

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Quick Guide to the Handbook	4
Beyond the “Quick Guide”	5
Session 1: God	10
Session 2: Jesus	22
Session 3: Salvation	32
Session 4: Practice	42
Session 5: Community	52

SESSION | 1

GOD

BEFORE THE SESSION

Many participants like to come to the group conversation after considering individually some of the issues that will be raised. The following five reflective questions are intended to open your minds, memories and emotions regarding some aspects of this session's topic. Use the space provided here to note your reflections.

What is your experience of God this week?

What words best help you express the reality of God in your life?

In what ways have you experienced and understood God at various stages of your life?

What riches grow out of your relationship with God at this time in your life?

What hymns, prayers and other writings express most accurately your experience of God?

OPTION 1: THE MEANING OF THE WORD GOD

Beginning Conversation

Say aloud words that you associate with the word *God*.

Note these on the newsprint page so that everyone can see them and reference them as needed.

Having heard all the words, use the space below to note the ones that have the most meaning for your group.

The Teaching



Play the first part of the DVD in which Borg asks the question, “What is the referent of the word *God*?”

Borg presents two responses to the question:

- the God of supernatural theism
 - a person-like being separate from the universe
 - an all-powerful, all-knowing, law-giving authority figure who loves us, but who may also punish us
 - one who occasionally intervenes in human affairs
- an encompassing reality or Spirit
 - the One in whom we live and move and have our being
 - the One in whom we live, as a fish lives in water
 - the reality of all that is
 - the One of whom mystics speak; “...a luminous light shining through everything...a falling away of sharp boundaries between ourselves and the world that marks our everyday consciousness...a place of amazement, wonder and joy in which I see more clearly than ever...”

Group Response to the Teaching

Like Borg, most people have known both of these meanings of the word *God*. Where are you now with regard to these two contrasting ways of thinking of God?

OPTION 2: WHAT GOD IS LIKE

Beginning Conversation

Say aloud the words and phrases that convey the nature (character and passion) of God to you. Note these on newsprint for future reference. Use the space below to note the words and phrases that carry the most meaning for you.

The Teaching

On the DVD Borg also addresses the question of what God is like. “What is God’s character and passion?” he asks.

Consistent with the first part of his teaching, he presents God’s nature in two ways:

- a God who is punitive and who might punish a sinner forever in hell—resulting in a relationship that includes fear
- a God who is gracious, compassionate and understood as an expression of the lines from John’s gospel, “For God so loved the world...”—resulting in a relationship free of fear and full of awe

Group Response to the Teaching

To what extent have you experienced these two “God” realities?

What difference does the way someone sees God’s character (1 or 2) make to his or her day-to-day living?

OPTION 3: SPEAKING OF GOD



Play the responses of the people who are in Borg's small group.

What a diversity of responses to Borg's teaching! Respond off the cuff to what you heard:

- Where did you find one of the DVD group members speaking for you?
- What issues were raised that concern you?
- Where did you find yourself wanting to respond in any way to someone on the recording?
- What questions are "live" for you in relation to this overall topic: God?

Some of these issues and questions may be addressed in the remaining options. Some you may have to answer in general conversation time or in one-to-one conversations.

OPTION 4: EXPERIENCING THE SACRED

Beginning Conversation

Share specific ways that you have experienced the reality of the sacred.

The Teaching

Borg says:

I come to this understanding (of God), not through intellectual effort, but through a series of experiences in my early thirties that I now recognize as mystical experiences. That's simply a way of saying experiences in which I saw whatever I was looking at—the same landscape or the same room—as if there was light shining through everything. Everything became luminous, and it was radiant but soft all at the same time. I also experienced a kind of falling away of the sharp boundaries between the self and the world that mark our ordinary, everyday consciousness. These experiences were accompanied by amazement and wonder and a sense that I was seeing more clearly than I'd ever seen in my life. They were also full of joy; I could have lived in that state of consciousness forever. I would never have gotten old. Then I realized that those we call the mystics of all religions call these experiences, such as I had, experiences of God or the sacred. Suddenly the word God referred to something that was manifestly real. I've never doubted the reality of God ever since those experiences.

Group Response to the Teaching

What are your responses to hearing Borg speaking of these mystical times?

Have any of you had experiences you would term *mystical*?

What are the kind of experiences (not necessarily mystical) that bring you to the declaration that Borg makes: “I’ve never doubted the reality of God ever since.”

Use the space below to make personal notes that complete this statement: “I experienced the sacred (the reality of God) when...”

OPTION 5: GOD DISCLOSED IN A LIFETIME

Beginning Conversation

In the space below draw your life's timeline; mark personal stages of spiritual awareness, religious activity, and awareness of God. Note the people or experiences that had an impact on your personal journey of spiritual and religious formation. Share these in pairs or triads.

The Teaching

Borg makes reference to his own theological growth from childhood, through his 20s and 30s up to the present time, as do a number of the other group members on the DVD. What insights do you take from all that has been shared both on the DVD and also in your group? Note insights below that you want to remember.

Group Response to the Teaching

Implied in this attention to life stages is the understanding that we are never finished. We are indeed evolutionary beings who carry an awareness of the “unfolding” nature of our lives. Think about where you are on your spiritual path today:

- What challenges and opportunities currently present themselves to you?
- What practices enable you to stay open to the movement of the Spirit?

OPTION 6: OUR NEED, GOD'S RESPONSE

Beginning Conversation

What do you need in your relationship with God today?

The Teaching

David, one of the participants in the group on the DVD, talks about his need for God in this way:

I want God to father me. I'm desperate for that. It's not as an authority figure. I want to be an apprentice. I want to become like father. I want to know, as a man, what masculinity is. I believe there is something that God is teaching me about that. I struggle with the idea of a personal God. Yet all the things I just said are all about the personal intimacy of experiences with God.

Group Response to the Teaching

What is the impact on you of hearing David speak this way about his desire for relationship with God?

When have you spoken with God in the way David does?

What words would you use to express the quality of the relationship you want with God? For example, *accompanier, safe presence, energizer, holy guide*, etc. Use the space here to note words or phrases concerning that relationship:

OPTION 7: FINDING OUR GOD LANGUAGE

Beginning Conversation

When do you communicate with God? What form does that communication take?

The Teaching

In the DVD, Ashley, one of the participants, says the following:

When I sit down to pray, instinctively my mind and heart still go to God “out there.” After 20 years of trying to find God as something connected to me rather than separate from me, the rubber hits the road when I sit down to pray, and God is still someone I’m appealing to rather than communing with.

And Borg responds:

When I pray, I address God as if God were a person. I talk to God as if God were right here. I regularly speak to God as Lord, or speak to God as if God is a person right here because I think my relationship to God is personal even though I don’t think of God as a person. So for me the language of personification, by which I mean personifying God as if God were a person, is utterly natural. When I reflect back on my childhood, I think that what happened was that I began to literalize those personifications that then led to God as a person-like being separate from other beings. For me personal language in prayer and worship seems utterly natural.

Group Response to the Teaching

In the space below complete the statement below in as many ways as you can. After a period of time share these in the group.

When I pray I...

What insights about communication with God come from this conversation?

What new practices of communication with God might you try as a result of hearing these reflections? Note those in the space provided here.

Hymns are another form of scripted and spoken communication with God. Take time to thumb through your church’s hymnbook for examples of hymns that allow you to experience a connection with the divine.

OPTION 8: CLOSING

Borg quotes the poem by Denise Levertov, “The Avowal.” You are invited to use it as part of your closing for this session.

As swimmers dare
to lie face up to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

“THE AVOWAL” BY DENISE LEVERTOV, FROM OBLIQUE
PRAYERS, COPYRIGHT ©1984 BY DENISE LEVERTOV.
REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF NEW DIRECTIONS
PUBLISHING CORP.