

For Times Such As These

Commending the Faith in Australia Today

Eight studies on understanding our context,
appreciating the challenges to Christianity,
and appropriately sharing our faith in Jesus Christ

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About these studies

Aim

The aim of these studies is to give people assistance and confidence in commending their faith to others. We live in a time in which genuine Christianity is little understood in secular multicultural Australia. Christians and the church are often portrayed negatively by the media. The Christian faith is to be shared not kept to ourselves, so these studies aim to facilitate that.

What these studies are about

These eight sessions cover the approach recommended in sharing faith, namely an approach that is neither defensive nor aggressive but confesses the faith or offers the faith for consideration. The context of Australia and the Western world is outlined and the characteristic criticisms of Christianity and the church are considered. The contribution of Christianity to society in several fields, especially health and education is pointed out. The atheistic challenge is identified and responded to. Ways people become Christians and points of contact for conversation are outlined.

Previous courses

This course has been taught by the author three times: twice in WA in churches in Perth and Bunbury and in NSW at the Centre for Ministry in Sydney. The course has been conducted over four evenings with two sessions an evening and held on Saturdays with three or four sessions each day. There are therefore different ways to hold the course depending on what suits the group. Individuals can go through the course as they wish.

Guidelines for group leaders

While these studies can be read by individuals they are best done in groups. There are opportunities for group discussion in threes. People benefit from hearing one another's comments. If done individually time should be taken to reflect on the questions.

Leading a group to use these studies requires no special knowledge or skills other than facilitating a group. The material can simply be worked through in the order it appears. The leader could invite different people to read a paragraph or two at a time. When there are questions there should be adequate time given for discussion. Those present can be divided into groups of three to allow people to contribute to the discussion. Everyone can be encouraged to participate without being required to do so. Each group can bring back to the whole group two or three comments they found particularly helpful. These will need to be brief.

Each study should take about an hour. Allow up to 90 minutes if there is a devotional to start (a Bible reading, comment and prayer) and the group is made up of more than two smaller discussion groups, namely nine or more people. Finish with a prayer or blessing.

The author

Rev Dr Christopher Walker has served in a range of positions and places in the Uniting Church including local church ministry in NSW, as a regional education and mission officer and as a Synod consultant in Queensland, as principal of Parkin-Wesley College in SA, as a mission officer for Parramatta-Nepean Presbytery, and for the Assembly as National Consultant: Christian unity, doctrine and worship. He also taught at Murdoch University and served the WA Synod for a semester. He is an adjunct lecturer in the School of Theology, Charles Sturt University. He lives in Sydney with his wife Dell. They have two adult children and three grandchildren.

He has a passion for theology, mission and discipleship. His interest in writing has resulted in various publications including *Peace Like A Diamond: facets of peace* (Spectrum, 2009) and *Living Life to the Full: Spirituality for today's baby boomers* (Openbook, 2005). He edited the book, *Building on the Basis* (MediaCom, 2012) which has papers from the Assembly Working Groups on Doctrine and Worship 2000 – 2011. He edited *Being and Doing Church, A Uniting Church Perspective* (MediaCom, 2015) to which he was the major contributor. His most recent book is *Thinking the Faith, Living the Faith: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (MediaCom, 2017).

Session 1

The approach taken

Common challenges to Christianity and the church.

Opening prayer

Gracious God, thank you for calling us to be followers of Jesus Christ your Son. Assist us by your Spirit to become more effective witnesses to you in our lives and in our words. May we learn through this course to be more able to share our faith with others and commend it to them. This we pray in the name and Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

Ice-breaker discussion starter

In order for people to get to know one another have people share their responses to the following.

- 1) State your name
- 2) Say something about your family situation
- 3) Tell people one particular interest you have (e.g. music, art, hobby, sport, travel).

The sessions for this course are about commending the faith especially in relation to the challenges or questions people have. This task is necessarily done in a specific context. So, we are talking about commending the faith in Australia today. In engaging with people, you will need to be even more specific and seek to respond to the particular issues and concerns of the person or people you are in contact with. Let me emphasise that we can only effectively commend the faith when we know people, when we have listened to them, and have established a relationship. In one-on-one situations and conversations you

know that particular person. In the context of speaking to a larger audience it is a matter of getting to know the people of your area. The issues and concerns of one location and group may well be different to those of another location (e.g. city or country, working class area or middle-class suburb). I will deal with broader challenges and questions that people often have in relation to the Christian faith in Australia today.

In threes invite people to share their answer to the question: What are you hoping to get from this course? Invite responses.

(Others have made such comments as the following. Find my voice. Be more confident. Become better equipped. Learn how to share faith. Get some ideas as to how to respond. Need to be brief. Understand the confessional approach. Discover entry points. Find natural ways to bring God into the conversation. Speak to younger generations that know very little about Christianity. Need to foster a genuine relationship. Learn about material to assist or offer.)

Let us start by pointing to some biblical passages that are relevant. The best-known verse is from 1 Peter, “Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15-16). Note that it says always be ready. I think we often miss opportunities to share our faith. I know I have. People have said something to me and I have not shared about the hope that I have in Jesus Christ. The manner in which we respond is also important. We are to do so with gentleness and respect. We are to be sensitive and respectful in how we respond. We commend our faith and that does not mean denigrating other’s ideas or being overly assertive. In Acts, after Paul was arrested because of a disturbance in the temple,

he asked to speak. He said, “Brothers and fathers listen to the defence that I now make before you.” He then shared about himself and his experience on the Damascus road (Acts 22:1f). In commending the faith to other people, it is appropriate to refer to one’s own experience. People do not just want to know your ideas, they want to know what difference faith has made to your life. You do not have to be a biblical expert or a theologian. Share out of your experience.

What is your greatest hesitation in sharing your faith?

In commending the faith, the intention is to share what Christians have claimed about God. While it is certainly possible to share one’s own idiosyncratic views, let me suggest that it is more appropriate and responsible to enable others to know what genuine orthodox Christianity is about. The goal is to commend the truthfulness and relevance of the Christian faith. We should accurately represent the gospel of Jesus Christ, present this in a Christ-like manner, and seek to help the other person to move from questioning or mistrust to openness. We cannot compel belief in Jesus Christ. We cannot create faith in someone else. We may be used by the Holy Spirit to open up the possibility of faith. That means taking into account the context and the person or audience.

When have you been ‘put off’ in a faith sharing situation?

In saying that we need to be sensitive and respectful of others, that does not mean we cannot offer constructive arguments for the faith and perhaps engage in deconstructive arguments against other world-views. At times, we may need to rebut false statements and point out that the objection is itself misguided.

For example, it can be useful when people say they reject God to ask them to describe the God they reject. In all likelihood, the God they reject is also what you would reject but that is not the God you know through Jesus Christ. You can clear away a false understanding and present your experience and knowledge of God.

Invite people in threes to share about the questions they have heard from people in relation to Christianity. What questions or challenges have people raised? Invite responses.

(Others have said the following. Faith is not rational, not scientific. The problem of suffering e.g. disasters and diseases – why does God not act? Why is there evil in the world? The failures of the church e.g. wars, abuse. Hypocrisy. The church is outdated and irrelevant. The Bible is unbelievable and the Old Testament is violent. It is alright for you but I do not need it, I can cope. It is a prop for the weak. They prayed and it did not work. Consumerist attitudes – what do I get out of it? Is Jesus the only way? What about other religions, New Age religion and other spirituality?)

A number of years ago the National Church Life Survey asked attenders what concerns about Christianity were most often raised by people in the wider community.

The most common objection to Christianity that attenders heard was that there are too many hypocrites, that Christians do not practice what they preach (39%). The next most common issues are the problem of suffering (28%) and whether the Bible is true (24%). Not for me say 18%. Around 16% have heard others say that faith is irrelevant. Only 6% heard that science disproves Christianity. The frequency of the hypocritical

accusation may be an easy throw-away line which allows them to dismiss considering the Christian faith. But it also underlies the importance of Christians living a consistent Christian life and acknowledging their failings. It is also interesting to note that women have a slightly different response to that of men. Women are more concerned about suffering while men are more likely to say Christian faith is fine but not for them. (From P. Kaldor et al, *Mission Under the Microscope*, Openbook, 1995, p80-81)

In threes ask people: How do you respond to the survey answers? Would the science and faith question have a higher percentage now and, if so, why? Do you think there a difference between men and women and, if so, suggest why? Invite responses.

It is important to be genuine and authentic. If people are to become Christians there is the need for an initial contact with God and Christianity. For those who do not grow up in the church usually there is some experience that leads them to consider faith. It may be an encounter with God or a change in their lives. They may seek out a church or Christians. Christians have an opportunity to make a positive impression and they do not have to be perfect people – just genuine people who acknowledge Jesus. They can show that faith relates to their everyday lives. As they enter into conversation and relationship with such people they can invite them to church or a small group. A warm but not excessive welcome is important. Reading the Bible and prayer can be encouraged with guidance given. As people participate they are likely to be led further and feel they belong. Christians can be something of a mentor helping people to have their questions responded to and incorporate them into the Christian community. All churches should be on the lookout for new people and engage with them in appropriate ways.

Otherwise they may well drift away and the opportune time has passed. All Christians can be ready to share something of their faith with others as opportunities arise. We will deal with the challenges identified in the NCLS survey in future sessions.

***What questions has this study raised for you?
Share your thoughts with the group.***