Shug pictures God ‘who is inside and outside manifesting love even when you’re not looking – in trees and birds and other people, when you’re sitting quiet or when you’re feeling like a motherless child... “So Celie,” Shug says, “Whenever you are trying to pray and a man plops himself on the end of that prayer, tell him to get lost, conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.”

For most of us the situation is not as extreme as it is for Celie, but I am suggesting that we keep our eyes open, our ears, minds and hearts [open] to changes in our experience that might affect our image of God.

“Tell me what your God Looks like.”

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When you have finished reading this excerpt, allow time for participants to respond to the notion that changes in our life experience influence and change our image of God. Ask if anyone has an experience illustrating this point that they would share with the group.

9. Share with participants, by way of closing, that this is what they have been doing in this session and will be doing in the next three – telling each other what their God looks like.
10. Thank participants for sharing with each other. Let them know that next week’s session will look at various biblical images of God.
11. Share the first stanza of #113 in the United Methodist Hymnal and close with a prayer.

SESSION TWO:

UNCOVERING BIBLICAL IMAGES OF GOD

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

Imagery for God in the Bible is rich, expansive, and provocative. In the Old Testament, Israel's language about God reflects two participants that must be held in tension.

- First, this Hebrew god is worshipped in sharp contrast with the goddess worship prevalent in the Ancient Near East at the time. Because of this, there is frequent reference to God as male.
- As the same time, God is not specified or limited by this masculinity. God's masculine character is not what Israel worships; that would be idolatry. The important thing about the Hebrew god was that this god acts in Israel's (and in our) history.

In the New Testament, the organizing center of Jesus' teaching and ministry is the inbreaking of the dominion of God. Language about God is focused on describing the realm of God. After his death, Jesus himself becomes the focus of language about God. And, after the resurrection and at Pentecost, Christians experienced God's redeeming presence with them as the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus, language about God becomes language about the Spirit.

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Before you lead this session, look up the Bible references of the page entitled "Biblical Images of God." Study those that interest you. What biblical images do you know that were left out? Do any of these passages widen your own image of God?

SESSION PLAN

1. Share with participants the information under "Background Material." Follow up any discussion this information generates.
2. Hand out to each participant the worksheet "Biblical Images of God." Have them look up the Bible passages and write down the varied images of God they discover.
3. Bring the group together to go over these biblical images. Discuss and briefly share:
 - a. When you pray or think about God, which of these images do you use?
 - b. Are these images ever used in services of worship in your church?
 - c. How do you feel about these images of God? Are there biblical images you can think of that are not on the list? Do any of these passages widen your own image of God?
4. Divide the group into four subgroups. Have each subgroup take one of the biblical images of God and ask them to write one of the following using that biblical image: a prayer, a corporate call to worship, a litany of thanksgiving, and a responsive reading.
5. Share these by using each of them in a time of closing worship. Share stanza 2 of #113 from the United Methodist Hymnal.

WORKSHEET: SESSION TWO

Biblical Images of God

Read the entire text of the hymn #113 in the United Methodist Hymnal, "Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud." Then look up some of the following Bible passages of the different names, images or faces of God. List as many as you can think of.

Look at these passages and list the names and images of God you discovered in these Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 32:18	II Corinthians 3:17	Revelation 15:3
Psalms 23:1	Exodus 3:13-14	Psalms 68:5
Matthew 6:9	Hebrews 12:29	1 John 1:5
Psalms 84:11	Psalms 18:2	Isaiah 42:14
Psalms 7:8	Isaiah 66:13	1 John 4:8
Isaiah 64:8	Psalms 40:17	Psalms 61:3-4

SESSION THREE

SINGING THE NAMES OF GOD: CREEDS AND HYMNS OF THE CHURCH

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The hymns and songs of the church reflect a rich history of corporate worship, that holy time and space where the faith community gathers to praise God, to pray, to seek forgiveness, to hear the Word, and to receive strength for the faith journey.

Throughout history, as different images of God have been lifted up in the faith community, those images of God have also appeared in the hymns, prayers and creeds of the church at worship.

As the Reverends Sharon Emswiler and Tom Neuffer note in Women & Worship,

“A study of the history of hymnody quickly shows that churches have not been afraid to change hymns down through history for various reasons; to make them more meaningful, to shorten them, or to make them more contemporary. Even a comparison of the same hymn in several different hymnals will show many changes the text of a hymn has undergone. Often different verses and different words within a verse are found in these hymnals.”

The same evolutionary process effects the creeds of the church. Creeds are statements of the journey of faith of the body of Christ and are used in similar ways to hymns during worship.

SESSION PLAN

1. Go over the background material to ensure that participants are starting with some common understanding of the development of hymns and creeds. Ask for any reactions, question or comments about the material.
2. Ask the group to list all the names and titles for God they can remember from hymns and creeds. As they name them, write them on newsprint. See how many the group can come up with.
3. Hand out the worksheet entitled, “Hymns of the Church.” Note to participants that several hymn titles and numbers are listed under the different categories of the United Methodist Hymnal. Divide the group into teams to look up hymns under each category and identify all the names, titles, and attributes for God that each hymn mentions.
4. Have the group come back together and share the list. You might have several categories on newsprint under which to list these – human names and attributes, images from nature, images of power, images of tenderness, images of vulnerability, etc. Print the names and attributes as they are called out. Let the group help you decide under which category to list each image. Talk about the images after they are shared. Which are the “traditional?” Which are surprising? Which speak most strongly? Which are oddest, the strangest or uncomfortable sounding?
5. Distribute the sheet entitled, “Creeds of the Church.” Note that on it are four creeds of the church: “The Apostles’ Creed,” “A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada,” excerpts from “A Woman’s Creed,” written by Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, and “An Affirmation from 1 Corinthians 15 and Colossians 1.”

Ask participants to take a pen or pencil and mark each creed this way: underline the words that are meaningful; circle words that are puzzling; put an x on words that are not personally meaningful.

6. After individuals have had a chance to reflect on these creeds, ask them to work in pairs or groups of three to share what they discovered about themselves, about God, and about faith, as they reviewed each of these creeds. If time permits, ask each pair or group to share with the whole group one or two insights gained from their conversations together.
7. Close by affirming the faith together with the United Church of Canada creed. Sing together either Hymn #105 – “God of Many Names,” or #113 – “Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud.”

WORKSHEET: SESSION THREE

Hymns of the Church

Praise and Thanksgiving

- 61 – Come, Thou Almighty King
- 88 – Maker, in Whom We Live
- 101 – From All That Dwell Below the Skies

God's Nature

- 104 – Praising God of Many Names
- 105 – God of Many Names
- 109 – Creating God, Your Fingers Trace
- 111 – How Can We Name a Love
- 113 – Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud
- 115 – How Like a Gentle Spirit
- 116 – The God of Abraham Praise
- 118 – The Care the Eagle Gives Her Young

Providence

- 127 – Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah
- 133 – Leaning on the Everlasting Arms
- 136 – The Lord's My Shepherd, I'll Not Want

In Praise of Christ

- 164 – Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life
- 174 – His Name Is Wonderful
- 180 – Jesús Es Mi Rey Soberano
- 184 – Of the Father's Love Begotten
- 188 – Christ Is the World's True Light

Promised Coming

- 204 – Emmanuel, Emmanuel
- 211 – O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

Birth and Baptism

- 222 – Niño Lindo
- 240 – Hark! the Herald Angels Sing
- 247 – O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright

Life and Teaching

- 257 – We Meet You, O Christ
- 263 – When Jesus the Healer Passed Through Galilee

Passion and Death

- 327 – Crown Him with Many Crowns

Assurance

- 378 – Amazing Grace
- 381 – Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us

Rebirth and the New Creation

- 384 – Love Divine, All Loves Excelling

Social Holiness

- 443 – O God Who Shaped Creation
- 447 – O Parent, by Whose Name

Prayer, Trust, Hope

- 465 – Holy Spirit, Truth Divine
- 466 – An Invitation to Christ
- 506 – Wellspring of Wisdom

Strength in Tribulation

- 523 – Saranam, Saranam
- 526 – What a Friend We Have in Jesus

Born of the Spirit

- 538 – Wind Who Makes All Winds That Blow
- 543 – O Breath of Life

Eucharist

- 624 – Bread of the World
- 630 – Become to Us the Living Bread
- 638 – This Is the Feast of Victory

Morning & Evening

- 679 – O Splendor of God's Glory Bright
- 684 – Christ, Mighty Savior
- 686 – O Gladsome Light

WORKSHEET: SESSION THREE

The Apostle's Creed, Traditional

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord; who was
conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father
Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the
dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

A Woman's Creed (*selected excerpts*)

I believe in God
Who created woman and man in God's own image,
Who created the world
And gave both sexes the care of the earth.
I believe in Jesus
Who discussed theology with a woman at a well
And first confided in her
His messiahship
Who motivated her to go and tell her great news to
the city.
I believe in Jesus
Who spoke of himself as a mother hen
Who would gather her chicks
Under her wings.

I believe in the wholeness of the savior
In whom there is neither
Jew nor Greek
slave nor free
male nor female
for we are all one in salvation.

A Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada

We are not alone, we live in God's world.
We believe in God who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the church: to celebrate God's presence, to love and serve others, to seek justice and
resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Affirmation from 1 Corinthians 15:1–6 and Colossians 1:15–20

Leader: This is the good news which we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved:

People: Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared first to the women, then
to Peter and the Twelve, and then to many faithful witnesses.

We believe Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God, the firstborn of all creation, the firstborn from the
dead, in whom all things hold together, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell by the power of the
Spirit.

Christ is the head of the body, the church, and by the blood of the cross reconciles all things to God. Amen.

SESSION FOUR

EXPANDING OUR IMAGES OF GOD

BACKGROUND MATERIALS

In 1983, the Washington Post ran the results of a poll asking Americans this question, “When you think about God, how likely are certain images to come to mind?” In the list, pollsters included such attributes as creator, liberator, mother, master and spouse.

In that poll, Americans were most likely to think of God as creator (80%), healer (68%), friend (61%), and father (61%). They were least likely to think of God as lover (41%), mother (24%), or spouse (16%).

Davelyn Vignaud compiled for the General Board of Discipleship a list of names, titles and phrases applied to God. That two-page list contains more than 200 names and phrases, many of them biblical, many of them from the church’s tradition-history of names for God.

This session is an invitation to participants to experiment with unfamiliar names and images of God, to expand their understandings of God, and to grow into new faith relationships with God and with one another.

SESSION PLAN

1. Share the above background information with the group. Be gentle with people; assure them that this session is an invitation to do some experimentation and growing in faith.
2. Distribute the worksheet for Session 4. Read through with the group the short definitions of grace as understood by John Wesley in “Wesley’s Notations of God’s Grace.” Then ask the group to lift up names and images of God that fit each understanding – prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace. List these on newsprint. Encourage people to use new images and names they have come across in the past three sessions of study.
3. Share the statement on the worksheet “Tell me What Your God Looks Like” by The Reverend Sue Anne Steffey Morrow.
4. Give each participant time to reflect for a few moments on this statement. Have them answer the questions following the statement.
5. Share reactions to the statement and answers to the questions with the whole group. Make this a time of invitation and sharing. Be sensitive to the fact that this may be more difficult for some people. Lead the discussion gently.
6. Sharon Emsviler and Tom Neuffer, United Methodist Clergy in the Illinois Conference and authors of Women & Worship, talk about how their own efforts to expand their images of God have enriched both their public and private worship. They write about the benefits of “experimenting” by using different images for God each week for their own personal meditation. One week they might pray to “Light,” another week to “Rock,” another to “Father,” and another to “Mother.” Share this with the group.
7. Gather participants into a circle in chairs. Invite participants to “center down” and to begin to reflect on their journey with God over the past four sessions. Invite members to share any changes, insights, surprises, or challenges to their spiritual life during this study. Spend a few minutes reviewing some of the major themes of the past four sessions – how we form our images of God and how the Bible informs that process, the place of hymns and creeds in our spiritual development, and ways to grow in our relationship with God through new images.

8. After all who wish have had a chance to speak and interact, place an open Bible in the middle of the circle and light a candle. Invite participants to sit quietly by themselves for a few moments and to focus on one image of God – particularly one that is new or unfamiliar to them. Guide them to spend some time in silent prayer with that particular image of God.
9. Let the participants know that the prayer time will end with a group benediction which you will start by saying, “We pray these things in the name of God, who is _____.” Each person in turn will end the prayer by saying the same line, adding the image or name of God that she or he has focused on for prayer that evening.
10. Close this session by singing a quiet, familiar hymn such as “Kum Ba Yah, My Lord” or “Amazing Grace.”
11. Thank the participants for their spirit of adventure, trust, and risk during this study. Encourage and invite them to continue to “fling wide the doors and windows” of their hearts and minds as they continue along their faith journey.

WORKSHEET: SESSION FOUR

Wesley's Notations of God's Grace

These are summary statements of John Wesley's thinking on grace. He differentiated among three different functions or kinds of grace.

Prevenient Grace

We acknowledge God's prevenient grace, the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses.

Justifying Grace

We believe God reaches out to the repentant believer in justifying grace with accepting and pardoning love. This process of justification and new birth is often referred to as conversion. Such a change may be sudden and dramatic, or gradual and cumulative.

Sanctifying Grace

We hold that the wonder of God's acceptance and pardon does not end God's saving work, but continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor.

Tell Me What Your God Looks Like

Tell me what your God looks like. This is not simply an exercise in our imagination for God's sake. How we envision God is of course intimately connected to how we see one another, how we look at one another face-to-face, how we act toward each other.

To see God as hungering after righteousness is to recognize our God-given responsibility to those who are hungry. To picture God as feminine alters the way we relate to one another, men and women, the respect we show one another, the possibility for mutual love.

To envision God [as a God] who suffers is to see God in the courage of a four year old facing leukemia. To know God as all wisdom is to see God in one who may be frail physically but has the accumulated wisdom of years. To see God in a bright September afternoon is to imagine this earth as a precious gift to protect. To consider God bent on all humanity is to bend ourselves over for all who surround us.

Tell me what your God looks like. Look around. Tell me you see love incarnate in all that has life.

Sue Anne Steffey Morrow

What do you think of Sue Anne's statement that "how we envision God is of course intimately connected to how we see one another, how we look at one another face-to-face, how we act toward each other?"

What difference would it make in your relationships with other people to envision God as both masculine and feminine? What difference would it make in your relationships with the earth to envision God in terms of nature? What difference would it make in relationship to power if we envision God as a child, or as a wise old woman or man?

Sallie McFague, former dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School, says that "Finally, of course, we must recognize that no language about God is adequate. Religious language begins and ends in silence." What do you think of this statement?

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THE COVER

The images of God represented in the mandala include the Trinity (three interlocking rings in the center), God as Father, God as Mother, God as Savior (the cross within the small upper circle), God as Shepherd (the shepherd's crooks), God as Holy Spirit (the descending doves), God as King (the crown), and God as fire (the cross of flames).

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Rebecca W. Waldrop has been a needlework designer for 20 years. She serves on the staff of the Scarritt-Bennett Center in Nashville, TN in the office of Spiritual Formation and Worship. Becky attended the Academy of Spiritual Formation. She is a member of the Fellowship of United Methodists in Music and Worship Arts.