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## Study guide

# “Do you see God in me?”

*How Lutherans engage in difficult conversations*

By Robert C. Blezard

“Can we talk?” the late comedienne Joan Rivers used to ask in her stand-up routines. Posing that question to today’s polarized culture, the answer is increasingly “no.” What passes for civil discourse is frequently anything but civil. As a result, many important conversations are either not taking place or aren’t being very productive. But as people of faith, we can find a better way.

### EXERCISE 1: MY CONTROVERSIAL CONVERSATIONS

As a study group, share your experiences of engaging others in discussion about important topics of the day, especially controversial topics and conversations with those who hold a different viewpoint. Discuss:

- Which topics of the day bring out the most passion in you, and why?
- Do you consider yourself reasonably well informed on those topics? Explain.
- Are there people in your circle of family or friends that hold similar viewpoints with whom you can talk about these topics? How do those discussions go? What about friends or family who hold differing opinions? Describe how those conversations go.
- What difficulties have you encountered in discussing controversial matters with people who disagree with you? How do you handle those difficulties?
- What’s the “worst” conversation you can remember having about a controversial subject? Where did it go wrong?
- Have you ever avoided talking with certain people about topics because you know it will not go well? Can you share about that experience?

### EXERCISE 2: LISTENING SKILLS

The old saying that we tell kindergartners might be wise for grown-ups to remember: “God gave us two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we talk.” Listening is more than simply hearing. Listening involves hearing with the intention of deeply and completely understanding not only the information the other person is relaying, but also discerning and respecting their personal connection and feelings about the topic. Listening is a skill that can be practiced.

- Have you ever tried to practice that old saying—listen twice as much as you talk? What wisdom do you see in the idea? Do you ever wish that everybody would practice it?



# Study guide: “Do you see God in me?”

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- When have you felt “heard” but not “listened to”? How would you characterize the difference?
- When have you felt both “heard” and “listened to”? What was it about the conversation that led you to feel that way? What was it about the person you were talking to? Together how did you conduct the conversation?
- How well do you “listen” to others? How could you improve?
- Consider these “good listening” tips:
  - Before responding with your viewpoint, seek to understand fully what they are saying and why.
  - Never interrupt someone. Give them time to finish.
  - Ask clarifying questions in a calm, polite voice.
  - Rephrase back to them what you heard, as in, “If I understand you correctly, you’re saying ....” This lets them know you are really listening, and it gives them a chance to correct any misunderstandings.
  - When you respond with your viewpoint, do so calmly and respectfully. Be sure to challenge the information or viewpoint, and *not* the person.

## EXERCISE 3: VERBAL WARFARE

It’s hard to have a discussion today. Have you noticed that “discussions” of social topics often denigrate into shouting matches? Why do you think that is?

Perhaps taking their cue from highly political talk shows on radio, cable and TV, many people today engage not in conversation but in verbal warfare. Commentors actually boost their ratings by not merely arguing a point of view but also denigrating, demonizing, insulting and dismissing people who hold another opinion. Some of the signs of verbal warfare include:

- Asserting that one side is entirely right, the other side is entirely wrong, and there is no middle ground.
- Refusing to acknowledge that the other side has any good points in their argument.
- Insulting and undercutting those who disagree, even asserting that opponents have no right to challenge the view.
- Interrupting and shouting down their conversation partner.
- Using anger and outrage as a way to dominate the discussion.
- Using misinformation, falsehoods or half-truths to make their point.

Discuss:

- Have you witnessed verbal warfare? Have you engaged in it?

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- Is verbal warfare productive? What do you think its goal is?
- What strategies can you use to avoid being drawn into verbal warfare?
- Can you think of ways you can avoid being a verbal warrior yourself?

## EXERCISE 4: RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

In a military command, rules of engagement describe how, why and under what circumstances and limitations force can be employed. The rules may allow certain weapons or tactics while forbidding others.

Would “rules of engagement” agreed to in advance by both parties in a debate or conversation help bring about a more productive talk? Why or why not?

Good rules of engagement for conversation may include:

- No interrupting—give one another time to finish.
- No shouting. Everyone has to use what elementary school teachers call “your indoor voice.”
- No name-calling. Stick to the issues and information.

As a study group, draft a set of guidelines for constructive conversations. Test them out in congregational discussions of issues.

## EXERCISE 5: US VS. THEM

In giving us the two most important commandments, Jesus told us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31). He also told us to love, not hate, our enemies (Matthew 5:44).

- Considering these teachings of Jesus, how should we view and engage other people generally?
- How should we view and engage people with whom we disagree?
- How should we consider those who are different from us in religion, language, culture, race, ethnic heritage and sexual identity? What are some words that come to mind as you think about this?
- For what reasons is dividing people into categories of “us” and “them” inconsistent with Jesus’ teaching?
- How do you explain the human tendency to divide people into “us” and “them”? What do people accomplish by doing so?
- When we have “us” and “them,” which side is usually the “right” or “good” side? Why?
- Does God love and cherish all people?
- What are some constructive alternative ways to view people who are different from us other than using “us” and “them”?

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## EXERCISE 6: SPECKS AND LOGS

Read Luke 6:41-42, where Jesus teaches us that it's sometimes easier to see the “speck” in our neighbor's eye than to see the “log” in our own. Moreover, we often want to remove the speck from our friend's eye while ignoring the log in our own eye. After reading the passage several times, discuss:

- In what way is Jesus describing (Luke 6:41-42) the common condition of human self-blindness? The human condition of judgment of others without self-examination? When have you witnessed or experienced this?
- How would Jesus' teaching apply when it comes to seeing the flaws and problems of those we dislike, but not in ourselves?
- Why might it be good to keep this teaching in mind when judging and conversing with people of different viewpoints? What would be a good guideline to keep in mind to do so?
- When it comes to discussion of institutional racism in the United States, how might Jesus' teaching apply? To what degree do many white people have a blindness to white privilege and racism? What could they learn?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do some people put down and demean others? Is it a way of making them feel better about themselves?
- Jesus commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31). Why is this so hard to do? Why is it easier to dislike or even hate our neighbors who are different from us in some way? Are there ways that you make it hard for others to love you? How can we better love our hard-to-love neighbors?
- It's sometimes hard to engage in productive discussions about sensitive topics, but what are the consequences if we avoid those conversations altogether? Meanwhile, if we can work through the awkwardness and difficulty, what can be accomplished if we share ideas and come to new understandings about our positions and those of the people around us?
- To apply an old slogan to the issue of engaging in difficult conversations, “What would Jesus do?”
- What is the difference between hearing and listening? In conversations with those who hold differing opinions than us, how can we not only “hear” what they say, but intently “listen” to them? Can we encourage them to do the same? What would be the result?
- What does it mean to you that we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves? How should that understanding guide our conversations with those who are different from us?

# "DO YOU SEE GOD IN ME?"

*HOW LUTHERANS ENGAGE  
IN DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS*

*By JENNIFER BRINGLE*

With a global pandemic, a tumultuous election and social justice issues coming to the fore over the past year, many have found themselves engaged in difficult conversations with family, friends, parishioners and even total strangers. These discussions can sometimes be productive, but they can also lead to hurt feelings, misunderstandings and disagreements.

“Things have gotten pretty charged this past year in a lot of different ways in our area,” said Seth Nelson, pastor of Faith Lutheran Church in Ronan, Mont. “People come charged into most situations—they know what they think and they know how to demonize the other side.”

In a world shaped by 24-hour cable news, social media and misinformation spread online, how can Lutherans cut through the noise and speak to each other with civility, compassion and understanding?

People across our church frequently engage in difficult conversations. How can we approach sensitive topics from a faith-based perspective and facilitate discussions in which we truly listen to each other—discussions that bring us closer rather than drive us apart?

### Political debates

Sarah Trone Garriott never imagined she’d receive hate mail for reading a prayer. Trone Garriott—an Iowa state senator and director for interfaith engagement at the Des Moines Area Religious Council—regularly reads prayers written by constituents of all faiths. Last February, she shared one written by a Muslim constituent.

“This is important to me and the work I do,” said Trone Garriott, an ELCA pastor who represents the



Photo: Courtesy of Sarah Trone Garriott

***“IT’S REALLY GOOD TO HAVE THOSE EXPERIENCES OF SEEING LIFE FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, BEING A LITTLE UNCOMFORTABLE.”***

*SARAH TRONE GARRIOTT*

state’s 22nd Senate district. “It’s important that we’re having prayer in the Iowa State Senate that’s reflective of all people in Iowa, because we have religious freedom and that applies to everyone.”

Initially she received no pushback, but a video of the reading that she shared online made its way to an anti-Muslim website, sparking a flurry of angry emails, comments and letters. Trone Garriott was dismayed by that response, but the moment also opened a dialogue with a Senate colleague who also expressed disapproval of the prayer reading.

“We ended up having a lot of conversations over the course of the year,” she said. “He doesn’t have women ministers in his tradition, and he said he wanted to hear me preach and came out for worship. We went to coffee afterward, and he told me he was really bothered by me sharing that poem because, to him, the name ‘Allah’ represents something other than God.”

Trone Garriott conceded that sitting down one-on-one with someone of an opposing viewpoint may be hard, but it also can help people understand each other better.

“It’s really good to have those experiences of seeing life from a different perspective, being a little uncomfortable,” she said. “And that gets you to a place where you are engaging with people who are different from you and having those hard conversations.”

Nelson also understands the importance of seeing people as individuals rather than members of one political party or group. The pastor of a “purple congregation” that skews slightly more conservative,

Photo: Will Nunnally/ELCA



***“THE THING I TRY TO PRACTICE IN CHURCH IS TO SPEAK TO ISSUES WITHOUT MAKING IT PARTISAN.”***

*SETH NELSON*



Nelson tries to approach controversial topics in a way that allows Faith's members to see issues on a more personal level.

"They used to say all politics is local, and I'm a firm believer that all ministry is local," he said. "Our politics have become incredibly national—the leaders we send to Washington are more representative of their party vote than their state vote. The more we can localize it and say, 'What are our concerns here and how do we fit in this?' the more likely we are to see things in a less partisan way."

Nelson said minimizing the partisan mentality helps defuse the "us-versus-them" thinking that dominates mass media and social media platforms.

"The thing I try to practice in church is to speak to issues without making it partisan," he said. "The big draw is to point fingers all the time, and I see that most

on cable news networks and on social media. But to fuel that, you need a bad guy on one side, and that gets really awkward in small towns and small churches."

### **Race relations**

Since the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and other people of color sparked protests and renewed calls for racial justice last summer, many people in the United States have engaged, and are continuing to engage, in difficult conversations about race and in anti-racism work.

For Americans of African descent such as Kwame Pitts, who leads a predominantly white congregation as transitional pastor of Crossroads Lutheran Church in Amherst, N.Y., those conversations are long overdue. "When we are talking about systemic racism and



Photo: Courtesy of Kwame Pitts



***"IT GOES BEYOND THE GENERAL SURFACE—IT'S GETTING DOWN TO THE DIRTY AND DOING THE WORK TO UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER."***

*KWAME PITTS*

oppression, people of European descent have not had frank and open conversations with each other about the nation's original sin, which is racism," she said.

To make progress in discussions about race, Pitts argued, white people must be not only open to having these difficult conversations but also willing to look hard at themselves and the history of the institutions they are part of, including the church.

That means "first of all, acknowledging that, yes, we have participated with the empire, that we have been racist, that we have participated in homophobia, transphobia, all those things, and then [doing] what we call 'white people work,'" she said.

Such work includes recognizing things one may need to change about their own complicity in those systems and acknowledging mistakes made in the



Photo: Courtesy of Aaron Fuller



***“AS A CHAPLAIN, MY FIRST STEP IS TO SIMPLY LISTEN.”***

*AARON FULLER*

past. It also means truly listening to and understanding the experiences of Black Americans, which is critical for dismantling both systemic and overt racism.

“We have to go past ‘love your neighbor,’” she said. “It goes beyond the general surface—it’s getting down to the dirty and doing the work to understand each other.”

Seeing each other as children of God, Pitts said, will help make these conversations not only possible but successful.

“Do you see God in me?” she asked. “Because if you see God in me, then there’s hope. But if you look at me and start questioning my humanity, there’s no hope.”

### **Responding to trauma**

Taking the time to listen is a major aspect of the ministry of chaplains, particularly those who work with the military and first responders. Dealing with trauma—and post-traumatic stress—can lead to an overwhelming sense of loneliness and isolation. For individuals struggling with those feelings, the first step to recovery can often be simply having someone acknowledge what they’re going through.

“There is a shift in people where it goes from ‘nobody understands what I did,’ to ‘nobody understands me’—the rejection of the person, which is a form of shame,” said Aaron Fuller, a bi-vocational pastor serving as a U.S. Navy Reserve chaplain. “A lot of the ministry I do is trying to remind people that their story needs to be heard [but that], at the end of the day, they’re not their story.”

Hearing those stories, Fuller said, is part of his role as a chaplain: “That’s where it differs from my ministry as a pastor—as a pastor, I feel the expectation that I have to speak. As a chaplain, my first step is to simply listen.”

Megan Rohrer, who responded to traumatic deaths in their (preferred pronoun) role as chaplain for the San Francisco Police Department, echoed Fuller’s observation: being able to say the right thing is less important than offering a sympathetic ear.

“The interesting thing about trauma and what happens in the midst of grief is [that] our cognitive ability limits what we’re allowed to take in,” Rohrer said. “I don’t have to be everything for someone in that moment—I was the first one they encountered in the most stressful situations, but most people, neurologically, don’t have the capacity to convert to a new religion or take in everything.”

Rohrer said ministering in moments of crisis is less about what you say than how your presence and support affect someone. “They don’t remember what you said but how you made them feel,” they said. “My goal was to make them feel they’re not alone in the hardest time in their lives.”

Rohrer and Fuller both pointed out that active listening can create a safe space where those dealing with trauma can process their feelings and heal.



Photo: Makyla Rohrer

***“IT’S NOT WITH THE PURPOSE OF WINNING AN ARGUMENT, BUT TO REMIND THEM THAT GOD’S CREATIVITY IS BIGGER THAN THEY REALIZE.”***

*MEGAN ROHRER*

“We’re listening, but it’s not just listening for listening’s sake,” Fuller said. “We’re listening for context—it’s for understanding, and cross-cultural confidence becomes really important in how I understand the person’s narrative and their issues.”

As a police chaplain, Rohrer also helped people make their voices heard. In addition to blessing badges and praying for officers, Rohrer served on an executive



committee that developed a plan for bias-free policing and participated in a forum at which San Francisco Police Chief William Scott apologized for unjust policing of the LGBTQIA+ community. They also served as support staff for the police during nonviolent protests in the city, providing logistical support and serving as a barrier between protesters and counterprotesters.

“The work I’ve done in San Francisco has been everything from giant protests about white supremacy to tiny protests about one issue on one block,” they said. “In those situations, I try to be someone centered in my faith and dignity in God, so that no matter what anyone says during a counterprotest, I’m representing the civility of God.”

Rohrer is well-suited for facilitating conversations of social change. They are the first openly transgender bishop to serve in a major Christian denomination in the United States, having been elected by the Sierra Pacific Synod last May. And since coming out as transgender more than two decades ago, Rohrer has had numerous difficult conversations with people about their gender identity and faith. “I was born and raised in Sioux Falls, S.D., where it may be illegal for me to go to the bathroom or get health care in certain spaces,” they said.

In challenging discussions, Rohrer tries “to listen to people and what they’re communicating and then thank

them for communicating with me. Then I bring them to Scripture and stories of Jesus, reminding them that God loves me and claims me.

“And it’s not with the purpose of winning an argument, but to remind them that God’s creativity is bigger than they realize.”

Taking a faith-based approach to these conversations, Rohrer said, has helped people see them as not just a transgender person but a fellow child of God. Rohrer reported that some people have apologized for judging them initially, adding, “I would really encourage people to notice when others have changed their mind.”

No matter how difficult these conversations may be—whether they center on politics, race, trauma or identity—Rohrer believes they are worth the hard work and can help change people, and the world, for the better.

“Our church has changed, our world has changed, our families have changed, the schools we go to have changed, confirmation has changed, [but] we freeze people in time, and often in their worst moments. ... The more we can remind ourselves God is about thawing people—and if Jesus’ worst moment on the cross cancels out our worst moments—we can have forgiveness of others.” †

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