
Where are We Starting?

Leader's Guide

This optional session will help prepare your group for the study. This session has two objectives: 1) establishing what people think they know about the history of race and Christianity in the United States and 2) helping people consider what is at stake for them in learning more about the topic.

What We Think We Know and What We Want to Know

As lots of students will tell you, history is hard. In part, that's because many students have been taught that history is all about memorizing a bunch of dates. Fortunately, you won't be memorizing here. Still, history can be difficult for other reasons. Sometimes, what you learn overturns what you thought you knew—and changing your mind is usually not easy. And, sometimes, there is just a lot of information and it can be hard to make sense of.

The activities in this section will help with those two problems by helping people articulate what they think they know and what they want to know. Once you know what you think you know, it is easier to make comparisons between that and what you learn. Articulating what you want to know provides a framework for organizing all the information coming at you.

1. Ask people to write down what they think they know about race and Christianity in the United States on the pre-session worksheets.
 - a. This is brainstorming so any response is fine
 - b. People might want categories to help prod their memories. For example, “main characters, significant events, important institutions, key texts.”
2. Ask people to write down what they hope to learn about the history of race and Christianity in the United States on the pre-session worksheets.
3. If you have time and it works for your group, have people compare answers (either in small groups or a large group).
4. At the end of the video series, you might have people revisit these worksheets. What have they learned? How have their minds changed (if at all)? Are there things they still want to know?

What We Believe and What Is At Stake

Most people come to the study of race and Christianity in the United States with some beliefs and assumptions. Maybe they assume that Christianity has mainly played a positive role in racial issues. Maybe they assume that the story is one of unimpeded progress. Whatever their beliefs and assumptions, it will be easier to learn something new if they know what they already believe.

It is also easier to engage a difficult topic if we know what is at stake in our beliefs and assumptions. Sometimes we believe things, but don't really care if they are true. Sometimes, however, our beliefs have significant implications for how we understand things we really care about—things like whether our ancestors were good people, whether our faith helps society, and whether our country gives all people equal opportunity.

To help people in your group uncover their beliefs and assumptions and to consider what is at stake for them, have them complete the rest of the worksheet.

1. First, have them answer the four questions. They do not need to respond to the “Reflection” question yet.
2. After they have answered all four questions, ask them to consider what is at stake for them by:
 - a. Ranking their commitment or stake in their belief on a 1 to 4 scale (the scale is also on the worksheet) They can write the number next to “Reflections”. The scale is:

1=Encountering solid evidence that challenged what I believe about this question would neither surprise nor concern me.

2=Encountering solid evidence that would challenge what I believe about this question would surprise me a little, but I would not be deeply concerned.

3=Encountering solid evidence that would challenge what I believe about this question would surprise me and would be difficult to assimilate because of what it would mean for how I understand myself, my experiences, my faith, and/or my country.

4=Encountering solid evidence that would challenge what I believe about this question would surprise me and I would be unwilling to assimilate it because of what it would mean for how I understand myself, my experiences, my faith, and/or my country.

Let them know that the goal is not to have “low” numbers. They might have very good reasons for their beliefs. The point is simply to get a sense of what beliefs matter to them and why.

3. Next, have them write about their response. They might consider, for example, why the beliefs matter (or don't) to them and what it mean for them if the belief was wrong (or right).
4. Depending on time and the needs of your group, you could ask people to share answers, either in a large or small group.