

A Conversation Guide for

Exploring Christianity After Religion* by Diana Butler Bass

Introduction

Leading Congregations in Mission (LCM) encourages congregations to discern and identify essential questions important to guiding how they discover, experiment, and live into deeper and new forms of ministry and mission. **Remember an essential question leads to significant conversation, discovery, and willingness to live into God's intended future.** It is important for congregational leaders to invite their congregations into the process of discovering and articulating essential questions overtime.

One way for congregations to identify essential questions is through conversations using scripture, books, poetry, and art that stretch our imagination and challenge us to explore and identify questions we have not considered before. To encourage this conversation excerpts from Christianity After Religion with added questions have been compiled for the Pastor Leadership Team to engage the congregation in learning and applying insights from Christianity After Religion. Diana Butler Bass writes on page 7, "... it is exceedingly wise for faithful people to intentionally engage emerging religious questions in order to reform, renew, and reimagine ancient traditions in ways that make sense to contemporary people."

LCM is about practicing ancient and new ways that embody and live the concerns and passion of Christ. Begin each conversation with a missional practice such as *Dwelling in the Word* or *Living With the Questions* located at <http://missionalleaders.org>. Taking time at the beginning of each conversation to offer the *Mission Prayer* will help the congregation awaken to God's presence and purposes. Let's offer this prayer so we as disciples and congregations can become a visible blessing of God's love and peace in the world.

Mission Prayer

God, where will your Spirit lead today?

Help me be fully awake and ready to respond.

Grant me courage to risk something new

and become a blessing of your love and peace.

Amen.

This quote from *Words of Counsel* shared at the 2013 World Conference affirms the importance of spiritual growth and guidance for enriching our focus in Christ's mission:

Involvement in Christ's mission is enriched and focused through spiritual growth and guidance. Following direction already emerging, the presiding evangelist and the Order of Evangelists, in concert with their colleagues in ministry, should concentrate on

spiritually forming communities of disciples and seekers that live deeply and generously in Christ's Spirit.

The following three links are sources to supplement this 'conversation guide':

1. <http://religions.pewforum.org> - "Trends in Religious Affiliation, 2007 – 2012" to note the rising numbers of people who are leaving faith behind and church membership decline (i.e. "unaffiliated").
2. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5DoQMGyjCO> – A video interview of Diana Butler Bass.
3. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42E2fAWM6rA> - "Lost Generation"

The excerpts and questions in this 'conversation guide' were first presented as a study guide by Katie Harmon-McLaughlin for the Orange Community of Christ Congregation and now adapted for LCM.

Note: all excerpts from Christianity After Religion are indented and in italics. Various questions follow each set of excerpts.

Excerpts from Christianity After Religion with Questions for Conversation

"The Beginning" (Pages 1-7)

Strange as it may seem in this time of cultural anxiety, economic near collapse, terrorist fear, political violence, environmental crisis, and partisan anger, I believe that the United States (and not only the U.S.) is caught up in the throes of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves, and expressing faith are being, to borrow a phrase, 'born again.' P. 5

This book is concerned with religion and change—specifically how Christianity, especially Christianity in the United States, is changing and how people are questioning conventional patterns of faith and belief. (Bold added) P. 7

Question: What change have you experienced since the 1960s and 70s that breeds spiritual awakening today? Consider some of the "signs" of awakening that Bass notes.

Exponential change creates exponential fear along with exponential hope. Massive transformation creates the double edged cultural sword of decline and renewal. Exponential change ends those things that people once assumed and trusted to be true. At the same time, upheaval opens new pathways to the future. Change is about endings and beginnings and the necessary interrelationship of the two. P.6

Question: How can change evoke both fear and opportunity?

Faith can neither insulate from nor prevent change... Religion rarely protects people from change. P.6

Question: What do you think about the concept that faith can change? How does our Enduring Principle “Continuing Revelation” prepare us for such change?

“Part I—The End of Religion” (Chapters 1-3)

“The End of the Beginning” – Chapter One (Pages 11-37)

In the last decade, Christianity in the U.S. has undergone tectonic shifts that have altered the nation’s religious landscape. P. 12-13

Newsweek reported on two major polls in American religion, both significant, sophisticated, and scientifically grounded research about grassroots American beliefs. According to Newsweek, these polls found that the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 points since 1990, from 86-76 percent, while the percentage of people who claim they are unaffiliated with any particular faith has doubled in recent years, rising to 16 percent. P. 13

Question: How are these shifts altering the nation’s “religious landscape”?

All sorts of people—even mature, faithful Christians—are finding conventional religion increasingly less satisfying, are attending church less regularly, and are longing for new expressions of spiritual community. P.15

“...in the United States... actual attendance at weekly religious services is significantly down, that people mix and switch religions more easily than in the past, that traditional religious institutions are in a sustained decline, and that even general belief in God has eroded over the last thirty years. P. 16

Questions: What are your experiences with this decline? What does it mean for you as a Christian, and a church goer, that mass numbers of people are leaving churches? Bass cites anger, boredom, and re-prioritizing of time as some of the basic reasons for this decline. Do you, or do you know someone, who can relate to these reasons?

(See Stories of Disconnect - Anne, Ellen and Sheila p. 20-26)

She said what others only suspect or secretly think—that there is a profound and painful disconnect between what Christianity (and other religions as well) has become and what we perceive that it should be. P.21

They experienced a jarring disjunction between their understandings of God and Jesus and what their churches taught and proclaimed and how they acted. P.25

Question: What is the difference between Ellen & Sheila, between individualism and reaching for deeper connection? (P.24)

People are fed up. They are unwilling to put up with religious business-as-usual. And, perhaps surprisingly, their unwillingness—the rejection of religion—is also hope for the future of faith communities. P.26

...endings are often beginnings. Recession is the gateway to renewal. Dressed in a secular guise, this is actually a core teaching of many faith traditions—notably the idea of resurrection in Christianity, but also reincarnation in some Eastern religions, death and birth in ancestor worship, and cycles of nature in tribal or pagan faiths. The spiritual pattern suggests the possibility for new things to emerge from the demise of the old, and religion itself is not exempt from this process. P.28

Questions: How are rejection and death of religion actually signs of hope for the future of faith communities? In what ways do you think the church in society is living into its own story of death and resurrection? What is your vantage point?

Revivals are essentially rituals of personal religious renewals that are often emotional and always involve a conversion of some sort. P. 28

Awakenings are movements of cultural revitalization that “eventuate in basic restructuring of our institutions and redefinitions of our social goals.” Awakenings begin when old systems break down, in “periods of cultural distortion and grave personal stress, when we lose faith in the legitimacy of our norms, the viability of our institutions, and the authority of our leaders in church and state.” P.29

Questions: What have been “revival” moments for you? What examples of “awakenings” have you been a part of where something “old” broke down and “revitalization” occurred?

(See North American Christian Awakenings Mapped in Five Stages of Change P. 33, 34) -
(Based on work by McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform* pp. 12ff)

Note: *... the first two stages are stages of breakdown and decline; the second two are stages of imagination and possibility; the last is a stage of reform of institutions and social change. In this terrain, changed minds and hearts—that is, what we think about ourselves, God, and the world—precede institutional change (which means... that those people who would seek to change minds by changing institutions are probably working backward). P. 34*

- 1. During a CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY individuals cannot “honestly sustain the common set of religious understandings by which they believe they should act.” People wonder if they are the only ones who see the problems and experience the frustrations of the old ways. Thus, they begin to question conventional doctrines, practices, and their sense of identity.*
- 2. People then experience CULTURAL DISTORTION, during which they conclude that their problems are not the result of personal failings, but rather “institutional malfunction,” as they seek ways to change these structures or reject them.*
- 3. Significant individuals or communities then begin to articulate a NEW VISION, new understandings of human nature, God, spiritual practices, ethical commitments, and hope for the future. New possibilities begin to coalesce that make more sense in the light of new experiences than did the old ones.*
- 4. As a new vision unfolds, small groups of people who understand the necessity for change begin to FOLLOW A NEW PATH; they experiment, create, and innovate with religious,*

political, economic, and family structures in a search for a new way of life. They develop new practices to give life meaning and make the world different. They embody the new vision and invite others to do so as well.

5. *INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION occurs when the innovators manage to “win over that large group of undecided folks” who finally “see the relevance” of the new path and embrace new practices. When the undecideds “flip”, institutional change can finally take place.*

Individuals may move through these stages at differing personal rates than large groups do, and the stages overlap in time and space. P.34

Questions: What stage, if any, are you experiencing? Do you see your congregational or denominational story in this description?

But waking up is only the first step toward awakening. To awaken spiritually means that we develop a new awareness of God’s energy in the world in order to discern what is needed to open the possibilities for human flourishing. Discernment leads to new understandings of self, neighbor, and God—a vision of what can and should be. Thus, awakening demands we act upon the new vision. Wake up, discern, imagine, and do. What will make a difference to the future is awakening to a faith that fully communicates God’s love—a love that transforms how we believe, what we do, and who we are in this world. P.37

Questions: How does acting on our vision make a difference? In what ways do you think we have been acting on our vision? In what ways do you think we are called to expand our vision and actions?

Chapter Two “Questioning the Old Gods” (Pages 39-63)

But the loss of obligation is not only a religious phenomenon; it is a social phenomenon, as people now organize their lives by association and negotiation. By the mid-twentieth century, we developed a choice-based society, one driven by preference and desire instead of custom and obligation... Americans, even those of modest means, exercise more choices in a single day than some of our ancestors did in a month or perhaps even a year. From the moment we awaken, we are bombarded with choices... P.40-41

Damnation is a much less powerful motivator than in ages past... p.42

Question: How are the “loss of obligation” and the increase of choice impacting religious institutions?

When pushed, more than half of Americans admitted that these views had no impact on their political or business practices, leading Herberg to conclude that belief in God might well have been social convention, a framework ‘providing them with some fundamental context of normativity and meaning.’ P.44-46

Questions: How serious is your belief in God? How common do you think “superficial faith” is in our society? In the section “1960 and 2010”, Bass compares the data about belief in God and the rise of those claiming that they are unaffiliated. Herberg’s study questions the seriousness of people’s belief and the way it actually impacts their life.

Three Big Questions: Who do I believe? How should I act? Who am I?

Belief, behavior and belonging are three intertwined strands of faith. P.47

Believing: What do I think? P. 48

Belief questions concern how people conceptualize God, how they understand religious teachings, and what they think to be right and wrong. P. 48

Thus there are four American Gods: the Authoritarian God (31 percent of the population), the Benevolent God (23 percent), the Critical God (16 percent), and the Distant God (24 percent). The authoritarian God, a wrathful sin-hating deity, may come closest to beliefs about God that once dominated American Protestant-majority culture. But other images shape American belief in God as well—the Benevolent God, the forgiving friend of sinners, peacemaker, and caring healer; the Critical God, the bringer of justice who will make all right at the end; and the Distant God, the cosmic creative force behind and beyond the natural universe. P. 49 &50

Behaving: How should I act?

Both of these markers of behavior—churchgoing and praying—seem to indicate that American religion has not changed very much since 1960. However, underneath the relatively stable numbers, both practices are considerably different than they were a generation or two ago. People attend religious services less often (even if they want to present a public image that they are regular churchgoers), and when they do attend public worship, a significant number of people attend the service of faith other than their own. And, in the case of prayer, the most widely held spiritual practice, blending, borrowing, and mixing forms are far more common than maintaining a single, church-approved rite, ritual, and style. When it comes to how Americans act out their faith, people still want to be seen as churchgoers and pray-ers, yet flux and fluidity in trying to figure out how to connect with God through practice rule the day. P. 57

Belonging: Who Am I?

If religious belief is changing and religious practice is in flux, it only makes sense that people’s sense of belonging is not particularly stable, as millions switch religious traditions seeking new communities of belief and practice, communities more congruent with the choices they are making. Belonging is an important aspect of religion. P.57

There are some assumptions in our culture about kind of person a Christian is, or what kind of person goes to church and still has the nerve to talk about it, and it is frustrating to be lumped in together with them. I’ve noticed that people who are deeply committed

to Christianity will identify themselves as a "Christ follower" or a "disciple of Jesus." You can almost see them stepping away from Christianity in their reply. It's their way of saying, 'It's not what you think. I'm trying to do something different. I'm trying to be someone different.' P.58

Questions: How has this model: believing, then behaving, and then belonging impacted Christianity in the United States? How have you experienced this order lived out in our own denomination or in other churches? What resonated or intrigued you most in each of these three sections?

In such a situation, diversity is a given (since no new norm has arisen) and dogmatism is a problem (since there are so many options and no single option can claim to be the ultimate answer). Indeed statistical research might prove that philosopher Robert Wright is more correct when he suggests that God is currently undergoing an 'evolution' than Richard Dawkins is when he claims that God is a delusion. Not an end, but a beginning? Are there signs of longing in the midst of discontent? Are new answers arising as people question the old gods? P. 63

Questions: How is God currently undergoing an "evolution"? What do you think it means that people are questioning the "old gods"?

Chapter Three: "When Religion Fails" (Page 65-93)

(Suggestion: begin this chapter review with this prayer found on P. 83)

O God, make me discontented with things the way they are in the world and in my own life. Make me notice the stains when people get spilled on. Make me care about the slum child downtown, the misfit at work, the people crammed into the mental hospital, the men, women and youth behind bars. Jar my complacency, expose my excuses, and get me involved in the life of my city and world. Give me integrity once more, O God, as we seek to be changed and transformed, with a new understanding and awareness of our common humanity. Adapted from a prayer by Robert Raines, Wittenburg Door, 1971.

(See Word Association: Spiritual & Religious P. 68-71)

They have essentially substituted the word 'religion' for institutional religion and 'spirituality' for lively faith. P.71

(See The Business of Religion P. 71-76)

How have you experienced the church as a corporate model? How do you think this paradigm has impacted the church and our understanding of the nature of God? P.72

If North Americans and Europeans perceive 'religion' as 'institutional religion', it may be because the denominations did this to themselves. The perception is largely correct. Churches may have a more altruistic product line than GM, but the history of big business and the big business of faith are intertwined... I frequently meet clergy who

either publicly or privately confesses to discontent, anger, and doubt with the organizations they serve. Although they often like their local congregations, they wonder if their denominations can change or even survive. P.75

(See 2000-2012 The “Horrible Decade” p.77-83 RE: 2001 “9/11”, 2002 “Roman Catholic Sex Abuse Scandal”, 2003 “Protestant Conflict over Homosexuality”, 2004 “The Religious Right wins the battle, but loses the war”, 2007 “The Great Religious Recession.”)

Question: How have some religious people’s scandalous/ negatively perceived interactions in society, especially by the religious right, damaged the “image” of religion in the U.S. over the past 10 years?

(See *Holy Discontent* p.83-88)

When channeled wisely and fueled by a hopeful vision for the future, discontent can be the beginning of genuine social transformation by inspiring courageous action. P. 85

Questions: How can discontent actually indicate an authentic spiritual longing? What can we learn from discontent?

(See *Outbursts* p.88-91)

Religious discontent is indistinguishable from the history of spiritual renewal and awakening. P.88

Religious faiths struggle between the pastoral and the prophetic, comfort and agitation... The history of Christianity can be told as a story of the tension between order and prophesy. P.88

Such things are part of the long historical process of renewing faith. How would any religious tradition stay alive over hundreds or thousands of years if not for the questions of discontent and the creativity brought forth by longing? P. 90

Questions: How do you see our enduring principle of Continuing Revelation and/or our understanding of being a prophetic people in this section? In what ways do you notice/feel this tension between the pastoral and the prophetic?

(See *Energy of And* P. 91-94)

*In a simple shift of phrase, many Americans are articulating their discontent with organized religion and their hope that somehow ‘religion’ might retain its true bearings in the Spirit. Sometimes, much is communicated in a word—institutional failure and longing. One of the most significant religion stories of the decade can be found in the overlooked conjunction **and**. P.94*

Questions: How can one be both spiritual and religious? Could this balance be the future of faith?

(See *The Great (Re) Turning* P. 94-99)

Religio: faith, living, subjective experience including love, veneration, devotion, awe, worship, transcendence, trust, a way of life, an attitude toward the divine or nature... P.97

*Instead, it is a Great Returning to ancient understandings of the human quest for the divine. Christianity of the Great Returning is not quite the same thing as an answer, where behavior is not following a list of dos and don'ts, and where belonging to Christian community is less like joining an exclusive club and more of a relationship with God and others. **Religio** is never satisfied with old answers, codified dogmas, institutionalized practices, or invested power. **Religio** invites every generation to experience God—to return to the basic questions of believing, behaving, and belonging—and explore each anew with an open heart. P.99*

Question: How do you understand **religio** and how might that be a middle ground for those seeking both religion and spirituality?

“Part II: A New Vision” (Chapters 4-7)

Chapter Four: “Believing” (Pages 103-135)

*If the Age of Faith was a time of “faith **in** Jesus” and the Age of Belief a period of “faith **about** Christ,” the Age of the Spirit is best understood as a Christianity based in an “experience **of** Jesus.” P.109*

Question: How have our understandings of Christ shifted throughout Christian history?

(See *The Religious Question: What Do I Believe?* P. 111-112 especially last two paragraphs)

Question: How have the WHAT questions impacted you and/or the church?

(See *Spiritual Question 1: How Do I Believe?* P. 113-114)

*When we ask **how**, we are not asking for a fact, conclusion, or opinion. Rather, we are seeking a hands-on deeper knowledge of the thing—a neighborhood or city, a craft or recipe, an open possibility, an idea, a sense of ourselves or of a relationship. **How** moves us around in the question. Instead of being above the information, giving an expert opinion about something, **how** weaves our lives with the information as we receive, review, reflect, and act upon what we sought. **How** provides actionable information; we can choose to act upon the answer or not, and we choose the extent of our action. **How** is a question of meaning and purpose that pushes people into a deeper engagement in the world, rather than memorizing facts. P.113*

(See *Spiritual Question 2: What Do I Believe?* P. 114-116)

In previous centuries, belief had nothing to do with one’s weighing of evidence or intellectual choice. Belief was not a doctrinal test. Instead, was more like a marriage

vow... you could not hold, claim, or possess a belief about God, but you could cherish, love, trust in, or devote yourself to God. P.117

Question: What do you think about Butler Bass's description of what she sees as a shift in Christianity from a focus on doctrine and "litmus tests" of belief to a focus on experiential belief? p.117 "I set my heart upon..."

(See *Spiritual Insight: Belief as Experience* (compare belief in terms faith and reason) P. 116-128)

In Greek, there is a verb for the experience of believing God: "to faith" (i.e. pist-). In English, however, "faith" is a noun and not a verb. With no equivalent active word, English translators rendered the Greek verb "to faith" in English as "to believe." The verb "to believe" (meaning to believe, prize or treasure," as explained above) appears frequently in the English Bible. It typically occurs without a direct object, in the forms "I believe" or "I believe you" (or "him" "her," or "God.>"). P. 119

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish, but will have life eternal. (CEB)" ... the verse (everyone who believes) would better read, "everyone who trusts in Jesus" or "everyone who directs his or her heart toward Jesus" will not perish. P. 119

Question: How does it help you to think of belief, not as an opinion, (see P. 118) but rather as what you place your faith in and have given your heart to?

Rather, reason softened religion's sharp edges by providing balance, harmony, and order in a supernatural world too often ruled by a seemingly capricious God. Reason was beautiful. And it was mystical... Our own age has conflicted view of reason, because we understand its limits, feel its inhumane touch, and doubt the power of pure reason to solve our problems... To be spiritual AND religious is to call for a new wholeness of experience and reason, to rest itch experience with human wisdom and to renew reason through an experience of awe. P.127

Question: In your own faith, how do you sense the balance between experiential belief and reason?

The creeds, as doctrinal statements, were intended as healing instruments, life-giving words that would draw God's people into a deeper engagement with divine things. When creeds become fences to mark the borders of heresy, they lose their spiritual energy. Doctrine is to be the balm of a healing experience of God, not a theological scalpel to wound and exclude people. P. 134

Question: How do you feel about some people who say they can't be Christians because they don't believe every statement in the creeds?

Chapter Five: *Behaving* (Pages 137-168)

I grew up in the church building, learning not only in the sanctuary, but in the kitchen, the parish hall, the basement, the classrooms, and the hallways. Slowly, I learned how to be Christian. I learned about reading the Bible, singing, listening to sermons, feeding hungry people, gathering used clothing for those in need, saintliness (and sinfulness too). Faith was inherited, but it was also a craft, joining together skills and community. P.139

Question: In what ways did you learn how to be Christian or Community of Christ through witnessing and engaging in the practice? Consider Diana's story about learning how to cut and arrange flowers (P. 141-142). Have you ever felt obligated or gotten the response, "because we have always done it this way" when asking WHY? Are meaning and purpose important in your faith life? Can you see how they are important in today's culture?

Those on a search for personal authenticity, for expressive faith, will not abide 'dull habit' as a substitute for meaningful spiritual experience. P.143

*That is the gap of hypocrisy, or the practice gap, of doing one thing and saying another. When it comes to religion, the practice gap is the worst gap of all—it angers participants and alienates seekers. Asking **how** before you ask **what** and **why** is the road that leads right into this gap. P.144*

Question: How have you experienced the "practice gap"?

Practices are things we do that shape who we are as they awaken us to God and others. P.145

Questions: What do you do that has changed your life in the last five to ten years and has moved you toward God and your neighbor? What might you do? P.146

[Practices] are at the heart of a vibrant, emerging faith. What should we do? For Christians, the question should be, as clearly and sharply as possible: What practices embody the teaching and compassion of Jesus? P. 151

Question: What are your thoughts as you reflect on the questions quoted above?

Imitation takes us out of the realm of obligation and requirement toward the realm of relationship and discovery. Imitation connects us to others as it opens the door to self-awareness and mastery. We are part of a great guild of human activity, apprentices to the art of being truly human. But imitation must be linked with intentionality... P.156

Questions: How does the WHY matter when engaging in practice? P.159-160 Do you consider practices as ACTIVE and participating in the reign of God on earth?

Spiritual practices are more like crafts than programs. They are activities you discern, choose, and learn, actions in which you develop skill and mastery to help you become a different sort of person and... deepen your love of God and neighbor. P. 163

*Spiritual practices are the bridge between doing something—such as engaging a hobby— and being someone shaped by mastery of an action. But how do you do it? What moves an activity, especially a spiritual one, from the realm of external plan to internal transformation? The two elements key to learning spiritual practices are **finding a teacher and time**. P.163-164*

Question: Does this section impact the way you view the purpose of spiritual practices? Refer to pages 167-168.

Chapter Six: Belonging (Pages 169-198)

Belonging is intimately related to being. To belong is to be. So what happens when old forms of belonging disappear? When the old labels no longer express who we are? When family ties and denominations go into decline? People lose a sense of themselves- this is what happens. Instead of being grounded, people feel unmoored. And with that comes grief, often unnamed, but still experienced in a myriad of ways. P.171

Questions: Have you experienced this grief? How is this experienced in congregations around the country?

If a community—a church, a town, an organization, a group of any sort—senses its end, the greater the need becomes to search out the family tree and to locate itself again in the larger story of continuity and change, to find where it belongs. Thus, at times of pitched cultural upheaval, a typical spiritual response includes heightened anxiety about identity—about who we are and the direction of our lives. P.172

Question: How have you heard this question expressed, WHO AM I? in the church, society, your own life?

The Religious Question: Who Am I? P. 173

Spiritual Question 1: Where am I? P. 175

*In this context of mobility, philosophers and theologians say that the most logical understanding of the self is that of a seeker, searcher, nomad, traveler, pilgrim, or tourist—identities of discovery and fluidity. Who am I? has become the question **Where am I?** I know that I am because **that** is where I was, **this** is where I am, and I **am going** somewhere else. P.177*

Question: How is your own identity shaped by your context?

Movement energizes most biblical tales.... the Hebrew Bible is a sort of family spiritual pilgrimage memoir, a record of a communal journey to and from God and back again that reveals ever increasing faithfulness, deepening awareness of what it means to be a Jew, and a widening understanding of God and God's love and justice. P.179 (See the whole paragraph for the list of people referenced in the scripture story.)

Question: How are journey, God, and selfhood interwoven?

Spiritual Question 2: Whose Am I? P. 180

This, I suspect, is the root of many people's anxiety about church that religion is the purveyor of a sort of salvation that does not address their lived struggles. So those who once 'believed' in this sort of salvation migrate away from church, seeking instead something they call spirituality. P.182

Salvation is not being saved from ourselves, escaping some dreadful fate of judgment, damnation, and hellfire at the hands of a wrathful God; rather, it is being saved to ourselves, finding what we lost and the joy of discovery in the hands of a loving Creator... Salvation and spirituality and self are related—spirituality connects us to the whole, allows us a glimpse into our place within God and God's world, giving a new sense of health and well being in our situations and identities. P.182-183

Questions: What do you think about this concept of salvation? How have you seen other versions of "salvation?" drive people away from church?

"Churches need to ask the question 'Who are we in God? In order to move ahead.'" p.183

Without intentionally adding the prepositional phrase 'in God,' we might forget that spiritual journeys are entwined with the Great I AM. "In" orients selfhood in a larger relationship; we are still ourselves, but we are not isolated individuals. We exist 'in' something. P.184

"Who am I in God?" This is one of the classical questions of Christian spirituality, one rooted in the person of Jesus... P. 185

*Thus, the biblical query "Who am I in God?" is a starting point for Christian spirituality. Why do Christians pray? Christians do not pray to have wishes granted; rather, Christians pray to find themselves **in** God and that they might be more aware of their motives and actions. Why do Christians worship? Christians do not worship to be entertained; rather, Christians listen to sermons, sing, and partake of bread and wine in community to be **in** Jesus's presence and come to know themselves better. Why do Christians serve others? Christians do not act charitably to earn heavenly credit; rather, Christians find Jesus **in** their lives because when they find themselves **in** God, pretense slips away to reveal the truest dimensions of selfhood and gives individuals the power to act in transforming ways. P. 187*

Question: How does this preposition "in God" help you understand your own and others' identity differently?

'Who is God in me?' is the mystic's question, a spiritual query that is fearsome to utter... 'Who is God in me?' Is that there God dwells? Asking the question in reverse is like Moses asking to see God's face, to behold God in person, and believe that God is in his own person. This inquiry moves us to holy ground. P.188

Rather, he is insisting, 'You are sacred space; you are where the Divine One dwells. Others see God in you! Be aware that you are holy geography.' P.189

We belong to God because God is in each and every one of us. P.190

Questions: How does asking this question in reverse shape your understanding of your identity? Do you see yourself as sacred space, holy geography?

Spiritual Insight: From Proposition to Preposition P. 190

*We are not only in God, but we exist **through** God—rather like the difference between standing in a doorway and walking through one. As a movement preposition, "through" reminds us that we are not static. Through God new possibilities open for growth as we move beyond our perceived limitations to new strengths, insight, and compassion. And the reverse question is equally helpful: 'Who is God **through** me?' What does God actually look like to others when I enact God's love and justice in the world? What vision of God is moving through me? Christian spirituality of the self enjoins that God is not only located **IN** us, but that God acts, speaks, heals, loves, touches, and celebrates **through** us.* P. 190-191

*Church is no longer membership in an institution, but a journey toward the possibility of a relationship with people, a community, a tradition, a sacred space, and, of course, God. With complete and certain assurance, I confess that I no longer hold propositional truths about Christianity; rather, I experience propositional truths of being found **in** God **through** Christ **with** others **TOWARD** the kingdom.* P.192

Questions: What impact do propositions and prepositions have on your own God image and self-image? How does God move through you to reach others? Consider the prayer of St. Patrick's breastplate on p.191.

Spiritual and Religious: The Relational Self P. 193

(Read the story on p. 193.)

"Just putting a bunch of people together in a church building doesn't make them a community. Community is about relationships and making connections. That's spiritual work. And it may or may not happen in a church." P. 193

*The sad fact is that many churches are not very good at being communities. They answer the question **where** by saying, 'at first and main.' They answer the question **who** by putting up a sign that reads, 'St. Peter's Episcopal Church.' Some churches think this is an adequate explanation of identity, when millions report that they are search for vibrant spiritual community.* P.193-194

Questions: What do you think about the assumption that spirituality is related to individualism? How can individualism still be found in church life? How is creating community "spiritual work?"

This sort of belonging insists that the community must be a dynamic, ongoing love, a passionate romance between the divine and the mundane that seduces us into an intimate relationship with God, our neighbors, and our own deepest self. P. 196

Questions: What do you think a community like this would look like? Do you feel like you are a part one now?

If we think of belonging only as membership in a club, organization, or church, we miss the point. Belonging is the risk to move beyond the world we know, to venture out on pilgrimage, to accept exile. And it is the risk of being with companions on that journey, God a spouse, friends, children, mentors, teachers, people who came from the same place we did, people who came from entirely different places, saints and sinners of all sorts, those known to us and those unknown, our secret longings, questions, and fears. Whose am I? O God, I am thine! P. 197-198

Chapter Seven: The Great Reversal (Pages 199-214)

*“A legacy of it is the tendency still today to ask, in explanation of ‘the religion’ of a people, What do they believe?—as though this were a basic, even **the** basic question.” (Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1962), pp.39-40.) P. 202*

...it is hard to think of any other sort of community that people join by agreeing to a set of principles. P. 202

Relationships lead to craft which leads to experiential belief. This is the path to becoming and being someone different. The path to transformation. P. 203

Question: How is Bass’s description of joining a knitting group different, or similar, to what you have experienced in church communities?

Step 1: Belonging P. 204

Jesus’ public ministry started when he formed a community. P. 204

Christianity did not begin with a confession. It began with an invitation into friendship, into creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service. P.205

Jesus began with the inner life, the heart. P. 205

Faith, truth, freedom—all of it—is relational, not speculative... Vital faith begins with desire and disposition, not a doctrinal test. P.205

Love is the connective tissue of relationship, the internal disposition that reaches up toward God and out toward others. It is impossible for love to exist in isolation. Love needs expression in relationships and communities. To love, one must risk belonging. P. 206

Questions: What is the difference between joining and joining in? How is belonging essential for faith?

Step 2: Behaving P.207

The early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice. Jesus' followers did not sit around a fire and listen to lectures on Christian theology. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, comforted the grieving, fasted, and forgave. These actions induced wonder, gave them courage, empowered hope, and opening up a new vision of God. By doing things together, they began to see differently. P. 207

It is profoundly important to grasp this. P. 207

They discovered that proclaiming the kingdom was not a matter of teaching doctrine; rather, the kingdom was a matter of imitating Jesus' actions. Jesus did not tell them to have faith. He pushed them into the world to practice faith. The disciples did not hope the world would change. They changed it. And in doing so, they themselves changed. P. 207-208.

...actions shape faith. Spiritual practices engender hope. Behavior opens the door for believing. Doing what once seemed difficult or impossible empowers courage to envision a different world and believe we can make a difference. Without practices, faith is but an empty promise. P. 208

Questions: How does behavior originate in belonging? Based on the example of Jesus' earliest followers, how do you think the church today is called "behave"? Have you ever been changed through Christian practice?

Step 3: Believing P. 208

(Read p. 208 about Peter's confession of faith.)

In the biblical pattern of faith, believing comes last. P. 209

Question: What do you think about believing as a response to a relationship, or a way of life?

Experiential faith does not always get this exactly right, as it can tend toward unhelpful literalism and misunderstand the context of ancient texts and practices, but experiential Christianity gets one thing very right: faith is not an intellectual exercise. It is a spiritual path. P.213

Questions: How does this section impact your understanding of other faith movements around the world? Even with those you disagree with doctrinally, what good have you seen come out of those traditions?

Experiential Christianity: The New Vision P.214

*In places where Christianity is very new and very old, where churches are being built and churches are being closed, “the experience **of** the divine is displacing theories **about** it.”*

*Relational community, intentional practice, and experiential belief are forming a new vision for what it means to be Christian in the 21st century, a pattern of spiritual awakening that is growing around the world. We belong to God and to one another, connected to all in a web of relationships, and there we find our truest selves. We behave in imitation of Jesus, practicing our faith with deliberation as we anticipate God’s reign of justice and love. We believe with our entire being, trusting, loving, and devoted to the God whom we have encountered through one another and in the world. We are; we act; we know. Belonging, behaving, and believing—shifted back to their proper and ancient order. This is the shape of awakened Christianity, a faith that is a deeply spiritual religion. No longer merely religion, but **religio**. The great reversal is the Great Returning of Christianity back toward what Jesus preached: a beloved and loving community, a way of life practiced in the world, a profound trust in God that eagerly anticipates God’s reign of mercy and justice. P.214*

Questions: What do you think about this pattern of faith? Does this resonate with your own desires or experiences?

“Part III Awakening” (Chapters 8-9)

“Chapter Eight: Great Awakening” (Pages 217-251)

It may seem as if religion is on a trajectory of unstoppable change, but genuine spiritual change does not result from historical determinism. Spiritual awakening is not ultimately the work of invisible cultural forces. Instead it is the work of learning to see differently, of prayer, and of conversion. It is something people do. P.220

The new spiritual awakening rehearses paradise, the awareness of love’s liberating and healing power. God is with us in this world. P.221

Question: How is awakening something we do?

The spiritual revolution, with its emphasis on connection, egalitarianism, and human rights, could be credited with opening the path of acceptance of much technological and social change. P.223

Question: What do you think technological and social changes have to do with spiritual awakening?

The Fourth Great Awakening would result in a more experiential, pluralistic, holistic, environmentally focused, and communal sort of American religion and politics. P.224

There is no smooth path toward awakening; change is a journey of hard work. P. 225

The 4th Great Awakening is not a quest to escape the world. Instead, it moves into the heart of the world, facing the challenges head-on to take what is old—failed institutions,

scarred landscapes, wearied religions, a wounded planet—and make them workable and human in the service of the global community. No miracles here. God does not heal without human hands. The hard work is the possibility... These practices require attention, time, and teaching; they need to be formed and nurtured in a guild-like community of beginners, novices, craftspeople, masters, and innovators. Through the self, community, and practice, the awakened romantics experience God, discovering new possibilities of trust, devotion, and love directed toward their neighbors and dedicated to anticipating the future of God's peace, goodness, and justice at work in the world now. The goal is not to bring about a utopian kingdom; rather, the goal is to perform the reign of God in and for the life of the world. P.239

Awakenings can be slowed—or potentially stopped—if people fail to understand the times in which they live and respond with fear instead of hope. Awakenings are both the work of God, and they are hard work. P.245

Questions: How do awakenings take work? How can change be difficult? How do you see this change being lived out (or how does it need to be lived out) in the church?

Whatever it may be called, it is the wind of the 4th Great Awakening, version 2.0, the America part of the Great Global Awakening: a generative spirit, a creative and innovative openness, a sense of hope-filled realism, of pragmatic idealism, of an interconnectedness of all things, of urgency and wonder, and of experiencing the divine in the here and now. Whatever it's called, it is powerful and real, it is changing the lives of countless millions, and it is the motivating source for change in North America, in Europe, and around the world. P.247

Questions: How have you experienced this awakening in our culture? What characteristics have you noticed?

Fear is a powerful motivator and the good old days seem pretty good to those caught in a web of economic change, collapsing industries, and social insecurity. Many people in such movements sincerely love God, their families, and their country, longing for the best for their communities and the future. Reactionary religions often understand themselves to be truly compassionate faiths, offering clear paths of authority and order in days that seem unhinged. To them, complete conformity to a singular interpretation of the Bible or Constitution or both—whether freely embraced or legislated by those in power—is the only way to health, happiness, and salvation. Yet coercion and fear are never compassionate. The only test of compassion is love-in-practice. P.248

Questions: How have you experienced fear or witnessed fear and division during times of change and transformation? How is fear a positive indication of genuine transformation? (Bass says those who are the most fearful are those who are often closest to REAL change.)

In this situation, (awakenings where there is fear, anxiety) leaders and spiritual communities are not needed to comfort people feeling lost in a time of change. Instead, spiritual leaders need to help transform these fears into urgency and courage. P. 251

Awakening is not a miracle we receive; it is actually something we can do. P. 251

Questions: What do we need to repent of in order to imagine the kingdom of heaven drawing near? What do we need to change about ourselves? (See scripture reference to “Repent,” cried Jesus found on P. 251)

‘Chapter Nine: Performing Awakening’ (Pages 253-269)

This awakening is being performed in the networked world, where the border between sacred and secular has eroded and their love of God and neighbor—and the new vision of belonging, behaving, and believing—is being staged far beyond conventional religious communities. Although churches seem the most natural space to perform spiritual awakening, the disconcerting reality is that many people in Western society see churches more a museums of religion than sacred stages that dramatize the movement of God’s spirit. P.258

Questions: How have you experienced spiritual awakening outside of the church? How can the church be more than a religious museum and actually dramatize the movement of God’s spirit?

Questions: What do you to do to participate in awakening? To rouse others? To move to spread the good news of a new spiritual awakening? Perform faith. Display the kingdom in all that you do. Anticipate the reign of God in spiritual practices. Act up and act out for God’s love.” p.259

*The people of God must live the kingdom by purposefully **doing** actions that rehearse love, charity, kindness, goodness, mercy, peace, forgiveness, and justice. P. 260*

*Performance involves the hard work of practice, but it also entails **play**... Mirth is essential to vibrant spirituality. Making a difference in the world, worshipping God, embracing new friends, feasting together, celebrating small successes doing meaningful work—these are things that make people happy. P.260*

Questions: How do/can you LIVE the kingdom, preparing and practicing for awakening? Do you find joy in the practices of your faith?

There is no special technique that can be employed, no set program to follow to start a great awakening. If you want it to happen, you just have to do it. You have to perform its wisdom, live into its hope, and ‘act as if’ the awakening is fully realized. And you have to do it with others in acts of mutual creation. P.263

Questions: How does this align with our understanding of mission? What does it mean to “act as if”? What does that look like in your context?

Despite the overall erosion of community, there are still places where strangers gather and ‘act with dignity, independence, and vision.’ Those places include neighborhoods, community gardens, city streets, public transit, parks, cafes, and coffee shops; galleries, museums, and libraries; festivals, fairs, and farmer’s markets; rallies and debates, public schools, congregations, and social networks. Each of these locations offers the possibility

of community and is potentially the sacred stage upon which awakening can be performed. P.263-264

Question: What are the “third places” in your life where you can act out awakening with others in the community?

...prepare (for awakening) by reading and learning the holy texts of faith in new ways... Theologian Karl Barth once said that Christians should read the Bible along with the newspaper—good suggestion still. Reading sacred stories and understanding the world in which we live are of a piece. When you read, always ask, “Where is God’s spirit active here” P. 165

Question: How can reading sacred texts be life-giving and help prepare for awakening? (See Doctrine & Covenants Section 163)

Show up for the awakening... No one can do it for us. Spiritual transformation happens only as we jump in and make a difference... Palmer describes the ‘Rosa Parks Decision’ as ‘the moment a person acts on the decision to live an undivided life.’ Experiential faith demands action. It is not enough to sit quietly in private and pray or meditate. Experiential faith happens in the world. Act out in public. It is risky, yes. But if you act in and with community, others take the risk with you. You are not alone. P.266

Questions: What is your ‘Rosa Parks Decision’? What does it mean for you to SHOW UP for the awakening?

Every spiritual awakening seeks to make visible, even if only in some incomplete way, God’s dream for creation.... This awakening will not be the last in human history, but it is our awakening. It is up to us to move with the Spirit instead of against it, to participate in making our world more human, just, and loving. P.269

*Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End Of Church And The Birth Of A New Spiritual Awakening* (Harper Collins, 2012)