



NEW
Directions
for **HOLY**
Questions

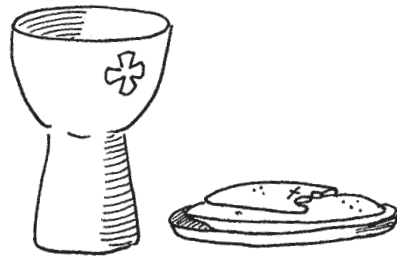
Progressive Christian Theology
for Families

Claire Brown & Anita Peebles

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*To our readers and all wonderers, may you have curiosity
and courage to explore new directions for your holy questions.*



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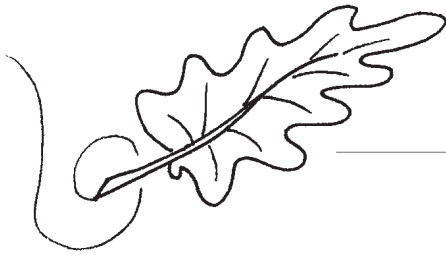
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Introduction for Kids



Dear Readers (those young in age and young at heart),

We are so glad you are here, holding this book. We welcome you to this journey of asking some big questions about God the same way we start the first chapter: You are beloved. Beginning, middle, and end. Each chapter begins with a question. Some questions are about God, some are about Jesus, some are about the church and the Bible and rituals that Christ followers do together. Some questions have answers. Some are simple, and some are complex. And some questions help us learn about ourselves more than we learn about an answer. There are all sorts of questions in this book. We invite you to add your own questions to these, too! You might think “Why?” or “How?” or “I wonder . . .” As you read, journal or color or talk about these questions with someone you love. Be curious!

In the middle of each chapter, you will find some spiritual practices. A spiritual practice is an activity that helps you come close to God’s heart and feel God’s presence. There are lots of different kinds of spiritual practices in this book: some that you can do by yourself and some that you can do with other people. We encourage you to try all of them and listen to your heart for what works best for you.

Toward the end of each chapter are stories about justice. These stories tell how individuals and groups have worked to make the world more generous, loving, and safe for all people. As you read these justice stories, think about what you can do to make the world a better place.

Who are we, the writers? We are beloved children of God, too. We are women who were called by God to be pastors and to serve God's church, especially children and youth like you! We are friends who like to sit on porches and drink tea and laugh and cry and sing and dance and learn together. We are curious people who love Jesus and who want to learn all we can about how to live with justice in this world.

As you read this book and ask questions and wonder, we pray that you will know in your bones and in your breath and in your heart that God loves you just the way you are. We are praying for you, as are the generations that have gone before us that we call the clouds of witnesses. You are not alone, for you are held in the love of the Holy all your life.

Beloved child of God, this book is for you.

Wondering with you,
Claire and Anita





Introduction for Adults

A couple of years ago, Claire’s family made the unfortunate backyard discovery of a small nest of baby rabbits that had died. Her then four-year-old was distraught and wanted a bunny funeral. As a mom and an Episcopal priest, she felt like this was a great learning moment. Ritual! Meaning making! Reverence for all creation! Grief and acceptance! All was going well until, several hours after the “service,” her son said, “Can we go check and see if God has raised the bunnies from the dead yet?”

Uh oh. That was not quite right. Why does it feel so difficult to have these conversations? How do we ponder big, holy questions with kids in a way that helps us all grow?

Parents and professional practitioners who care about sharing the Christian faith with their kids can run into all sorts of sticky spots and weird ideas as we explore the big questions. This book is not full of answers or a template that will smooth a bumpy conversation, but it’s meant to be a companion in your conversations as you and the children in your life learn, grow, and wonder together. More advanced readers might pick this book up on their own, and that is awesome! We encourage adults to let those learners lead the conversation. Others might benefit from reading aloud one chapter at a time with an adult and having some encouragement and guidance in their learning. Each chapter also includes a few summary points that offer adults a script for emerging questions about God and faith with children not old enough to read this book on their own.

We are companions on this journey with you. Claire is an Episcopal parish priest raising two young children with her spouse in southeast Tennessee. Anita is an ordained Baptist pastor associated with the Alliance

of Baptists, and works with children and youth in Seattle, Washington. We met while students at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, where we studied, prayed, served, and worshipped with people with diverse theologies.

In each chapter, we retell a story from the Bible. All acts of translating ancient texts make editorial choices, and we believe that it can be faithful and helpful to tell these stories in fresh ways and with accessible language. With every retelling, the scripture reference is included. We encourage you to look up these passages in your preferred translation and dig deeper into the context and content of the story and surrounding passages of scripture. This continued exploration is also a great way to help children understand the complexity and breadth of the Bible and see where else curiosity might lead.

Anytime we study and read and pray with the Bible and theology, we will run into questions. Sometimes questioning faith is scary or lonely, and it can feel like you're the only one wondering. Let us say here and now that you are not alone! Asking questions is one way to love God with your mind, by growing deeper in your understanding of Holy Presence in our world. As you read this book, remember that these questions are great! In fact, *New Directions for Holy Questions* is filled with open-ended questions on purpose. We hope they offer reflection and conversation between children or children and adults. Many of these questions don't have one answer and are meant to expand the readers' curiosity about scripture, theology, prayer, and our experiences of God. Maybe you will find new ideas here that are different from what you've learned at church, or new ways of thinking about a certain Bible story. Maybe you aren't satisfied with the open questions. If you find yourself asking these questions in your own faith, we encourage you to check out the faith formation resources for adults on our book's website, newdirectionsforholyquestions.com.

This book covers a lot of territory, asking and exploring many of the core questions that have shaped Christian faith and theology for thousands of years. Our ambitious hope was to offer insights, instruction, and continued reflection around the biggest theological doctrines and ponderings of our religion. Yet it is just one start, or one point of continuation, in a lifelong journey of holy curiosity and learning. None of these questions come with one definitive answer, and the chapters are not meant to

reach tidy conclusions. In our seminary new-student orientations, faculty and administrators repeated versions of this refrain: “You will not learn answers here. You will learn to ask better questions.” The journey of faith doesn’t look like mastering handwriting, memorizing multiplication tables, or remembering to say “please” and “thank you.” This is an ongoing learning, getting to know ourselves, our rich and complex tradition, and God, that is never concluded. Maybe *New Directions to Holy Questions* will offer some answers, some insights into important questions of faith, but we hope, most of all, that it leads you to richer and more interesting questions as you grow in the knowledge and love of God.

The prompts for spiritual practices in this book are meant to require little to no preparation and be adaptable for all ages. Some involve mindfulness and body-based breath practice, others incorporate spiritual attention into daily routine, and there are also simple activities with art reflections, going on a walk, or connecting with friends and neighbors. You might make colored pencils, markers or crayons, and paper available for art responses. With these practices, there is no “right” way to do them. The only guidance we can offer is that you make space to experience the Sacred with you, wherever you are and whoever you are with.

Prayer for the Journey

Dear God, give us grace and peace as we love the children you have entrusted into our care.

Protect and nourish them body, mind, and soul:

That they would know you delight in them, in all of who they are and who they are becoming as they grow;

that they would know they are enough and beautiful and know how to love themselves;

that they would be deeply kind in an unkind world;

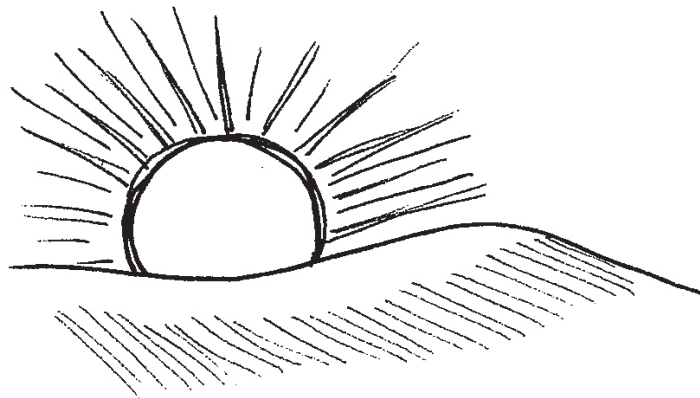
that they would find belonging and know their worthiness;

that they would survive and flourish in a world that isn’t designed for them to live;

that they would always remember the good news that you love them just the way they are;

that they would know they are deeply beloved, by you and by others;

*and that they would live and move and have their being in you, knowing
you in their mind but also finding your presence and guidance in all their
emotions and experiences;
that they would be nurtured into just who they already are, not who we
think they should be;
and that they would be so surrounded by loving community that they take
that sense of welcome and belonging everywhere they go, extending
it to others.
Be with us each day, reminding us of your faithful presence, deep
compassion, radical love, and boundless grace.
In the name of all that is holy to each and every one of us,
Amen.*



~ 1 ~

Who Am I?



Long, long ago, as the stories say, before there were people and homes and cities and roads, before there were dogs and books and trees, there was only the earth, with a spring of water in it. God took some dirt from the earth and formed the first person with the dirt. Then God breathed on the dirt person, and they came to life. God made a lovely garden, full of all kinds of beautiful plants and foods, and put the first person there to take care of the garden and enjoy it. God didn't want the first person to be lonely, so God created many kinds of animals, too, and the person loved the animals and gave them names. God decided to make another person as well, so that the first one would have a partner and helper. So the two human beings lived together and cared for each other as they tended the garden and loved the animals. (Retold from Genesis 2)

In the beginning of everything, Something Holy hovered over the chaotic waters. Then the Something Holy spoke, and became God. The words God spoke called into Being the dark and the light, the earth and the sky, the land and the water. God said, "All of this is sacred. All of this is good." Next, God spoke the words that created Life, animals with fins for the water and animals with wings for the sky and animals for the land that crept, slithered, trotted, and hopped. There was a place for every living thing, and growing things for every living thing to eat. God said, "All of this is sacred. All of this is good." Then God said the words to make Being alive, and there was a Human. God created the Human to be an echo of God on the earth. "The Human will take care of all this beautiful Creation. All of it is sacred. All of it is good." Because God created everything from Something Holy, every Created thing is sacred. (Retold from Genesis 1)

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You are beloved. Beginning, middle, and end. From the moment your heart began beating, through the joys and pains of growing up, until the time when you, like all of us, return to God, God loves you. When God created you, God blessed you and made you to live and love. God delights in you being yourself, in all the complex and full and wonderful you-ness. No one else is like you in the whole entire world.

Every person is beautiful and beloved. Diversity is what makes our world so wonderful. People with dark and medium and light and freckled and spotted skin. People who speak Xhosa and Spanish and Hebrew and Arabic and English and Russian and more. People with small and tall and wide and narrow and curvy body shapes. People who use wheelchairs and crutches and who run and who lie down and who dance. All races, ethnicities, abilities, languages, body sizes, etc. Every person is as valuable as anyone else. None of us are better or worse than anyone else.

Spiritual Practice: Give thanks for your body, heart, and mind. Pray through your body, from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. Say, “Thank you, God, for my [body part] that can [perform an action that the body part does].” Remember to give thanks for how you love when you reach your heart and for all the unique ideas that are all yours when you reach your head.

Every single person who has ever been born is a part of God’s family. Sometimes we talk about church as a family, or as “the body of Christ.” Like the parts of a body (in 1 Corinthians 12, for example), every part of a family has a special purpose and plays a unique role in making life beautiful. That’s the same for humanity. Every person is an expert in their own lives. You, as an individual, know the most about what it is like to be



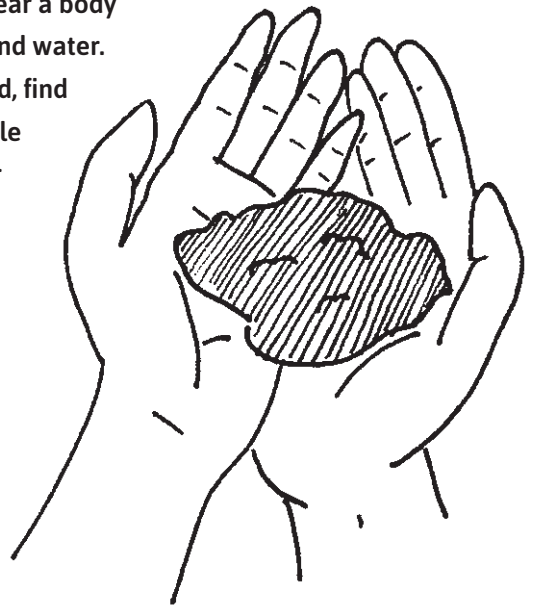
you! And you have gifts and talents that are all your own. Even when you don't feel very special, that doesn't change that you were created to be only yourself by a loving and imaginative Creator.

What is something you appreciate about yourself? How do you want to grow? Who do you want to be?

Justice Story ~ In 2011, Sonya Renee Taylor posted a picture of herself on social media, stating that she was proud of her body and loved her body. For a large Black woman, that was an act of resistance. Soon, thousands of people all over the world were sharing photos of themselves, sending affirmation to each other, and a community called *The Body Is Not an Apology* was born. This organization shares resources for people seeking to embrace their bodies as they are, to push back against narratives of body shaming, and to uplift people of all different identities. Today, *The Body Is Not an Apology* continues to educate and encourage people on the journey of loving and seeking justice for all bodies in each of their particular shapes, colors, sizes, and abilities. All bodies are good bodies. ~

Spiritual Practice: Find some mud after a rain or near a body of water or make mud in your yard by mixing soil and water. Make the mud really squishy. (If you don't have mud, find some clay or Play-Doh). Try making figures of people out of the mud. As you make the figures, remember that God created humans out of the soil from the ground, like clay.

When you are done with the figures, leave them outside. Remember that humans live on earth for just a little while compared to the whole life span of Creation. God's time is not our time. Remember that God is continuing to create newness every single day.



Being human is complicated. It can be confusing. It is often messy. We have bodies that need food, water, shelter, and safety. We have hearts that thrive by giving and receiving love. We have a wide range of emotions that help us respond to events in our lives and in the world. Most humans need to be in a community of people, like a miniature family of God. When we are part of a community, we can remind each other of how much we are loved, because sometimes we forget. People can even know God through a community of people, in how individuals love each other and care for the earth and advocate for justice. Because each of us was created with a little bit of the Something Holy inside us, part of being human is to look for that holy in each other and to live so that others can find the holy in us.

Who is in your community? Who helps you learn how to live and love? Who sees God in you?

The stories in the Bible tell us how God wants to be in relationship with God's people. These stories can help us understand parts of who we are as humans and how we can relate to God, to the Creation, and to each other. When we read the Bible, we can find words of love and encouragement that help us be our best selves. We can also know, through our experiences of living every day, that God is present with us and reminding us that we are beloved. You were created to love and be loved.



For younger children

SAY: Every person in the world is a beautiful, beloved part of God's family. God created you because God loves you. God created you to love and be loved.

DO: Make mud or clay figures. Be amazed that God created you and that you can create, too!

PRAY: God, thank you for making me and loving me. I am amazing, and you did a great job! Amen.