

Discussion Group #1 – “Our place in Cosmic Time and Space: Finding God in the Universe”

Workshop Leader: Dr Geoff Kaiser: Ehlers Hall Osprey Room

Dr. Geoff Kaiser, holding a baccalaureat and a masters degree in natural sciences and a Ph.D. in elementary particle physics from Cambridge University in UK, completed assignments with the UK Atomic Energy Authority and in the US with DOE, NRC, and EPA as well as the last 25 years with the Science Applications International Corporation (now Leidos). He is active as a layman at Fairhaven UMC in Darnestown.

Topical Statement:

New technologies in astronomy and new theories in astrophysics are allowing us to see and perceive a universe so vast that it is beyond everyday comprehension, and certainly inconceivable to our forebears in the Faith. The prescientific picture of the universe bears little resemblance to the cosmos we are now discovering. Yet we worship a personal God.

Questions for Discussion:

Does this new picture of the universe affect how we think/feel about time and space?

In this "big picture," what options are open for us to affirm our God?

What are the implications when we speak of God as the "source" of all that is?

How can we credibly relate to the whole universe and to God as its source?

What symbols are available for us to convey the sense that our existence has meaning?

How can we say that we, as humans, matter, and that our actions matter?

How does Christ and the doctrine of the Incarnation "fit" into this "big picture"?

Discussion Group # 2 – “The Story of Evolution within the Framework of Religious Thinking”

Workshop Leader: Rev Dottie Yunger: Ehlers Hall Heron Room

Rev Dottie Yunger, currently Associate Pastor at Metropolitan Memorial UMC in Washington DC, earned a BS in Marine Biology and worked for over ten years at the Smithsonian; she has an M.Div. and MTS with an emphasis in environmental justice and the Hebrew Bible.

Topical Statement:

The epic of evolution is one of the great stories of our time, a sprawling interdisciplinary narrative of emergent phenomena that has produced over eons a state of astounding diversity and rich ecosystems. The concept of evolution as "red in tooth and claw" and unending competition ignores the other half of the story, that of cooperation. Our challenge is to find appropriate metaphysical concepts and inspiring artistic forms within an interpretive context to integrate scientific knowledge and our Christian faith. It requires romantic vision and philosophical rigor.

Questions for Discussion:

What is the biggest stumbling block for Christians when thinking about evolution?

How does the concept of evolution fit within the framework of our Story?"

How should our faith evolve in order to be consistent with what we know about the world?

What role(s) does Christ Jesus serve (fulfill) in the story of human evolution?

Is this what Paul means by saying that "We are in Christ, and Christ in us"?

How can evolution provide a new way for understanding the hope and the promise we proclaim as the good news in Christ?

Discussion Group # 3 – “The Paradigm of Creation as a Framework for Scientific Thinking”

Workshop Leader: Dr. Rav Stricklin: Retreat Center Lounge

W. Rav Stricklin, PhD. has conducted research and taught animal behavior at the University of Maryland, College Park for 30+ years. His research has focused on social behavior using an ethological approach, i.e., the evolutionary basis of behavior. Recently taught courses are animal welfare & bioethics and an Honors course entitled “From animal thinking to animal feelings.” Member of Metropolitan Memorial UMC.

Topical Statement:

Science (the scientific method) requires "reducibility," and then the "combination" of the parts into wholes. Creation is misunderstood when it is thought to be a "once and for all" single event. Each distinct entity, however small, is part of a larger whole, which is again part of a still larger whole. Each of these parts are creative. Nested creativity is, thus, the nature of reality itself, and this collective creation is a continuous process, at every scale of reality.

Questions for Discussion:

In what way can scientific "cause and effect" account for the emergence of novelty?

How can creation be recovered as a concept inherent to the scientific enterprise

Can emergent reality through natural processes be considered consistent with faith?

Does the statement, “God is both the garden and the gardener” affirm that both Evolutionary Biology AND Creation can contribute to a rational understanding of all natural phenomena - including life as viewed from the human experience?

What is going on around you that demonstrates ongoing creation?

How does faith help us to understand how we fit into this unfolding creation?

In what way does the concept of creation allow for the emergence of love?

Since not all novel events have positive results, what sort of responses can Christians give that are both realistic and provide hope in difficult times?

What are the implications when we say "Faith is a Journey?"

Discussion Group # 4 – “Our biological heritage: New Discoveries in DNA Research”

Workshop Leader: Dr. Gary Sherman: Retreat Center Main Room
Dr. Gary Sherman. MS, DVM, PhD with expertise in reproductive, microbial, molecular and evolutionary biomedical science; National Program Leader for Veterinary Science and Agrosecurity at USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture; Three decades of service in academic and Federal science positions. He is a member of Oakdale-Emory UMC.

Topical Statement:

There is evidence that modern human DNA has an African origin: We infer from other evidence that Africa is a likely source of the human mitochondrial gene pool. The broad study of African genetic diversity also locates the origin of modern human migration in south-western Africa, near the coastal border of Namibia & Angola. The estimate for the age of the ancestral human Y chromosome is given at about 70,000 years ago and is also placed in Africa. Ongoing DNA research confirms our kinship, near or distant, with all living things. At the same time, we have mounds of data that confirm our endless seeking of group identity.

Questions for Discussion:

Is it difficult for many people in the Church to accept the findings of science, and if so, why?

Must acknowledgment of the common ancestry of all living things, as overwhelming scientific evidence from many independent fields asserts, diminish the inestimable value of each human being, or could it instead raise our estimation of the enormous value of all life forms and the importance of their biological and spiritual interdependence.

Are Christian perspectives regarding special creation of man (*Homo sapiens*) altered as a result of clear DNA-based evidence that modern man coexisted in time and space with a completely different and only slightly less advanced hominid species, Neanderthal man, in the Middle East for several thousand years.

What are the implications of DNA research for the human tendency to separate ourselves and others into specific "groups"? Does DNA research explain, promote or mitigate this? Does fidelity to specific religious doctrine explain, promote or mitigate this?

What are the implications of DNA research for spiritually-related ethical decisions; for example, our understanding and treatment of those, 1) of distantly and closely related species 2) with disabilities, 2) of different races, 2) of different nations, 3) of different faiths?

What are the implications of DNA research for real-world ethical decisions; for example, our understanding of how to minimize of pain and suffering due to 1) hunger, 2) disease, 3) natural disasters.

Discussion Group # 5 – “The Phenomenon of Consciousness: Our Self-Identity as Humans”

Workshop Leader: Dr. Cate Bennett: Retreat Center Lounge

M. Catherine Bennett, PhD, is a neurobiologist and has 30 years of professional research experience in the field, with over 50 published articles to her credit. Cate serves as a Scientific Review Officer at NIH and she serves as a member of the Board of the Institute for Science and Judaism. She brings to this discussion a life-long interest in fundamental questions about the origins and meaning of our existence, viewed through

the lens of physics, cosmology, biology & religion.

Topical Statement:

There exists a close link between mental and physical processes: in fact, the whole notion of "active information" suggests a rudimentary mind-like behavior of matter. Although much is understood about the neurobiology of sensory processing, how can it address the manner in which sensory stimuli are translated into consciousness. What are the similarities and differences between the physical phenomena that exists in the outside world and how those are recreated as mental representations. There is strong evidence that the physical world gets deconstructed by our sensory systems and reconstructed as perception and consciousness. Is there also any evidence that humans evolved to have spiritual awareness and religious yearnings that also have a neurobiological basis?

Questions for Discussion:

Is there a distinction between consciousness and self-consciousness?

In what way is the phenomenon of consciousness distinctive for our self-identity?

In what way is consciousness connected to our sense of freedom & responsibility?

Is there a quality of consciousness that should provide the Christian a "new mind"?

What is there in consciousness that compels us to seek community?

Is the power of human reason the highest gift of consciousness, or is reason merely one of many gifts that include emotions, social awareness, mystical encounter, empathy and compassion?

How might consciousness and our sense of the divine be related?

Discussion Group # 6 – “Faith Manifest in the 21st Century: Taking Science Seriously”

Workshop Leader: Dr. Gordon Graig; Retreat Center Main Room

Dr. Gordon Cragg, Ph.D. with a focus on international collaboration in the discovery of novel molecules from nature for the treatment of human diseases, and two decades of university teaching, most recently served as Chief of the Natural Products Branch at the National Cancer Institute at NIH in Bethesda. He is active as a layman at North Bethesda UMC.

Topical Statement:

If we want Church renewal, we will have to renew thinking in the Church, and that means, among other things, taking science seriously. Believing is a theological act, and the Church must recover its sense of representing a community of inquiry. The believing Christian should clarify all assumptions involving faith statements, and expect others to do the same. At the minimum, it means we should learn to use language properly and set boundaries for all faith claims, including those proposed by secular and scientific thinkers.

Questions for Discussion:

How can we teach our children to distinguish meaning from literalism in stories?

How can we encourage adults to take the Bible seriously and not literally?

How can we convey the difference between explanation and interpretation?

What are the implications when we say, "faith is a journey"?

Discussion Group # 7 – “The Living Church in a Scientific World: Church decision-making”

Workshop Leader: Rev. Dan Gleckler; Retreat Center Lounge

Rev. Arthur Dan Gleckler, has been a member of the Baltimore-Washington Conference for over forty years; a graduate of Perkins School of Theology in Dallas. Dan was ordained in 1960. He has served six churches in the Baltimore area before retiring in 2000, and now serves on a part-time basis at another urban church in Baltimore.

Topical Statement:

We live in a culture in which it is *de rigueur* to immediately diss "world-views" and belief systems, but no one lives in a thought vacuum. When a church sign out front says, "No matter who you are or what you believe, you are welcome here" -- what does that say to those within and without the church walls? We rightly might abandon absolutes, but it appears we are abandoning the "norms" of faith in our yearning for togetherness.

Questions for Discussion:

Are we living in a vacuum of beliefs, or is this openness a masquerade for pluralism?

Is there a way to credibly "reclaim" a traditional Christian affirmation for our age?

If I call myself "Christian" do I have to "believe" all these ancient creeds and doctrines?

In what way does the growth of "the Nones" and the "spiritual but not religious" folk provide an opportunity for a scientifically based and globally aware faith?

How can we best engage in re-formation and expansion of the Christian worldview that is appropriate for our pluralistic yet fully connected era?

What are the options for the "modern church" when few in the world are listening?

How does the United Methodist Church make its decisions on doctrine & practice?

Discussion Group # 8 – “The Perspective of Young people that the Church is anti-Science”

Workshop Leader: Rev. David Hosey; Retreat Center Main Room

David Hosey is a native of Virginia and is a graduate student at Wesley Theological Seminary. His special interests in ministry include urban and his goals include campus student work and teaching. He currently serves at Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church as Campus Ministry Coordinator for students at The American University.

Topical Statement:

Findings from the Pew study of religion in American life, and the Barna Research Group, consistently show that young people between 20 and 29 years of age are more skeptical of Christianity than comparable cohorts in previous decades. In fact, in just a decade, many of the Barna measures of the Christian image have shifted substantially downward, fueled in part by a growing sense of disengagement and disillusionment among young people. Surveys of those who have left the Church indicate that their impressions are that Christians are (1) out-of-touch, (2) hypocritical and (3) anti-science. Currently just 16% of non-Christians in their twenties said they have a "good impression" of Christianity.

Questions for Discussion:

What do you think is at the root (the cause) of this data?

Do you agree or disagree with this data? What consequences does this data have for you?

What could leaders within congregations do to change the impressions of those young people leaving the Church?

How can we begin to make small (large?) changes within the churches (among its members) to turn these impressions around?

How can we encourage church leaders to take the implications of this data seriously?