Interacting with God’s Story and Vision

A. Hymn study
Distribute hymnals and other songbooks used in your congregation. Examine the lyrics of hymns you know that mention the blood of Jesus and/or the sacrifice he made to redeem us. Check the passion/death and atonement sections of the hymnals.

» What feelings do these hymns generate?
» Why are these songs meaningful or not meaningful to you?
» What hymns better reflect the way you understand and acknowledge Jesus’ death?

Sing a few favorites.

B. The language of metaphor
During biblical times, the shedding of blood was used as a metaphor for cleansing people of their sin. Ironically, blood shedding was, in the end, life-giving. Nowadays, people donate their blood so that others might live. When we give blood, we are offering our life force to save others and bring hope to their lives. In ancient times, water, wool, and hyssop were used to cleanse people of their sins.

» What items might we use today to express either sacrificial living or being offered a new lease on life? Use words or posture to show gratitude to God for forgiveness.

Option: Instead of talking, sit together in silence. Imagine Christ’s forgiving love washing over your soul like a stream of sparkling water. Imagine a brilliant light removing the shadows from your heart, replacing them with embracing love. Be open to new images for God’s cleansing and renewing activity in your life. If desired, share your images with the group or another person.

C. Explore theories of atonement
Over the centuries, theologians have suggested a number of explanations why Jesus had to die. Present a summary of the more prominent theories.

» Which theory resonates with you?
» What issues do you have with some other theories? Explain your answer.
» What are the pros and cons of having diverse understandings of atonement within your group or church?

Timothy Geddert reminds us that all of the atonement theories are abstractions and they all have biblical bases, but none alone can fully explain the mystery of how Jesus’ death makes us “at one” with God.¹

» How do you feel about living with such “mystery”?

D. Applying key concepts
Use the questions Darling poses (see ABS, pp. 18–19) to discuss the group’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences of forgiveness, hypocrisy, judgment, and freedom from sin. The author of Hebrews suggests that, with clean consciences, we may serve the living God.

» How is this manifested in our daily living? Give concrete examples.

E. Change
Reflect on the value of your congregation’s longstanding traditions, such as communion, foot washing, baptism, or worship styles (or perhaps potluck meals).

» What do you value about the “way it’s always been done”?
» What changes might make it more meaningful or superior to your current practice?
» What would it take to convince the congregation to change a tradition?
» How would your understanding of covenant affect your discernment process?

¹. Mark, Believers Church Bible Commentary, 389.