



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Faith & SCIENCE
YOUTH IN DIALOGUE

Session Two
Are there others?

Faith & SCIENCE

ARE THERE OTHERS? REV. DANA HENDERSHOT

It is time to open our minds! To help the participants think about extraterrestrials, the group will first begin to imagine our large universe. Participants will observe photographs of space. We look up at the stars at night, but do we really understand what we see? How much space is really out there? What have we been taught in science class about space?

This session will begin to open our minds to the reality of our universe. From NASA missions we can learn how much we still don't know, and what we hope to know within the next ten years.

Then we will move into a discussion of the ways this knowledge may affect our faith. Astronomers are continually discovering the vastness of our universe and we now know that ours is not the only solar system. What does that mean for us as Christians? Is our God earth-centered or universe-embracing? Would finding extraterrestrial life make a difference in our faith? Dealing with questions like these is what theologian Ted Peters calls *Exotheology*.¹

This session is designed for an hour and a half.

GOALS FOR THE SESSION

- To open minds to a new understanding of the vastness of space and time.
- To understand that NASA hopes to know whether there is simple life on other planets.
- To begin to explore how new ideas of space and time may expand our understanding of God's power.
- To begin to think about whether God is an earth-centered God or a God of the universe.
- To begin to struggle with questions about how much we, as humans, can matter to God, since space and time are so huge.

SUPPLIES NEEDED

A bucket
Pencils
Small pieces of paper
The movie *Contact*
NASA mission facts

Three or more posters of Hubble Space
Telescope images and accompanying facts

Printable copies of all documents and hyperlinks to images are in the back of the book or online.

SET-UP

Place three or more posters of the Hubble Images around the room. Near each poster, display facts about that image and other facts about current NASA missions. *Note:* If you cannot print full-size posters, the images can be displayed on a laptop or iPad, with an LCD projector, or with an overhead projector. Ask your church or retreat center staff if they have any of these resources available. Additionally, you can use smaller images/posters if you have a smaller group.

IDENTIFYING THE QUESTIONS

¹ Ted Peters, *Science, Theology, and Ethics* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003), 121.

Hand out the pencils and paper. Ask participants to write down any questions they have about this subject. What interests them about this breakout session? What are they hoping will be answered? What would they like to discuss? Collect the papers in the bucket and set it aside.

ENGAGING IN THE SCIENCE

Encourage participants to look around at the images. Ask them to pick an image that especially fascinates them.

Instruct the participants to go to the image they choose and read the fact cards about the image and related NASA missions. Once they have read the cards, they should pick the facts they would like to present to the group as a whole. By sharing the facts, it will help to bring this poster to life. The facts include information NASA scientists have learned about that part of space, and about current NASA missions. Try to make sure that the group is divided fairly evenly among all the posters.

After participants have spent about ten minutes with the images, bring the group together. Allow time for presentations to the group as a whole.

Make sure they understand that the Bubble Nebula is 72 million light-years away. A light-year is the distance a particle of light – or *photon* – will travel in one year. The distance light travels in one year is about 9.461×10^{15} meters (9.461 petameters), or about 5.879×10^{12} (nearly six trillion) miles. This means that a picture of something 72 million light-years away shows the way things were 72 million years ago.

TRANSITION

Watch a clip from the movie *Contact*, from 2:12:32 to 2:18:55.² This is a clip from the ending where Jodie Foster's character, Dr. Eleanor "Ellie" Arroway, faces a panel that is questioning her claims about her experience with extraterrestrial life. After watching the panel, briefly discuss some of the following questions as a large group:

- As a scientist, does Dr. Arroway hold any beliefs or faith claims?
- Is Dr. Arroway's claim about her experience of another world a faith claim or a scientific claim?
- Is there any evidence to support her claim?
- Are there any ways in which religious people base their beliefs on evidence as scientists do?
- Scientists say that they will eventually abandon a theory if sufficient evidence is discovered that contradicts it, but sometimes they can be conservative and slow to do so. If evidence is discovered that contradicts a religious faith commitment, will religious people abandon that belief?³

ENGAGING IN THEOLOGY

Many assume that the Christian faith is fragile. The fear is that Christians' beliefs would be shattered by the discovery of extraterrestrial intelligent life, because Christ came to save only those on earth.

² It may be helpful for you, the leader, to watch the clip beforehand and make sure that your copy is not a director's cut or something else that may change the timeframe.

³ The Rev. Roger Timm, pastor of Ascension Lutheran Church in Riverside, Ill.

However, some think that the Christian faith is not as fragile as it might seem. Ted Peters summarizes this conclusion:

Despite St. Thomas's use of Aristotelian arguments against many worlds, however, Christian theologians have routinely found ways to address the issue of Jesus Christ as God incarnate and to conceive of God's creative and saving power exerted in other worlds.⁴

Ask the group whether God's saving and redeeming power must be reserved only for those on earth.

Have the group split into smaller groups. Assign these questions to small groups for discussion and see what they come up with.

- What kinds of life do you think might exist?
- If you met an extraterrestrial, what two things would you find out first?
- Would finding extraterrestrials disturb or change your faith? In what ways? What would change or not change with this new finding?
- Is our God an earth-centered God or a God of the universe? What would be your arguments for each idea of God?
- Does this information about the universe expand your understanding of God's creative power?
- God is active in your life. What does it mean that God calls you by name? Does your knowledge of an expanding and vast universe change this?

ADDRESSING NEW QUESTIONS

Ask the group whether they have any new questions. If they do, remind them again that new knowledge always brings out new questions. If you feel comfortable answering any of these questions, do so, or ask if anyone else in the group has an answer. Unfortunately the answer to many of their questions may not be known yet or is too complicated to provide here. But discussion will open the door to further understanding. If no one feels confident giving an answer, say that you don't know the answer. If you are able, suggest places that the answer might be found. Use the remaining time to go through the questions they wrote at the beginning of the session. See if some of the questions have been addressed or changed.

CLOSING

Gather the group members together. Ask them to summarize something important that they learned during this session and how that might relate to the good news that God's love was revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Let them know that these insights will be shared during the homily. Have them appoint someone to write down and present these conclusions at closing worship. Then ask the group to write a prayer of hope that grew from this discussion. Have them appoint someone to read it during the Prayers of the People.

⁴ Peters, *Science, Theology, and Ethics*, 131.