

Crossing THE LINES We Draw

Faithful Responses to a
Polarized America

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Discussion Guide for Congregations & Other Groups

*Created for use with Matthew Tennant, *Crossing the Lines We Draw: Faithful Responses to a Polarized America* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2020).

C R O S S I N G T H E L I N E S

Introduction

This Discussion Guide provides tools for people who wish to use *Crossing the Lines We Draw* (Judson 2020) in congregational settings or similar small-group studies. This guide invites readers to think about the boundaries we define and the walls we build—even and perhaps especially as moderate to progressive Christians. The intent of the guide is to open conversations and invite people to grow together. Growth may be a challenge because we all tend to be resistant to change. When we are confronted with the planks we carry in our own eyes (Matthew 7:3-5), most of us get defensive. The aim of this guide is to identify and extract these obstructions and to lead people toward a destination of faithful unity in the midst of our diverse identities, beliefs, and political positions.

The guide includes a variety of discussion questions, action steps, and opportunities for reflection. Participants will be invited to share their own experiences—experiences of overcoming polarization and encounters where they have contributed to divisiveness.

Listen to Learn

Too often in group discussions, we wait impatiently for our turn to speak—especially when the current speaker is espousing a viewpoint with which we disagree. We may resist the urge to interrupt, but we aren't truly listening to the other person's words. How can we learn from one another, however, if we don't first learn to hear one another? Take time in this session to establish some basic strategies for participating in discussions that may avoid escalating tensions. Here are some common practices recommended by experienced group facilitators:

- Be aware of (and minimize) nonverbal responses—especially negative ones. (Huffed breaths, crossed arms, frowns, and head shaking communicate as loudly as words.)
- Notice when one or two people (including you yourself!) are dominating a discussion. Practice listening without replying.
- Establish a time limit for individual participants to speak.
- Alternatively, or additionally, agree on a limited number of “turns” for each person (which encourages people to respond with greater intentionality).
- Use a “talking stick” to minimize cross-talking and to give each participant a turn to speak or pass in a discussion rotation.
- Create space (i.e., silence) to allow more introverted and introspective participants time to respond.
- Slow the pace of discussion by establishing a 5-second pause between speakers.
- Avoid misunderstandings by reflecting back what you heard. Say, “I hear you saying _____. Does that accurately reflect your meaning?”
- Ask clarifying questions: “Can you say more about why you feel that way?”
- Recognize that intent does not negate impact. Take responsibility for the impact of your words, even if that impact was unintended. (This often means offering an apology!)
- Avoid all-or-nothing terms such as “always” or “never,” “everyone” or “no one,” “all” or “none,” “everywhere” or “nowhere.” (Such claims are rarely true!)
- And of course, use “I” language. Speak for yourself and reference your own experience. Resist accusations or blame.

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Using the Guide

The discussion guide is set up for six sessions. Because there are 12 chapters in the book, most group sessions cover two chapters each, as follows:

1. Session One: Chapters 1-2 (plus Introduction)
2. Session Two: Chapters 3-4
3. Session Three: Chapters 5-6
4. Session Four: Chapters 7-8
5. Session Five: Chapters 9-10
6. Session Six: Chapters 11-12

However, if your group would like to condense the study into four sessions, then each of the four sessions would cover three book chapters as follows:

1. Session One: Chapters 1-3 (plus Introduction)
2. Session Two: Chapters 4-6
3. Session Three: Chapters 7-9
4. Session Four: Chapters 10-12

This flexibility should allow groups to use *Crossing the Lines We Draw* in a variety of contexts.

Learning Goals for the Book Study

- Identify the ways we engage in polarizing behavior.
- Develop tools to disarm polarizing behavior.

- Explore some of the reasons we form like-minded groups.
- Analyze how our own personal and collective stories, experiences, and behavioral patterns reinforce polarization and politicization.
- Identify and implement concrete ways to overcome divisions and contribute positively to local and national conversations about divisive issues.
- Encourage growth in Christian faith formation.

Before Each Session

Materials

- One copy of *Crossing the Lines We Draw* (Judson Press, 2020) for each group participant
- Markers and newsprint or white board
- Paper and pens/pencils for all participants
- Timer (e.g., watch, phone, clock)
- Optional: Candle and matches/lighter (for an opening or closing ritual)

Preparation for Facilitator

- Read the relevant chapters in *Crossing the Lines We Draw*.
- Review the primary Scripture for the session.
- Answer the discussion questions for yourself and be ready to get the conversation started with your personal response(s) if necessary.

Session 1: Faith & Unity

Book Chapters: Introduction; Chapters 1-2

Key Scripture(s): Matthew 19:26; James 1

Setting the Stage: In a polarized and politicized culture, knowing where to go and how to get there remains a challenge. Where do we want to go? Unity. Harmony. Equality. A church, a community, a nation, a world in which all people are valued, in which all lives are able to flourish. But, what does it take to get to that place? What does the process look like? And how can we be part of that process as people of faith and pursuers of justice?

Getting Started: As this group embarks on a journey together, begin by asking participants to share their expectations for this book study. What do they hope to learn or accomplish? What concerns or anxieties do they have?

Talking It Over: This session will focus on questions about what unity looks like. Discuss the following questions:

- When have you experienced a strong sense of unity? What did it look like? How was it expressed and embodied?
- How do you define unity? How does your definition relate to or compare with other concepts such as:
 - o Like-mindedness o Herd mentality
 - o Tribalism o Consensus
 - o Solidarity o Homogeneity
- How is unity related to diversity? Is a vision of unity in diversity a goal worth pursuing? Why or why not?

Making Faith Connections: Unity is often affirmed as a vital part of our identity as Christians. We read Scriptures that talk about “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” and hear sermons about “being one in Spirit and united in faith.” Yet, we each have unique experiences with God and with the church, and some of us have had painful encounters with people whose Christianity looks quite different from our own. Discuss the following questions in light of participants’ personal faith journeys:

- Has your faith journey been characterized primarily by unity or by diversity? Share an example to illustrate your experience. (Responses may vary widely, from tales of living an entire life in the same faith community or tradition, to dramatic ecumenical encounters, to painful experiences of church splits and more.)
- What are the gifts and benefits of seeking and staying in like-minded and homogeneous faith contexts? (e.g., peace, productivity in ministry, solidarity in mission, safety for vulnerable individuals or groups, etc.)
- What are the challenges and dangers of such contexts? (e.g., stagnation, self-righteousness, “othering,” ignorance, etc.)

Uniting Faith and Praxis: When it comes to putting our faith in action, we often echo the Gospel question, “Who is my neighbor?” But in today’s divisive climate, a more challenging question may be, “Who is my enemy?” Even (or especially!) those of us with strong faith convictions may begin to perceive people with divergent convictions as their enemies. Consider these questions and discuss:

- How would you define an enemy in your life today?

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- Whom do you count among your enemies by this definition? Are they public figures? Are they people you know personally? Do your enemies know they are your enemies?
- Why do you consider them to be your enemies?
- What would transform these enemies into your friends or neighbors? What would they need to do? What would you need to do?

Taking Action: (1) Pay attention this week to examples of unity—in its positive and negative forms, in healthy and unhealthy expressions. Notice how unity in one area may also encompass diversity in others. In particular, cultivate awareness of unity and diversity as it relates to faith claims and lived expressions of that faith. Resist judging; simply notice and ponder. (2) Accept Jesus' challenge in Matthew 5:43-47 and pray for your enemies. List them by name and pray for those people daily between now and the next session. Reflect on the changes you experience as you practice this discipline.

Session 2: Risks

Book Chapters: Chapters 3-4

Key Scripture(s): Matthew 14:29-30

Getting Started: Oliver Cromwell said, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." Perhaps the biggest risk we can take is to risk seeing the world through someone else's eyes. What if your position is right and mine is wrong? How would the world look from that perspective? If we hope to explore such difficult questions with grace and empathy, we need to cultivate the ability to listen to one another. As a group, begin by reviewing the strategies in "Listen to Learn" on page 2 of this Guide.

Talking It Over: If your group is largely like-minded, discuss the following questions in light of the "opposition." If your group is diverse in politics or theology, the questions will hit closer to home:

- What factors influence the ways in which we view the world? (e.g., life events, cultural heritage, personal experiences, emotions, education, etc.)
- How have such factors shaped your worldview? What influences may have shaped the worldviews of your "opponents"?
- Does such speculation make it easier or more difficult to empathize with or respect them as God's children? Why?

Making Faith Connections: Now that we know a little more on how to understand someone else's worldview, let's dare to discuss different perspectives on some powerful concepts that inspire passionate responses across the political and theological spectrums. For now, ask every member

of the group to write down their responses to each of the following questions.

- What is your definition of *terrorist*? On what do you base that definition?
- What is your definition of *evil*? On what do you base that definition?
- What is your definition of *salvation*? On what do you base that definition?
- What is your definition of *civilization*? On what do you base that definition?

Uniting Faith and Praxis: When everyone has had opportunity to frame their answers and their rationales (~5 minutes), open the floor for discussion and invite one volunteer to share his or her first response. (Go in the order listed above, or let the group decide which topic to discuss first.) Then, allow the group to interact thoughtfully and intentionally with this courageous offering. Individual responses may include a comparison or contrast with the respondent's own answer to the question.

Taking Action: Read or watch the news from a different perspective. Try to understand the lens through which they perceive and thus present the world. Humanize the people who hold oppositional views. Try to see them as Christ sees them. Revisit this exercise periodically.

Session 3: New Beings

Book Chapters: Chapters 5-6

Key Scripture(s): 2 Corinthians 5:17; Psalm 27

Getting Started: Recall Session 1, when we explored the idea of unity—and its healthy and unhealthy expressions. When “unity” takes the form of herd mentality (or worse, mob mentality) people risk being led astray—or trampled. Rather than being conformed to the categories our divided world presents, God calls each of us to be transformed into new beings, who are united in the Spirit and bearing witness to Christ in each aspect of our lives. We are stronger together, when we learn to honor our diversity and to trust in the Spirit who makes us one body in Christ.

Talking It Over: As a group, you have been journeying together for a few weeks now. Take time to consider how your relationships with one other have changed and grown. Discuss the following questions:

- How has your personal understanding of unity evolved?
- What have you (and we) learned about unity, community, and diversity in the past couple sessions?
- How has your journey with this group begun to influence your relationships and perspectives beyond this group?

Making Faith Connections: One of the greatest challenges to unity in community comes when a group encounters divergent opinions around an issue or concern that people feel passionate about. One test of a relationship is the ability to explore difficult topics together—trusting one

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another to speak our truths aloud and to depend on others to respond with empathy and reciprocal honesty.

- On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate the trust among group members? Why?
- To what extent do you think that your trust in God affects your ability to trust other people? To what extent does your trust in other people affect your ability to trust God?
- In your experience, what is the relationship between trust and truth-telling? Why do you think that is?

Uniting Faith and Praxis: Most of us have so-called trigger topics that touch something deep inside of us, concerns that we feel passionate about. In contexts where divergent opinions are expressed, it can be a great challenge to speak about such topics without escalating the discord. Trigger topics may include racial justice, sexuality issues, immigration, climate change, gun violence, domestic abuse, and more. Invite participants to write down the topic(s) they feel most passionate about. Discuss the following questions as a group:

- Why do we feel so strongly about some topics and not others?
- Is it possible to discuss such topics without “getting emotional”? Why or why not?
- What are the gifts of being passionate (i.e., emotional) about a particular issue or concern? What are the challenges of such passion/emotion?
- What individual and group strategies might be helpful in structuring discussions around “trigger topics” to balance our emotional responses with objective considerations?
- Review the “Listening to Learn” section (p. 2).

- Individual strategies include deep breathing, doodling or note-taking, “fidget” devices, and honest disclosure.
- Group strategies may involve covenants around rhetoric (“trigger words”) to avoid, short-cut responses to signal an emotional response (e.g., ouch, oops, wow), and time for debriefing in pairs or small groups.

Taking Action: (1) Between now and the next session, reach out to a select list of friends or acquaintances on a regular basis. Choose 5 to contact each day, or 10 to connect with over the course of each week. Send a short text, direct message, or email, or go “old-school” with phone calls or personal notes. Some people will respond briefly and others not at all, but notice the ways in which the discipline transforms you—and your relationships. (2) In the days ahead, take time to practice balanced responses to your self-identified trigger topics. Consider how to express your passion with respect and to provide well-reasoned explanations for your convictions.

Session 4: Bringing People Together

Book Chapters: Chapters 7-8

Key Scripture(s): Ephesians 2:11-22

Getting Started: We have been talking about this book study as a kind of journey your group has been traveling together. But as we have already begun to discover, each person is also an individual on their own path, a path from which we experience and perceive the world around us. Those personal experiences may present challenges because of the diversity they produce, but they also offer invaluable insights and opportunity to learn from others.

Talking It Over: The nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote, “The world is a work of which you survey only a part.” The work of a surveyor is all about perspective, so take some time to explore the parts of the world each person surveys from their perspective on the path. Invite participants to form small groups of no more than 2-3 people to discuss the following questions:

- Where were you raised (geographically)?
- How would you describe your culture of origin (race, ethnicity, nationality)?
- In what faith tradition(s) were you nurtured (if any)?
- What other factors formed your earliest views of the world?

Making Faith Connections: As people of faith, most of us have noticed the ways in which life experiences produce changes, adjustments, recalibrations of our thinking about God, as well as our reading of Scripture, our convictions about

social issues, and our relationships with institutions of various kinds. Continuing in small groups, explore these questions:

- How often have you experienced significant shifts in your view of the world over time?
- What circumstances or experiences contributed to those shifts?
- How would you characterize the general trajectory of your path through these recalibrations?
- How have shifts in education, geography, vocation, intercultural encounter, socioeconomic status, and major life events affected your faith perspectives?
- How has the evolution of your faith journey led to shifts in other areas of your life?

Uniting Faith and Praxis: From the earliest days of the Jesus movement, the community of faith has been the result of God’s reconciling work in the world—reconciling human beings with our Creator and diverse creatures with one another. Regrettably, Christian history tells a mixed story about the unifying force of faith in the midst of diversity. Come together as a larger group to discuss these questions about how our diverse backgrounds and experiences might intersect to establish common ground for justice and peace.

- What experiences do you have with other faith traditions, within the Christian church universal and beyond?
- What have you learned from those experiences?
- How have those experiences influenced your own faith journey?
- Where do you perceive potential for collaboration and common ground across theological, political, and other differences?

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Taking Action: (1) Individually or as a family unit, visit a faith community that is totally new to you (not as an invited guest). Do some research and try to choose a congregation that approaches social issues differently than you do. Pay attention to your responses during the experience: physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual. (2) One of the best ways to find common ground is to break bread together. Invite someone with whom you disagree or differ to share a meal with you; get to know their path and perspective in the world. This is not aimed at persuading or converting someone else to your viewpoint. It is a chance to know each other and grow together.

Session 5: Making Progress

Book Chapters: Chapters 9-10

Key Scripture(s): 2 Samuel 12:1-13

Getting Started: Distinctions and divisions in the world are nothing new. And not all differentiation is a bad thing. Distinguishing the self from others is a normal part of human development. Naming and categorizing are key strategies for organizing our personal worlds. How we differentiate one from another can be a creative and constructive strategy for how we relate and connect to one another. The challenges tend to arise when our distinctions become grounds for exclusion, privilege, and power.

Talking It Over: Healthy boundaries are vital to healthy relationships, individually and socially. Our nation was founded on a principle of separating (however imperfectly) the institutions of “church” and “state.” Even intimate relationships such as marriage, parenting, and friendship all hinge on appropriate limits between people. When healthy boundaries are trespassed, we experience a valid sense of violation.

- What are examples of healthy boundaries in personal relationships?
- What are examples of healthy boundaries in social or institutional relationships?
- What are examples of unhealthy boundaries?
- **Trigger warning:** This discussion may be difficult for those who have experienced trauma related to boundary trespasses. Acknowledge that these concerns are deeply personal. Invite people to share only as they feel safe and willing to do so.

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Making Faith Connections: The work of justice, reconciliation, and ministry as a whole can be slow, exhausting, and demoralizing. Burnout is common among those who undertake the work, whether as professionals, as volunteers, or in their personal relationships and daily lives. This is another important area for healthy boundaries. Discuss the demands and the need for limits with the following questions:

- What do you find life-giving and energizing about this kind of work and ministry?
- What do you find life-draining and exhausting about this work?
- What are the signs you recognize in yourself that warn of impending burnout?
- What do you need to recharge your emotional, physical, and spiritual batteries?
- During different seasons, people can offer different amounts of energy and time. What does this season in your life allow you to do?

Uniting Faith and Praxis: Recognize that the work of overcoming polarization, of effecting reconciliation is a marathon and not a sprint, that it is not the task of a single person nor of a single day or year or lifetime. Acknowledging these limitations, discuss some concrete ideas for perseverance in pursuit of the goal:

- What preparation would you recommend to someone wanting to start on this work?
- What skills have you learned for navigating and overcoming division—in this group, in your congregation, in your community or family or workplace or other contexts?
- What theological resources have you discovered in Scripture, in worship, in the community of faith to strengthen and sustain you? To challenge and convict you?

- What human resources have you identified to strengthen and sustain? To challenge and convict?

Taking Action: (1) Get involved in local government. Start by learning more about how yours is structured and how it engages the public. Where do you see a need that you can address? How might your involvement become an act of reconciliation? (2) Identify a divisive topic that you would like to understand more fully. Summarize the issue, and then describe the different viewpoints with their competing concerns. Make a list of your own questions about that issue, and reach out to people in your community who might be willing to talk openly and constructively with you about their views.

Session 6: Participating in God's Work

Book Chapters: Chapters 11-12

Key Scripture(s): Psalm 139; Matthew 25:31-46

Getting Started: As this group study draws to a close, revisit the learning goals on page 2 of this Guide. Consider what you have discovered about yourselves, your community, your relationships with one another and with God. The discussion questions in this final session are crafted to encourage review, reflection, and a plan for action moving forward, implementing the lessons learned from this group experience.

Talking It Over: Begin this session by discussing the reasons you embarked on this journey together and reviewing the concerns that have surfaced as you gathered to talk, listen, and learn from one another.

- What was the impetus behind your decision to join this discussion group?
- What did you hope to gain from participation in this study?
- What relationships have been formed, strengthened, or reformed through this group?
- What new issues or concerns have you identified for action in your community?
- What have you learned about yourself that will shape your future interactions in a diverse and often divided world?

Making Faith Connections: Scripture tells us in Psalm 139 that God knows us—intimately. The good, the bad, the well-intentioned but ugly. Read this psalm aloud together in its entirety. You might compare different translations and invite different voices to read. Then discuss its

verses in three sections, answering the following questions:

- Verses 1-12. What is reassuring about such intimate knowledge and presence? What is daunting about the idea?
- Trigger warning: Anyone who has had experience with a human stalker or with similar psychological trauma in an abusive or toxic relationship may find this image of God to be deeply disturbing. Be sensitive and prepared to acknowledge the shadowy side of this kind of all-knowing and everywhere-present relationship.
- Verses 13-18. How do these verses cast new or added light on the preceding passage? In what ways do these verses speak to concerns of human identity, value, and rights? How do they connect with the Christian affirmation that all humans are created in God's image and that all are beloved by God?
- Trigger warning: Because this passage is often used as a weapon in abortion debates, be sensitive to the ways that these verses may be triggering for people on either "side" of that issue. It may also be triggering for parents who have recently experienced miscarriage or early infant death.
- Verses 19-24. How do these verses strike you in comparison or contrast with the preceding passages? Discuss the psalmist's prayer from all angles. Is this "the prayer of the righteous" or is this person of faith projecting a personal agenda on God? (If your group is strong on either side, the facilitator may take the "opposing" view to encourage participants to exercise the skills and strategies acquired in previous discussions!)
- Trigger warning: Particularly in moments of heightened emotion, stress, and social unrest, prayers of lament and honest anger are full of

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truth, warranted, and legitimate expressions of faith. Be sure to acknowledge the validity of lament, even when the words used to frame it seem violent or contrary to the spirit of “crossing the lines we draw.”

Uniting Faith and Praxis: The gospel ministry of reconciliation, of working toward unity and common ground, assumes that each person of faith is joining in God’s larger work that is already in progress. A vital goal of learning to talk with one another across our differences is to work together for the good of the world we share. Keep that in view as you discuss these questions:

- What does reconciliation mean to you?
- What is involved in a process of reconciliation? (Consider this question in general relational terms first—between estranged siblings, spouses, friends. Expand to communal or societal contexts—racial reconciliation, legal mediation, union talks, etc.)
- How do you understand your role as a Christian in the work of reconciliation?
- How might the work of reconciliation connect to Jesus’ parable in Matthew 25?

Taking Action: (1) Do something neighborly for someone you might previously have avoided or counted as an enemy. Do not make it complicated. Simply offer to help someone who needs help. (2) Journaling can keep this journey of reconciliation going. Keep track of the ways you see God moving and how you experience God building bridges between people who disagree with one another.