



National Center for Science Education

Defending the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools

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Introduction to the Congregational Study Guide for *Evolution*

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Why a study guide for congregations on *Evolution*?

In the first episode of *Evolution*, Erasmus Darwin says to his brother Charles, “People like Owen think that if there were no Church of England, cucumbers wouldn’t grow.” While Darwin’s theory of evolution may have challenged religious organizations, especially their sense of authority and control of human activities, it also has, for those open to the possibilities, expanded our notions of God.

Still, for some people of faith today, the theory of evolution is rejected outright because of its conflict with the tenets of their faith. For others, like the articulate students shown in Episode Seven, evolution seems to challenge their faith assumptions, but in a way they are willing to engage. For a few people of faith, because they work in sciences grounded in evolutionary concepts and are also active members of worshiping communities, the dialogue between evolution and theology are familiar ground. But for most leaders and members of congregations, evolution and faith occupy different domains in their lives. Both make sense in different departments of life, and nothing has caused them to explore what they might have to say to one another. It is largely for this group that this study guide is offered.

Using the Guides

These guides are written for 45–60-minute sessions of dialogue or study groups, though with enough material they may be lengthened. They are geared toward adults, but could easily include older teenagers as well.

The “Guide to the Series” is intended for use with the congregation for a single discussion session on the entire series. For a more detailed dialogue, the guides for the individual episodes can be used by groups who wish to watch the episodes together.

[To purchase the PBS Evolution videos, please visit the NCSE Store on our website.](#)

Leaders should take some time to review the guide before the discussion. Those using the episodes on cassette have the luxury of reviewing the guide and previewing the episode in advance.

Choosing Leaders, Facilitators, and Resource People

Dialogues around themes and issues often work best with plural leadership. For a small group of people with a high interest level, one leader with good facilitation skills should work just fine. For a larger group, consider working as small table groups (six to eight persons) each with a facilitator/time-keeper, and two up-front resource people — one in theology and one in biological sciences — for the group as a whole.

The best place to look for resource people is in your congregation. Members of the clergy and adult education leaders may serve as theological resource people. If you would like to find a theologian with

more experience in theology and science dialogues, try nearby colleges and universities — both faculty members and campus ministers could be effective resource people. People who work in the life sciences are probably already in your congregation. High school biology teachers, physicians and others in the medical field can all be helpful. If you are lucky enough to have a professor in the evolutionary sciences in your midst, by all means use that person as a resource. If not, look to the wider community, or to congregations in nearby communities with colleges or universities.

Methods for Reflection and Dialogue

The detailed guides for each session offer a pattern that allows some flexibility. Experienced adult educators may have their own preferred techniques for encouraging conversation and dialogue.

Each guide offers detailed questions which follow these steps:

Image – recalling an image or images from the episode

Dig – getting into the image and the thoughts, feelings and connections it evokes

Dialogue – bringing the teachings of science and the traditions of faith into conversation

Explore – researching and reflecting beyond the one hour session

Act – taking steps with your congregation to build on new ideas and insights

Learning What We've Learned

Taking a few minutes at the end of each session to evaluate is a good way to sum up what was learned. Sample questions are:

What was new for you in our conversation today?

What's the most important thing you learned today?

How will what we talked about today affect your life the rest of this week?

What are you still wondering about as we wrap up today's discussion?

The last question, or some variation on it, may be particularly important in groups whose members represent both conservative and liberal perspectives.

Please send comments on these guides, and any questions about ideas and resources for extending the conversation, to:

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