

I've been meaning to ask...

a series for curiosity, courage, & connection

Our objectives for this series

We began planning this series in the fall of 2020 at the height of the US election season. In that time, we felt sharply the pangs of three prominent realities that transcend beyond that particular moment in time: we are deeply divided; we are isolated and disconnected; we desperately need hope. We polled our larger community of pastors and ministry leaders and asked, *"What kind of worship series are you wanting and needing right now?"* Overwhelmingly, the response was a series focused on community—how we build it, repair it, and sustain it. And so, as we began brainstorming for the series, we started by asking ourselves questions: *"How can we listen to one another? How do we find connection despite physical and ideological distance? How do we create space for compassionate dialogue and for seeking the holy in one another?"* While the solutions to our challenges feel daunting, these questions are simple. We quickly recognized that all courageous conversations begin with simple questions and the curiosity to truly listen. We decided to shape this series around guiding questions that lead us deeper into the heart of the matter—and deeper into connection with God and one another. We hope this series helps us disrupt assumptions, cultivate curiosity, foster listening, and, God willing, find deeper connections to one another.

Please note: In this worship series, we wish to avoid glorifying a false sense of unity that glosses over or ignores inequities and real harm done. We acknowledge how marginalized groups and individuals who've survived trauma are often urged to forgive and forget without accountability or repair; we want to avoid perpetuating this pattern. We trust you will be mindful of this dynamic when implementing the series.

About the theme

Our leading question, *"I've been meaning to ask..."* conveys intentionality, warmth, curiosity, and consideration. In essence, this question also implies the following statements: *"I've been thinking about you and I've been wanting to check in... You've been on my mind... I haven't known how to have this conversation, but I'm getting started with a question."* The ellipses symbolize the main objective of this series: to cultivate courageous conversations—and to keep having them, even if we need to pause. Our weekly sub-themes provide a trajectory for going deeper. As you can see, these questions aren't surface level; they invite us to share our pain and seek ways to care for one another. We pray that through vulnerability and authenticity these conversations lead us to glimpse hope, joy, and beauty.

This series alone will not resolve our divisions and differences. However, it will invite us to behold each other as images of the divine. It will help us strengthen our capacity for empathy and compassion. It will show us the simple power of asking unassuming questions. It will remind us that courage is rooted in the heart.

How to use this series

We've designed this series for 4 weeks; it can be used anytime throughout the liturgical year. For each week, we've selected two focal scriptures to theologically explore our theme and weekly sub-themes. We hope you will customize this series to best fit your context. The two weekly focal scriptures give you flexibility to choose your preaching text(s) and to guide your community in deeper biblical study. If you desire, you could extend the series beyond the 4 weeks, creating additional sub-theme questions for your community to explore together.

where are you from?



Our Guest Contributor for Week 1 Dr. Raj Nadella

Dr. Raj Nadella (he/him) is the Samuel A. Cartledge Associate Professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, GA. Dr. Nadella's research and teaching interests include postcolonial biblical interpretation, migration and New Testament perspectives on economic justice and their ethical implications for the Church and society. In addition, his research has focused on Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Studies. His work has appeared in publications such as The Huffington Post, Christian Century, and Working Preacher. Since 2018, he has served as an area editor for Oxford Bibliographies: Biblical Studies. Nadella was one of two biblical scholars who led the PC(USA) General Assembly Bible Study in 2018. In 2020, Patheos featured him as one of 50 NT scholars to follow.

ctsnet.edu/faculty/nadella-raj

Weekly sub-themes, focal scriptures, & guest contributors

Inspired by our theme, we have curated a panel of guest contributors to offer written commentary and video vignettes for each week's sub-theme and scriptures.

Week 1

I've been meaning to ask... where are you from?

Genesis 2:4b-15 *(Humanity is formed from the dust in the garden of Eden)*

John 1:35-51 *(Jesus calls the disciples)*

In order to build connection and trust, we need to listen to each other's stories and experiences to learn who and what has shaped us. We also need to feel seen and known for who we are. In this first week, we hope to affirm the particularity of our identities while also acknowledging our common ground. Formed from the dust and God's very breath in the garden of Eden, we have a common home, a shared birthplace, and a collective calling: to sustain and care for all of creation. The story of Jesus calling the disciples provides a helpful charge for the whole series: to "come and see" what the journey holds. In this first week, we wish to address how the question, "*Where are you from?*" is sometimes coupled with assumptions, judgments, and even microaggressions—all of which can be exhausting and painful to receive. Our hope is to acknowledge, disrupt, and release the assumptions we hold about others.

where does it hurt?



Our Guest Contributor for Week 2 Rev. Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum

Rev. Brittany Fiscus-van Rossum (she/her) serves as pastor of Mercy Community Church, a grassroots ecumenical congregation that meets out-of-doors in borrowed space, parking lots, and on the streets of Atlanta, GA. As a community, Mercy strives to bring those in and out of housing together to worship, fellowship, work for justice, offer shelter, and build community. The Mercy community gathers five days of the week to share clothes and meals, study scripture together, support one another in recovery, write, study, pray, drink coffee, and spend time together. Brittany first came to Mercy Church while completing her MDiv at Columbia Theological Seminary. Brittany is passionate about the church's vocation to be present to the poor in ways that foster mutual relationships and healthy communities. Brittany loves writing, creating, and studying theology alongside her congregants. She is jointly ordained by the PC(USA) and Mercy Community Church.

mercyatl.org

Week 2

I've been meaning to ask... where does it hurt?

1 Samuel 1:1-18 *(Hannah's pain)*

Mark 5:21-43 *(The healing of a hemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter)*

This week's question implies that all of us have known pain and suffering. In order to cultivate connection, we must first get curious about the pain others carry and the pain we carry ourselves. Before we can act, we must first acknowledge and believe the pain is real, for bearing witness to each other's pain helps us cultivate compassion. In 1 Samuel, Hannah's pain is ignored, diminished, and mocked. Yet, Hannah vulnerably and courageously bears all of herself before God, which transforms Eli's perspective. She finds release by being fully seen and known by God. In the dual healing story of the hemorrhaging woman and Jairus' daughter, we acknowledge those who suffer chronically and in isolation. By telling these women's stories, we hope to bear witness to the particular and very common struggles related to fertility and reproductive health. Additionally, we must confess the harm done in neglecting the emotional, physical, individual, historical, and systemic wounds that exist among us.

what do you need?



Our Guest Contributor for Week 3 Rev. Remington Johnson

Remington Johnson (she/her) is an ordained PC(USA) minister who has served at the bedside of the sick and dying as a healthcare chaplain for the last ten years. Remington is currently pursuing a masters in nursing at the University of Texas. Remington is active in the research community by working as a consultant on a growing number of peer-reviewed studies and also serving a medical school think tank at the University of Texas. She regularly lectures on the complex care navigation process with a special focus on values identification. Remington is engaged to a lovely woman and mother to a delightful six-year-old. remingtonjohnson.com

Week 3

I've been meaning to ask... what do you need?

Job 2:11-13 (*Job's friends come to comfort him*)

2 Timothy 4:9-18 (*Paul's final instructions to Timothy*)

This week's question recognizes that we all have needs and that we need each other. It reminds us that we each have unique needs; we can't assume to know what is best for others. It also prompts us to reflect on our own needs, priorities, and desires, which can sometimes be difficult to discern from one situation to the next. In the midst of Job's afflictions, three of his friends promptly leave their homes and come to him. They tear their garments, weep loudly, and sit with him for seven days, saying nothing. Their response is the ministry of presence, of true solidarity, of seeing his excruciating pain and joining him there. Beaten and imprisoned, Paul writes to Timothy with a simple request: "*Come quickly.*" He lists those who abandoned him, but says, "*I hope that God doesn't hold it against them!*" In his greatest moment of need, Paul doesn't need revenge, but instead asks for companionship. In essence, this is what we all need—for someone to come quickly, to gather the items we need, and to simply show up.

where do we go from here?



Our Guest Contributor for Week 4 Rev. Aisha Brooks-Johnson

The Reverend Aisha Brooks-Johnson (she/her) is a native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 2018, Aisha began her role as the Executive Presbyter for the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta serving 84 congregations and encouraging 26 new worshipping communities. She is honored and overjoyed to serve as an encourager to the congregations and leaders within a presbytery filled with a deep cultural diversity and a vast theological landscape. She believes that it is part of her call to support healthy and vital congregations and to equip healthy and innovative leaders to live into their passion and purpose as the people of God. Aisha is blessed to have her mother, Deborah, and her son, Ellington, to join her in this adventure in the Greater Atlanta region (atlpcusa.org). Aisha gives thanks to God for her recent marriage to the Rev. Dr. Alonzo T. Johnson who serves as the Coordinator for the Self Development of People for the PC(USA) headquartered in Louisville, KY (presbyterianmission.org/ministries/sdop).

Week 4

I've been meaning to ask... where do we go from here?

Ruth 1:1-22 (*Ruth and Naomi become chosen family*)

Acts 10 (*Peter, Cornelius, & the Gentiles*)

This final question is not meant to be the end of the journey; instead, it creates openness to explore together what is next. It is contextual, designed for individuals, families, churches, and communities to discern how to move forward into something new. Our hope is that we keep cultivating curiosity, asking questions, having conversations, and seeking connection in order to humanize and care for each other. Ultimately, this final question invites us to foster hope and imagination. After the loss of loved ones disrupts their lives, Ruth and Naomi create a new covenant with each other, choosing to be in a relationship across their religious, cultural, and generational divides. As women, they build power together in a system where they have little power. Peter and a pious Roman centurion named Cornelius are brought together through visions they each receive. Peter and Cornelius meet face-to-face and Peter says: *"I really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another."* Through their courageous conversation, their narrow perceptions of others expand, the Spirit descends upon them, and they share in community and hospitality.



Resources included in the bundle

- 1. Study journal** *(A printable journal with: scripture, text & reflection prompts, commentary, visual art, poetry, and written reflections).*
- 2. Sermon planning guide** *(A guide offering biblical commentary by our guest contributors on each focal scripture, as well as theme connections and links to further reading).*
- 3. Words for worship** *(Written liturgy inspired by the theme and weekly sub-themes).*
- 4. Conversation cards** *(Conversation starters, following our weekly sub-themes, for families, small groups, fellowship events, and worship engagement).*
- 5. 8 New visuals with artist statements** *(Illuminating the focal scriptures for the series).*
- 6. Branding bundle** *(Logo files and graphic templates to help you share the theme and weekly sub-themes in your community's communications).*
- 7. Poetry prayers** *(Poems inspired by our theme and weekly sub-themes).*
- 8. A special liturgy with holy communion** *(A creative and interactive liturgy crafted for outdoor or online worship that gathers worshipers to celebrate the sacrament of the Eucharist).*
- 9. Video vignettes** *(Short videos of each of our guest contributors responding to their respective sub-theme question; you can use these videos in worship or small groups to spark conversation and hear different insights and perspectives).*
- 10. A listening guide** *(A simple guide to set the space for having and facilitating courageous conversations).*

Materials we will release for free to supplement the bundle

- 1. Hymn & music ideas** *shared on our blog.*
- 2. Children's lessons** *shared on our blog.*
- 3. Artful ideas for worship adornment** *shared on our blog.*
- 4. A content calendar for social media** *an add-on free to bundle patrons.*



About the logo & branding

In the main logo, the speech bubbles are nestled within each other—symbolizing the sense of care and gentleness we hope to carry into our conversations. The bubbles also expand, echoing outward as the conversations continue. The colors are vibrant yet earthy, reminding us of being formed from the dust and the beauty of the garden of Eden. In the overlap, new hues are formed. Throughout the branding, the speech bubbles get teased apart and deconstructed—reminding us to dig deeper, to welcome new perspectives, and to disrupt assumptions we may hold.

Reflections from the Sanctified Art team

"During the pandemic, I've experienced a general sense of feeling pulled apart—like my relationships are slowly and inexplicably being ripped apart at the seams. With mounting isolation, incendiary social media posts, distrust, conspiracy theories, and divergent news broadcasts, I've seen this chasm emerge. People I've loved and respected for my whole life have become like strangers to me, and bridging that divide feels impossible. Conversations that were once simple have now become like walking in a minefield. I think we've lost sight of the nuance and complexity of our neighbors and even those closest to us. We cling to labels, assumptions, and limited understandings, using them as materials to construct barriers and false, insufficient caricatures of one another. I long to return to the wisdom of our common humanity. This worship series theme feels necessary, if not inevitable. *I've been meaning to ask...* this phrase implies intention and interest. It's a starting point; one that feels familiar, warm, and inviting. I believe this theme and the sub-theme questions model a way of finding connection through curiosity. Can we dismantle our barriers and discover one another again? Or maybe for the first time? Perhaps we'll find courage through these conversations, and together, find a new way forward. That's my hope, at least."

— **Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman**,
Founding Creative Partner, Director of Branding

"After years of hate rhetoric, how do we speak to those with whom we disagree? After a long span of social distance, how do we talk to one another in person again? In an age of propaganda, how do we discern and discuss reality? I am inspired by the theme, *I've been meaning to ask...* because it is personal and personable. It is both surface level and extremely deep. It also touches on the simple ways that love and relationship are shared."

— **Hannah Garrity**, *Founding Creative Partner*

"When our team got together to discern what our next series might be, one thing was clear: people were feeling disconnected. We each went around the circle sharing stories of loneliness during the pandemic, feelings of physical isolation, concern for those feeling disconnected from the Church, and grief over the enormous divides in our country politically. With all of these concerns at the forefront of our minds, we began by asking: what stories in scripture speak to these divides in our lives? What does the Church have to say about building relationships? How do we foster and model genuine and authentic connection in this socially-distant season? How do we get to know one another—truly and deeply? What was born from these questions was the series, *I've been meaning to ask...* The title alone carries a message of thoughtfulness in it, for we utter these words when we've been thinking of someone. However, the title also hints to the sensitivity that vulnerability invites. So my hope for you in this series is that you will dig deep. I pray you will use these guiding questions to better know the people you sit next to in the pews each week, as well as those you may have never spoken with before. I am confident the kingdom of God looks like deep, meaningful connection. May it begin again here."

— **Rev. Sarah Are**, *Founding Creative Partner*

"In the middle of the November 2020 US election season, my nextdoor neighbor walked out to his front yard one day while I was planting shrubs in mine. Political signs for different candidates loomed like silent silhouettes behind us. Though we've shared lots of small talk over the years, on this day, my neighbor leaned on the fence that divides us and, after complimenting my rhododendrons, asked, 'So, do you have family in the area?' I talked about my cousins who live nearby, about my parents who quit their jobs to move to the mountains as newlyweds, about the many generations before me who had spent summers here, making it a temporary and permanent home. And he told me about his large family, the many cousins and siblings who have called these same mountains home. After a while, he went back into his house and I returned to my shrubs. Our conversation did not unite us or reconcile our differing worldviews. But he essentially said to me, 'I've been meaning to ask. . . where are you from?' And through curiosity and listening, we remembered that we are born of the same dust to which we will one day return. This series alone will not heal our deep divisions or unify us in perfect harmony. But, perhaps one question at a time, we will remember how to stay curious, to keep asking, to keep listening, and to keep seeking the face of God in each other."

— **Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity**, *Founder, Creative Director*