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Thank you for leading this small group series! The material has been designed to deliver over 3 sessions – these might be mid-week group over three weeks or it might form the focus of an away day for a church group. It could be delivered in person or on line. These notes are to assist you prepare to lead a group.

What You Will Need....

The Notes are in booklet form and large print. You might want to print them for people or to email them for them to either print themselves or read on a device during the sessions.

Music Each session ends with a hymn. The tunes should be well known and able to be downloaded online. Please email via Andy.Braunston@urc.org.uk if you'd like some help finding music to sing along to. People like to sing and it's a good way to start each session.

To Keep Your Wits About You! The task of the leader is to facilitate the learning so know who you can ask to read a Biblical passage, the information box or the reflection box. It's good to have other voices but remember not everyone is comfortable reading in a small group.

Be prepared to gently encourage the quiet and quieten the more bubbly ones. "Thank you, has anyone else got a perspective on this, how about you Mabel?" is a good way to move a discussion on. Be aware of people are being too talkative and who isn't speaking enough.

Glance through the notes on each set of questions, below, in case folk get stuck! Your role isn't to answer (these are questions for discussion not to pass a quiz!) but to get conversation going.

Refreshments Someone, not necessarily you (!) should sort out refreshments and the setting and clearing up. I suggest people grab a coffee and biscuit as they come in and then get started. That might be easier than breaking and gathering everyone back again!

The Discussion Questions

In black I reproduce the discussion questions. Then in red some ideas to get them going if they get stuck!

Session 1

Statement of Faith 1

- Many churches recite a creed as part of Sunday worship – this is more rare in the URC (though the Worship Notes often offer an affirmation of faith for congregational use). What are the positives and negatives about using or not using a statement of faith in worship?

Positives – helps us articulate what we believe; if different ones are used in different seasons of the year we get a nice range of affirmations. Such affirmations help us articulate what it is we believe and reminds us of what we believe!

Negatives – No single statement of faith will ever cover all that we believe, saying the same one over and over again might become repetitive and meaningless (though our Orthodox and Catholic siblings don't find this to be the case.)

- Susan locates statements of faith in our praise – do you think that recitation of a credal statement is like praise? Why? Why not?

You might want to suggest that we pray what we believe, making affirmations of faith part of good liturgy is one way of expanding how we praise God.

Statement of Faith 2

- What other things or people do we trust in aside from God?

The Bible often warns the Jewish people not to put their faith in princes or foreign alliances; that might mean political leaders in our

context now. Jesus often warned people not to trust in worldly wealth – something we'd find very counter cultural now.

- What other things are we tempted to worship?

As a child my priest felt that those who washed their cars on Sunday morning rather than attend mass were worshiping their cars! We're tempted to worship celebrities, wealth, success, thin bodies, white bodies. Perhaps, in the Church we're tempted to worship bigger "successful" churches rather than see God at work in our more fragile congregations.

- What might trusting God to go beyond the hymns, prayers, buildings and texts mean for us?

Might it mean we let God be God and not be confined in our liturgies, buildings and even be confined in the Bible?

Statement of Faith 3

- Does calling God "father" mean we think that God is male?

Feminist theologian Mary Daly once said that if we think God is male then we're thinking that male is God. It might be useful to gently explore what metaphors or images people have for God beyond Father? Rock, Refuge, Strong Tower, Mother Hen, Nursing Mother, and Mother Eagle are all Biblical images for God but often not ones we're used to.

- If we don't think God is male why is there so much male language about God?

Might it be that liturgy and credal statements and Biblical translation is often done by men?

- What other metaphors for God might we use?

Jesus referred to himself as a Mother Hen (Matthew 23:37 and Luke 13:34). Deuteronomy 32: 11-12 uses an image of God as a Mother Eagle who helps her young to fly. Deuteronomy 32:18 mixing metaphors has God as a rock who gives birth. Isaiah 66:13 has God as a comforting mother and 49:15 as a nursing mother. Later in 49.15

Isaiah describes God as a woman in labour. Psalm 23 has an image of God as a Shepherd – an image picked up by Jesus. Psalm 131.2 has God as a mother. Isaiah saw God reflected in a suffering servant. Hosea 13:8 troublingly, has God as a ferocious mother bear who kills some boys who interfered with her young. The Psalms often describe God as a strong tower and mighty refuge.

Session 2

Statement of Faith 4

- Susan notes that ideas about Jesus feature more in Christian creeds and affirmations of faith than reflections on his teaching. He is “of one being with the Father” “God from God, light from light, begotten not made” but nothing is said about his message. If you were asked what would you sum up Jesus’ teachings as saying? This should be a gently free flowing exercise as people remember Jesus’ teachings. For some it’s the first sermon in Nazareth Synagogue where Jesus said he came to free captives, give sight to the blind and good news to the poor, for others it’s the Sermon on the Mount. See where they go (and maybe have Matthew 5 and Luke 4 open ready to go!)
- Why do you think Jesus was executed? Some may go straight to ideas about atonement “so we could be forgiven” which is a classic interpretation. The authorities, however, didn’t execute Jesus due to notions about sin and redemption. He was a rabble rouser, a trouble maker, one who disturbed the status quo, one who might have bought the wrath of the Roman empire down on the people. It was expedient to silence him just as it’s always expedient to silence those who speak truth to power.
- What’s the most important part of the story of Jesus for you? His birth, life, miracles and message, death and resurrection or ascension and coming in glory? (Why is this important for you?)

Be ready to have some ideas about what in the story of Jesus is important to you and why – not to impose a right answer but to help if people get stuck.

Statement of Faith 5

- How much do we talk about the Holy Spirit in church? What type of things are said or preached about the Spirit?

Might our people think the Holy Spirit inspires us at Elders and Church Meetings? (which is what we say we think happens!)

- Susan holds that the Spirit comforts us by giving us the tools we need to do Jesus' work now he's ascended. What work might that be?

You might want to have the end of Matthew's Gospel and the sermon in Luke 4 ready.

- Should the Church, should Christians, get in or cause trouble? If so, what type of trouble?

Crying out for justice, working for a greener world, challenging injustice, clamouring for proper free trade, asking why the poor have no food.

Statement of Faith 6

- What difference might it make to us locally if we really behaved in ways which reflected we are united in the Church with Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists, Catholics, Orthodox, Pentecostals and Independents?

Might it mean we tried to work together more on things like food banks and campaigning? Might we be more careful to articulate what we say we believe which emphasises what we have in common?

- The URC stands in traditions which leave much to the decision of local congregations and which pioneered women's ministry and the inclusion of LGBT people in membership and ministry. In many ways

we've gone further than many other branches of the Church – has this helped or hindered our sense of belonging to the Church Catholic?

When the Church of England were debating ordaining women it was often said that union with Rome was more important and so women shouldn't be ordained until union had been achieved. Would this approach be a good sign of ecumenical sensitivity or quenching our understanding of the Holy Spirit?

- What might we learn from other Christian traditions? What might other Christian traditions learn from us?

I think we might learn more about realising we're part of something bigger, of sensitively using affirmations of faith, of a commitment to poorer areas of our country and the world. I think other traditions might learn something of resilience with less ordained ministry and the gifts of Eldership.

Session 3

Statement of Faith 7

- Susan implies that belief in God's sovereignty means that it is only God who can save and redeem the world and sites this in the context of the climate emergency. Do you agree that this is God's work to sort out or is it something that humanity (which got itself into this mess) needs to sort out?
This is a classic Reformed dilemma – are we able to help ourselves at all. Does God help those who help themselves or is it a matter of God help those who get caught?
- The Revelation passage, and the quotation from our Statement of Faith, imply that, in God's good time, God will dwell with humanity. It's a reading often used at funerals as we look forward to a renewed heaven and earth where we will live in harmony with God

and each other. For you is this a pious myth or a firm hope? What do you think our faith has to say about the climate emergency? Lots of possible answers here. If we believe that God will renew the earth we have to ensure there's enough left to be renewed. The Biblical witness is not about being dragged off to a supernatural heaven but a renewed earth that means we have to live in harmony with the earth.

Statement of Faith 8

- Christians believe not only that humanity is made in God's own image but that Jesus came and shared our humanity. What might those ideas mean for the value and dignity of humans? Even humans we don't like!
It might mean we have to treat all people well as being made in, and reflecting, God's own image. That might mean folk we don't like, it might mean our enemies. What does it mean, in 2023, to recognise Mr Putin as being made in God's own image? What might it mean to recognise that those we rightly recoil from – abusers and rapists – are also made in God's own image?
- In the Catholic tradition babies, when they are baptised, are clothed in a baptismal gown (I'm told that the Churches of Christ used to give gowns to those to be baptised by immersion too). At a Catholic funeral it is usual to drape the coffin in a plain pall – reminiscent of the baptismal gown. No other symbols of identity or nationality are supposed to be placed on the coffin. The idea is to show that all our identities are subsumed into our identity of being in Christ. This doesn't mean that our various social, political, sexual and national identities aren't important just that they aren't of ultimate importance. Does this idea of being "in Christ" resonate with you? Why/why not?
This exercise will be easier if people are aware of their own identities. Minority communities are often more aware of their

identities than the majority – eg black people are aware of being black in a white society in a way that white people aren't.

- Susan suggests that to be made in the image of God is to those things which God does – identify with the poor and outcast, work for change and justice – what might this look like for you?

Get them to think about the need in the communities in which the congregation is set.