

God is Holy Mystery

an intergenerational theological reflection project
Immanuel United Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba Spring 2021

Final Worksheet: Integration Reflecting on theological reflection...



The Intergenerational Theological Reflection project in which folks from Immanuel have been participating has focused our attention on learning about God through reflecting on Creation, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the movement of the Spirit. The structure provided a framework within which to think about God in company with Christians around the world. Reflecting on the triune (three things that are also one thing) nature of God provides a solid foundation of belief. It also leaves room for doing theological reflection using different starting points and approaches.

Activity:

Review your notes, drawings, insights about God from the first three worksheets Gather these “God words”. Don’t restrict your responses to names you call God. Use words that describe what you believe God is like. Be sure to include nouns, verbs, adjectives or adverbs, metaphors and If you haven’t been keeping notes, start here

Choose seven of these words/phrases/ pictures/photos/movements that you would want to share if you were asked about what God is like by someone from another faith tradition or from no organized faith community. Keep track of these seven descriptors for God. (God words)

Listen again to the stories of Old Turtle and In God’s name from Worksheet #1: Creation.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0itq-Uk43mE>

and

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfM69k_S1as

The creatures wanted God to have attributes they recognized, that were relevant for them. They yearned for a divine being who understood their world, what it was like to be them. They did not want to **be** this divine being or have it be just like them. They wanted understanding and recognition. They wanted to be known. So do we.

Think about the difference between being like someone and understanding that person. Consider the difference between someone being like you and someone understanding you. What helps you to feel known/understood? What does it mean to you to be known/understood by God?

We need not to limit our understanding of God by assigning human attributes to God, making God in our image. There is a word for that... **anthropomorphism** (pronounced just the way it looks! with the emphasis on “mor”). Try saying it five times as fast as you can as you are waking up - just for fun, no reward involved.)

Assigning human qualities to God and understanding God to be defined by them, eliminates from our concept of God all of the amazing themes, aspects, ways of imagining that come from learning about God through creation, Spirit, story, tradition...

Steve Earle's song "God is God" provides interesting insight into nature of God. It is sung here by Joan Baez.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQ_Ktz73WMY

"God, in my little understanding
Don't care what name I call
Whether or not I believe doesn't matter at all
I receive the blessings
That every day on Earth's another chance to get it right."

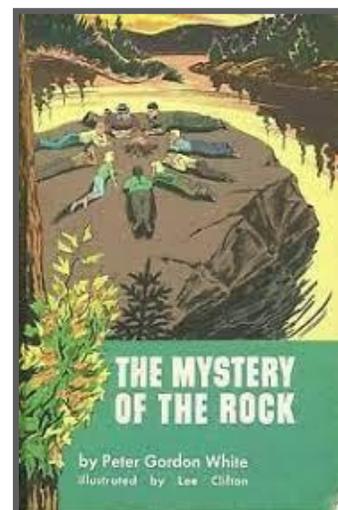
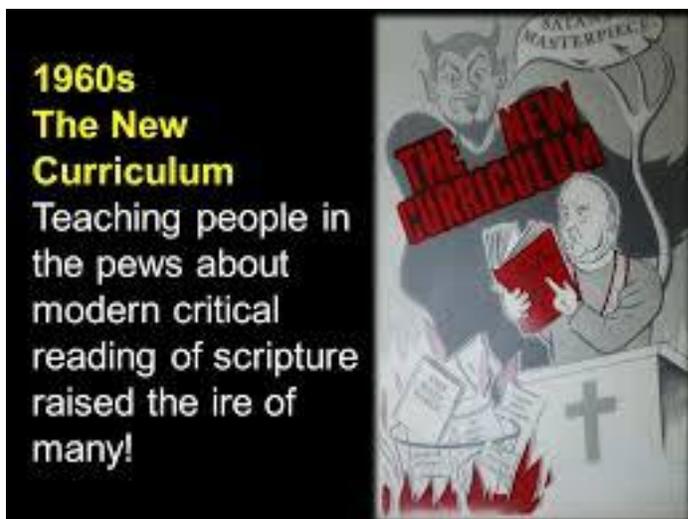
While God does not care which names we choose to refer to God, our "God words" matter because they give shape to our vision and call us to action.

Joan Baez is known to have said

"If you're gonna sing meaningful songs, you have to be committed to living a life that backs that up."

The same thing holds true for what we say we believe about God and how we live our lives. There needs to be consistency between what we say we believe and how we live in the world. This is true for us as Christians, for us as communities of faith who gather in and as congregations, as denominations, and as ecumenical faith bodies.

Since its inception in 1925, The United Church of Canada has engaged in, and encouraged, faith-based study leading to both policy development and action. In the 1960's, it developed a comprehensive new curriculum for Christian Education for people of all ages. Known as the Core Curriculum, it brought critical thinking, current theological insight, and rigorous biblical interpretation to faith formation using innovative educational methods. While there was considerable negative reaction from outside the denomination, this curriculum instilled in both its leaders and learners, a passion for study, a commitment to learning in community and, informed by our faith, to addressing issues of injustice.



Many people in the Immanuel community were influenced by the Core curriculum. The history of study groups at Immanuel and the continuing commitment of the congregation to learning and to prophetic witness is testimony to the value of faith based critical thinking.

The centrality of an informed faith in members of a community that takes seriously its responsibility to participate in the healing vision **proclaimed** by the Kingdom of God and a structure that provides avenues for members of faith communities to raise concerns, initiate actions, and make voices heard has led the United Church to developing policies and taking actions that contribute to justice and peace.

A few examples:

General Council:

- supports medicare (1950s)
- studies and makes affirmations related to sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity ... (1960 to present)
- apologizes to Native congregations of the United Church for past denial of Native spirituality (1980s)
- ends South African investments (1986)
- confronts sexual abuse (1992)
- repudiates Doctrine of Discovery
- commits to being an anti-racist church

Activity

The next few pages are presented as a matching exercise. The statements in blue are theological statements – mostly quoted, occasionally paraphrased. – things about which the United Church has made official statements. The statements in orange are policy statements the United Church has made (usually by the General Council) or actions the United Church has taken /encouraged its members to take. Some of the theological statements were made in conjunction with the approval of a policy or action. Some are excerpts from A New Creed or from Song of Faith. Some theological statements connect with more than one policy or action. The task is to match each of the blue boxes with one or more of the orange boxes There is no one right answer! The purpose is to reflect on the relationship between the theological statements made by the church and the policies and actions made by the church.

The easiest way to do this activity is to fasten/ tape/glue each of the pages in the activity on to another piece of paper and cut out the individual boxes. Sort them into two piles , one for each colour. Then try to match the theological convictions with one or more policies or actions... As you do this, think about what is being said about the nature of God and the purpose of the church. What kind of God is portrayed in the convictions, policies, actions? If new words come to mind to associate with God (new God words) add them to the list you have been keeping.

miracle stories of abundance (in both Old and New Testaments) when a "little becomes enough," because love and faith are present

the visions of abundance for all which is the goal of a redeemed creation.

To live with respect in Creation

This affirmation reminds us that we do not live in isolation on this planet. God created us for relationship and God calls us into relationship. We are not alone; we are not created to be alone. As human beings we need relationship as surely as we need air, water, or food. An infant who is deprived of human touch will wither and die. Adults who are deprived of loving relationships also wither and die, spiritually, emotionally, and even physically.

WHEREAS children, youth, women and men are all called to be members of the Body of Christ and the household and family of God.

WHEREAS changes of language offers creative and expanding possibilities for Christians in their perceptions of God and of one another.

We affirm our acceptance of all human beings as persons made in the image of God, regardless of their sexual orientations.

devises an educational reflection-action curriculum enterprise, which helps to uncover the inter-relatedness of care of the earth and care for people;

curriculum of our theological colleges be designed to incorporate the goal of care of our earth with all its implications, are for people;

Expresses solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples of the world and supports the rights of Indigenous Peoples to live in and retain their traditional lands and territories, to maintain and enrich their cultures and to ensure that their traditions are strengthened and passed on for generations to come;

Urges various governments in the world, including the government of Canada, to dismantle all legal structures and policies that are based on, or influenced by, the Doctrine of Discovery, to better empower and enable Indigenous Peoples to determine their own aspirations and issues of concern;

that the General Secretary, General Council, in cooperation with Affirm United's Affirming Ministries Program, be encouraged to develop a program of education and advocacy, in consultation with a representative group of transgender people within The United Church of Canada, and then to provide leadership in advocating for the human and civil rights of transgender people;

AFFIRM the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religions including the right of conscientious objection to war

We are not alone. We live in God's world.

Joins the World Council of Churches in denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery as fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and as a violation of the inherent human rights that all individuals and peoples have received from God;

Jesus said, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matt. 5:23-24)

apartheid...is a sin, and that moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the word of God, a theological heresy."

WHEREAS the gospel calls us to risk and adventure in the name of Jesus Christ; and the example of those who have followed him in obedience even to the cross as they upheld justice and promoted shalom, challenges us to high commitment and trust; and

WHEREAS the increase in gambling is but one more manifestation of the current climate of materialism suggesting that we are trying to live by fate and not by faith

Support a long-term global emission reduction goal consistent with the Paris agreement;

Encourage investment in green renewable

The United Church of Canada will not tolerate and will seek to eradicate any behaviour by its members (lay and order of ministry), volunteers, adherents or employees which constitutes sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, pastoral sexual misconduct, sexual assault, or child abuse.

The United Church of Canada is committed to providing a safe environment for worship, work and study in all pastoral charges, congregations, institutions, agencies, organizations, or other bodies which operate under its name. Complaints of sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, pastoral sexual misconduct, sexual assault, or child abuse will be taken seriously and dealt with in a spirit of compassion and justice.

commit the church to a process of discerning how its own values, actions, policies and structures continue to be informed by the Doctrine of Discovery; and

take steps to repudiate The Doctrine of Discovery in word and action.

petition the government of Canada, and provincial governments, to withdraw support of organized gambling in our country;

to re-affirm its opposition to gambling in all its forms;

Made in the image of God,
we yearn for the fulfillment that is life
in God

God reconciles,
and calls us to repent the part we
have played in damaging our world,
ourselves, and each other.
God transforms,
and calls us to protect the vulnerable,
to pray for deliverance from evil,
to work with God for the healing of the
world, that all might have abundant
life.

The Spirit judges us critically when we
abuse scripture by interpreting it
narrow-mindedly, using it as a tool of
oppression

Jesus announced the coming of God's
reign—
a commonwealth not of domination
but of peace, justice, and
reconciliation.
He healed the sick and fed the hungry

the reconciliation of persons through
justice
and communities living in
righteousness,

recommit ourselves to living out the apology of
The United Church of Canada to native
congregations offered in 1986, and specifically
the fourth paragraph which states:

'We imposed our civilization as a condition for
accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you like us and in so doing
we helped to destroy the vision that made you
what you were. As a result you and we are
poorer and the image of the Creator in us is
twisted, blurred, and we are not what we were
meant by the Creator to be.';

The United Church of Canada request the
government of Canada to:

1 FORMALLY and publicly acknowledge the
injustice done to Japanese Canadians through
injury of confiscation and internment;

2 ENTER into negotiation with the National
Association of Japanese Canadians to
determine suitable financial compensation as
was recommended by the Special
Parliamentary Task Force on Visible Minorities
in their report commonly known as "Equity
Now";

3 DEVELOP an appeal procedure for Canadian
citizens to protect against future injustices
through invoking the War Measures Act; and

4. REQUEST the Division of Mission in Canada
to alert the membership of The United Church
of Canada to available resources to aid study
of the issues of compensation to Japanese
Canadians and to the implications of the War
Measures Act for future injustices

The church has not always lived up to its vision.
It requires the Spirit to reorient it, helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition, challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement, for we are called to be a blessing to the earth

We are not alone.

General Council make a gift of the following insights to the congregations: - Engaging the Bible is not optional for the Christian community. The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture vi - When we engage the Bible, individually and collectively, we are deeply influenced by and entangled in the worldviews of the particular nation/community/family in which we live. - Our interpretation of scripture is most clearly shown in the way we live. - Interpretation is unavoidable when we are engaging the Bible. - Each interpretation is an invitation to ever new discoveries and insights into God's covenant with life and the earth.

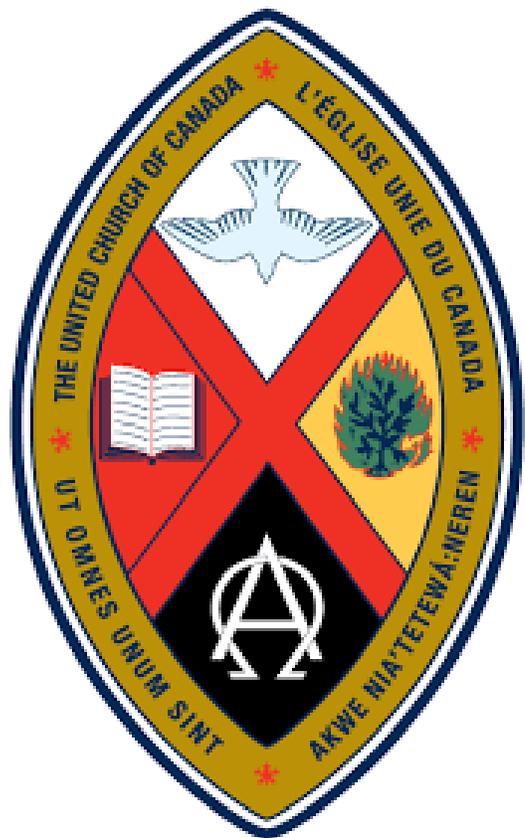
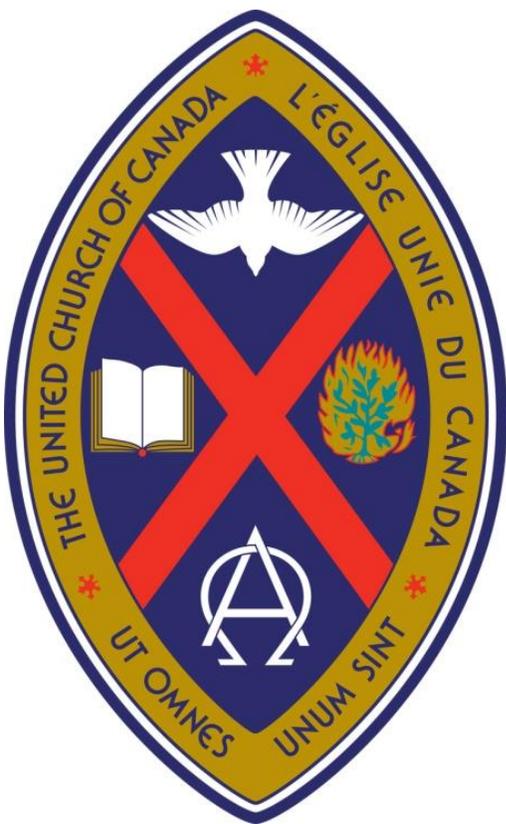
God calls us to engage the Bible as foundational authority as we seek to live the Christian life. - God calls us to engage the Bible as a church seeking God's community with all people, living creatures, and the earth. - God calls us to engage the Bible to experience the liberating and transforming Word of God. - God calls us to engage the Bible with an awareness of our theological, social, and cultural assumptions. The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture v - God calls us to engage the Bible with a sense of sacred mystery and in dynamic interaction with human experience, understanding, and heritage. - God calls us to engage the Bible trusting God's Spirit to enliven our understanding and to empower our acting.

-from The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture – affirmations passed by the General Council in 1992

the power of a word! During the General Council in 1992, considerable time was spent in debate regarding the appropriate wording for a motion about the authority and interpretation of scripture. Should we say that the Bible is a foundational authority or the foundational authority? Back and forth. Articulate arguments. Polarization loomed. A respected leader, trusted as a wise and thoughtful framer of consensus, suggested that we don't use either – or any – word there, and that we simply say “engage the Bible as foundational authority”. Agreement reached.

In August of 2012, at the 41st General Council, The United Church of Canada acknowledged the presence and spirituality of Aboriginal peoples in the United Church by revising the church's crest.

The crest changes include incorporating the colours often associated with the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel, which reflects respect for diversity and interdependence, is often represented in the four traditional colours of yellow, red, black, and white, which incorporate important teachings from the four directions, the four stages of life, and the four seasons. The placement of these colours will vary according to the traditions of the nation. The Medicine Wheel teaches us to seek balance in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the circle of life. The crest changes also include the addition of the Mohawk phrase "Akwe Nia'Tetewá:neren" [aw gway--nyah day day waw-- nay renh], which means "All my relations."



Intergenerational God Words Activities

These activities/ reflection processes can be done by young children with adult support, by older children or young teens independently or with other older children or young teens, by adults alone or with others.

A variation for learners of any age would be to choose a hymn, biblical passage or faith statement as the source of God Words rather than using the cards that are provided which come from several sources

God Words: (words that help us know God)

Love	Gentle	Starry night sky	Welcome	Spirit	Guide
Fair	Rock	Comforter	Trust	Jesus	Flame
Wise	Wind	Everywhere	Joy	Creator	Close
Strong	Friend	River	Peace	Leader	(Add your own)

The last page shows an example of a size and shape for *God Words* cards. They can be any size and shape and they do not have to be the same. Feel free to copy these and /or make your own from scrap paper.

You may want to glue or tape the *God Words* paper on to another paper or cardboard or a file folder or a cereal box or a large envelope from the mail before starting any of these activities Write or draw the words from the chart above on the shapes you have chosen.. Add your own ideas to blank cards. These become the *God Words* cards. Cut out the *God Words* cards.

Reflection Options:

because God is... A

Choose one of the *God Words* cards.

Finish the sentence Because God is _____, I feel _____.

e.g. Because God is gentle, I feel safe.

Write or draw your word on the back of the *God Words* card you have chosen.

Repeat with as many cards as you want.

AND/OR

because God is... B

Choose one of the *God Words* cards.

Finish the sentence Because God is _____, I want to _____.

E.g. Because God is caring, I want to take care of myself and others.

Write or draw your word on the back of the *God Words* card you have chosen.

Repeat with as many cards as you want.

For both A and B:

Decorate both sides of the *God Words* cards with whatever materials you have .e.g. markers, yarn, magazine pictures, scraps of paper...

Fasten a string or yarn or elastic to each card and fasten each card to a hanger so you have a mobile.

***God Words* Poetry**

Spread out the *God Words* cards, adding your own or replacing them with key words from a hymn, biblical passage or faith statement.

Place them randomly or in an order that conveys a message about the nature of God.

Paste the poem on a larger piece of paper or hang the individual cards on a hanger as a mobile.

Sharing your learning and your faith...

Take pictures of the mobiles and /or the poetry. Send them to Ha Na (minister.iuc@gmail.com) for possible inclusion in worship and other church activities. Also, please take pictures of any of the lists, notes, drawing, photos, insights, questions, artistic expressions you have been keeping from others sessions It may be possible to use them for future congregational reflection.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Ann Naylor, Guiding Elder, Faith, Formation and Life Long Learning until August 31, 2021
