

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Quick Guide to the Handbook	4
Beyond the “Quick Guide”	5
Pointers on Facilitation	8
Session 1: Belief Matters	11
Session 2: The Bible Matters	27
Session 3: Community Matters	43
Session 4: Place Matters	57
Session 5: We Matter	71



SESSION | 1

BELIEF MATTERS

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 activities 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.

1. Take some time to reflect on your journey of belief. You might find it helpful to draw it on a path on a page, noting times of insight, challenge, fullness, emptiness, hope, gratitude, transformation and so on.

2. Think about the kind of words and writing that are important to you in your believing: hymns, creeds, poems, scripture passages, prayers, graces, psalms, short stories, essays and so on.

3. As you move through the week notice yourself as a believer in a culture that doesn't espouse just one belief system and that is sometimes either cool or even hostile to Christianity. What's it like to be a Christian in this period of North-American history?

4. Think about times in your life when it has made a big difference for you to be a person of faith and belief. Feel the gratitude for those times.

5. Someone comes to you and asks, "What is belief and why does it matter?" What do you say?

GROUP LIFE

The theme of this series is “Embracing a Life of Meaning.” You have come together as a group, ready to uncover some responses to this question: What does a life of meaning look like for us as a people of faith in this second decade of the 21st Century?

Even if you have met everyone in the group before, it is still a brand new group taking on a new topic of exploration. Take a few minutes to introduce yourselves in two ways:

- by telling your name
- by telling about something that gives meaning to your life today

In September of 2011, another group met in Denver to learn with Kathleen Norris and to grapple with the same issues that are on your agenda for these five sessions. They will introduce themselves in the same way that you have just done.



Play the first section of the DVD for Session 1, up until Kathleen begins to talk.

ESSENTIAL: KATHLEEN NORRIS ON WHY BELIEF MATTERS



Play the second section of the DVD for Session 1, through Kathleen's talk (about the next 10 minutes).

Here are 20 statements that Kathleen makes in these opening 10 minutes of teaching.

1. The fact that I was singing in church choirs from the time I was four years old probably has more to do with my beliefs—my spiritual development—than any catechism I learned as a teenager.
2. The hymns come before the sermon for a good reason: if we are to become believers we need that immersion into poetry not our ordinary speech, but poetry.
3. The world tells us that what you see is what you get; Christianity denies that: it asks us to look for something more. It points to greater and deeper things, but not necessarily other-worldly things.
4. In my faith I'm encouraged to look for the sacred and holy that is hidden in ordinary life.
5. In media coverage almost all the press is given to the most extreme right-wing Christians so that many people are convinced that is the only form of Christianity.
6. We ourselves resist the counter-cultural nature of Christianity: at its very heart this religion insists that God is always there for us, loving, forgiving us and welcoming us as we are.
7. Most of us manage to resist the core message of Christianity most of the time.
8. One of the biggest problems we have with the concept of belief today is how illiterate most of us are when it comes to the Bible and Christian tradition.
9. When Jesus is asked who is my neighbor he doesn't give a discourse on the concept of neighbor; he says, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers." Jesus' storytelling made me feel right at home.
10. To ask, "What do you believe?" is not at all the same as asking, "What do you think?"
11. The verb "to believe" in its origins means "to give your heart to." Belief comes from your whole self and not just your intellect.
12. Belief is not a list of things you know for certain; it's much richer than that and also more subtle. Belief always carries within it the seed of doubt.
13. We need belief more than ever to help us to live together.
14. Worship with all its repetitions and hymns and prayers is meant to fortify our belief and make us feel at home in a community with other people who are also struggling with their own belief.
15. I used to hate creeds, but I have finally come to terms with them. In some ways the Nicene Creed is just the family story we Christians like to tell. In its strange phrases, it's as if we are all speaking in tongues.

16. As a poet I'm used to saying things I don't fully comprehend.
17. What the poet William Stafford said about poetry is also true of prayers and creeds: "Successful people cannot find poems; for you must kneel down and explore for them."
18. The metaphors I use in poems and stories I tell are out there in the world—part of the fabric of the world created by God. I didn't invent them; I only discover or stumble across them.
19. There are things I can do to make myself more receptive to these discoveries: prayer, the practice of silence, trying to avoid distractions and limiting my use of television and the Internet.
20. Belief is simply a matter of paying attention to the world around me, to the little ordinary things that are so easy for me to overlook. They will reward me beautifully if I give my heart to them; if I believe.

Which one of these statements did you find yourself most strongly drawn to? Sit with one other person and make that statement personal to you by speaking about its meaning in your life.

OPTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Before going on to choose from the following options for conversation and reflection, watch the rest of the DVD for Session 1 in which Kathleen engages with the small group from St. John's Cathedral, Denver.

OPTION 1: WHAT IS BELIEF?

Kathleen offers four ways of beginning to answer the question about the meaning of belief:

- *The verb “to believe” in its origins means “to give your heart to.” Belief comes from your whole self and not just your intellect.*
- *To ask, “What do you believe?”, is not at all the same as asking, “What do you think?”*
- *Belief is not a list of things you know for certain; it's much richer than that and also more subtle. Belief always carries within it the seed of doubt.*
- *Belief is simply a matter of paying attention to the world around me, to the little ordinary things that are so easy for me to overlook.*

1. How would you define *belief*?

Encouraged to think of belief as more than a list of things that one knows for certain, the participants in the group talk about the meaning of belief through the lens of their own experiences:

Kim:

One of the things I love to share with the young people I work with is that this isn't just something that happens one day and “boom!” that's it, you've got it all. You just keep discovering and keep discovering. The doubts creep in, and you keep wrestling with them. It's a life-long journey. I'm beginning to see as I get older that it gets better. It just keeps getting better and better. That's a little parable in itself!

Maria:

I'm using all the resources I can draw on right now. Becoming a grandmother has been a really true experience. Seeing this new life, this young child and infant; there is such closeness to the Creator! Even without her words; it doesn't matter. With her eyes I can see there is something that the child is showing me that I want to learn about myself because I once had that. I had that. I want to tap into that again.

2. What moments in your life illustrate how belief is a powerful and very present reality?
3. If you take Kathleen's lead and think of belief as "*simply a matter of paying attention to the world around me, to the little ordinary things that are so easy for me to overlook,*" how does that change the way you experience the world around you?

OPTION 2: FINDING WORDS WHERE GOD HAS HIDDEN THEM

Kathleen Norris quotes the 19th-Century mathematician, Bernhard Riemann, who said, *“I did not invent those pairs of differential equations. I found them in the world where God had hidden them.”* Kathleen encourages us to approach our search for our personal language of belief in the same way. The words are out there as part of the fabric of the world created by God. Our task is to get out there on the search where we will stumble across them. The American poet, William Stafford, said much the same thing about poetry: *“Successful people cannot find poems; for you must kneel down and explore for them.”*

The participants in the small group pick up on this idea of taking on the hard work of searching for the words of belief as though God had hidden them out there for them to find. These are some of the ways that each of them talks about the rigor of this personal search for meaningful language:

Amanda:

I was raised an Anglican, going to church with my parents, just skimming over the words, barely understanding anything. When I got married I came to the United States. For a while my husband and I went to a Southern Baptist church where he was raised. I sat there. It was just like being in a convention center, not what I was used to — sitting in a church with the tinted windows. I finally found St. John’s. I remember when they said, “stand...sit...kneel.” I said, “Wow! I’m home!” Then we said the Nicene Creed. O my goodness; it was literally like coming home.

Kathleen:

I’m going to an Episcopal church now. There are some people who will not say the creed. It just bugs them too much. I was there once. I really hated it. I didn’t know what it was all about. But after being in church a while, I did think, this is the family story. It’s the story you might tell at the family reunion. Of course, there’s all this theological history with it, but it’s our story. It’s the story that the church has chosen to tell for two thousand years. It’s not just my story; it’s our story. I really am more comfortable with it. I do laugh sometimes when I think of us all speaking in tongues, with no idea of what we’re saying, but that’s fine.

Kim:

One day my son said to me that what he learned growing up from our church was to hold things open, and that if there were stories that didn’t make sense to him to just hold them open and that one day he might find meaning there.

1. What role do words have in your life of belief and faith? Include in your discussion the place of words in things like hymns, creeds, prayers and relationship with the Bible.
2. Have you had that experience of stumbling across words in the world where God seemed to hide them waiting for the right time for you to find them? Talk with someone else about what that was like.
3. What feels like “home” for you today in your worship life? Why do you think it is that place?

OPTION 3: LIVING BELIEF IN THE DOMINANT CULTURE

In introducing this topic, Kathleen makes the following points:

- *Christianity is counter-cultural:* The world tells us that what you see is what you get; Christianity denies that: it asks us to look for something more. It points to greater and deeper things, but not necessarily other-worldly things. In my faith I'm encouraged to look for the sacred and holy that is hidden in ordinary life.
 - *Because Christianity is counter-cultural the culture reacts to it in very negative ways:* scorn, ridicule, dismissing and ignoring the faith as irrelevant, and anachronistic in the modern world.
 - *One of the ways we see Christianity as negated is in media coverage:* almost all the press is given to the most extreme right-wing Christians so that many people are convinced that is the only form of Christianity.
 - *We ourselves resist the counter-cultural nature of Christianity:* at its very heart this religion insists that God is always there for us; loving, forgiving us and welcoming us as we are. Most of us manage to resist the core message of Christianity most of the time.
 - *One of the biggest problems we have with the concept of belief today is how illiterate most of us are* when it comes to the Bible and Christian tradition.
1. We find ourselves in a time when it is more likely that we are choosing to be Christian and re-affirming that choice rather than simply being born into it and staying with it. Because of that we are more likely to be identified as people who have made that choice; we are more likely to “stand out” as people who have opted for a religious path. Is that true for you? What difference is this making in the way you live out your faith?

2. Rebecca reflects on a very specific personal way that the dominant secular culture has called her to greater account as she lives out her faith:

My new husband is a geologist. He was not raised in the church. Before we met he had started going to another church. He is now coming to St. John's; he was baptized here before we got married as his choice. I feel like he is my conscience, my mirror. I can see things through his eyes: "You say you believe this, but why are people acting this way?" He has such a clear lens. He has an idea of how a Christian community should be, but we don't always live up to that. He calls me to be a better person and to live more intentionally. He is someone of great integrity, so he calls me to greater integrity.

3. What are your stories about relationships with people outside Christianity or new to Christianity that illustrate what it's like to live in a time when being Christian calls for a clarity of choice and commitment?

OPTION 4: THE GIFTS OF BELIEF

During the conversation, Kathleen observes that we need belief more than ever to help us live together. Belief, seen as a response to the challenges of life, is a gift that is available to us in moments of crisis or over the long process of personal growth and development.

Kathleen leads us to consider the gifts that belief can bring when she reflects on the movement away from the fear and self-consciousness of our teens and twenties:

When you start to shed the self-consciousness and the fear you had as adolescents and young adults—maybe the tradition you were raised in was very strict and you're leaving that and not too sure of yourself—when you start to get free from fear, you find it really does get better and is a process in which you are growing without fear. That's one of the great gifts belief can bring.

Kim builds on this from her own experience of a ministry with young people:

I think that in every session we talk about what faith really is; we talk about words like trust and beloved. I'm always telling them about the idea that this is a journey, and that right now in their lives they're in a place where they're all about themselves—all about finding out who they are—differentiating from their parents. What I often see as they come back from one or two years in college is that they're starting to look for something else, something more. So we talk about the "More"; the more of God and Jesus in our lives.

And Margaret reflects on the gift of belief and practice in a time of deep loss and grief:

Ten years ago our 18-year-old grandson, who was a freshman in college, died suddenly in his sleep of a ruptured aorta. One moment he was here and vital; the next he was gone. That evening at 5 o'clock I sat down to do my centering prayer. It never occurred to me not to, because that's what I do. And I felt myself rocked. It you observed me you probably wouldn't have seen me moving, but I was rocked and that continued for the journey to the funeral. I kept wondering how is my family getting by without centering because I just knew that God was present with me. It wasn't God who took Chris. Chris died. God was holding me like a child, not like a grieving grandmother.

What are the gifts you have received that you would consider "gifts of believing?"

OPTION 5: BELIEF AS JOURNEY

Believing is a life-long dynamic process. To tell the story of your believing is to pull out from the narrative of your life one of its most powerful themes. What would you include in the telling of your belief story up to this point in your life? Here are some of the ways Margaret tells her story:

I realize that my beliefs change everyday. I was raised a Southern Baptist and I was in that for 25 years where belief was everything. Then I moved into the congregational faith where the emphasis was more on living than believing. But it wasn't until I began meditating 37 years ago that I became open to allowing myself to be changed in every moment of everyday. It's still happening. Something new comes along and I ask myself, "Am I being here now, present, and living from that place?" For me it takes an hour of centering prayer a day to stay there.

I've been an Episcopalian for 22 years and it's feeding my soul. But I look back to my Baptist roots when I learned the Bible: I memorized so that now I can recite whole passages. I can bring up whole passages so I feel such gratitude for that. At the same time I'm studying Kabbalah and I'm understanding Jesus more than I ever have in the Christian church because I'm getting the mysticism and I'm coming to love him in a new way. So, everything is gift even though at the time you leave it, thinking, "I'm moving on!"

My shaping began after I retired from psychotherapy practice and was led into becoming a spiritual director. The people I've seen over these years are of different faiths and some agnostic. I have been challenged to watch me language so that I'm open to everyone. What I finally got was to see people as Jesus sees people. What a challenge! So eventually what people got from me was respect and love.

The underlined words are the kind of words and phrases that people use in telling the stories of their lives. You might use one or two of them as starting points in speaking about your own journey of belief. For example: *My shaping began after I _____ and was led into _____.*

In telling the stories of our believing, there is power in doing that together in a group, but you may not have the time to do that in a regular session. You do have the option of taking a whole extra session to hear one another's stories of belief and faith. It's a remarkably affirming process!

In a regular session you might just tell one part of your story of belief to one other person, just to get a sense of what it's like to have your story witnessed by another.

OPTION 6: (PERSONAL REFLECTION)

Following the session you will continue to think about issues raised both on the DVD and in your small group. This suggestion for journaling is offered to support you in continuing your reflection beyond the session time.

In your journal note the current season of the church year (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, The Season after Easter, Pentecost, The Season of Creation [where that is named]). Choose from these stems as ways of beginning your daily writing about your journey of belief in this season:

I notice how this season colors the way that I live my faith...

In this season of the church year, belief matters to me in these ways...

As I continue to embrace a life of meaning, I discover the meanings this season has in my life...

CLOSING

Offer this prayer:

Blessings on this life,
birther of meaning.
Blessings on these people,
companions on the Way.
Blessings on this day,
light of the Beloved.
Blessings on the past,
stories of belief.
Blessings on our voices,
holy conversation.
Blessings on our departure,
promise of return.