



Exploring tough questions  
facing youth today

# TESTING THE WATERS

**Basic Tenets of Faith**



The Pastoral Center

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## » OVERVIEW

When conversing online, the acronym IRL stands for “in real life.” The virtual world of social media, text chats, blogs, and more have the power to remove us from the real world. What we experience online can skew our perspective on what it means to be human. It can numb us, incite us, distract us, depress us, confuse us, and make us rude or impatient. Strangely, this supposedly “social” and “connected” technology can profoundly disconnect us from others.

Religious faith can also place us in a bubble, especially when it distances us from others. When we keep the prophetic message at a safe distance, obscured in theological language and abstractions, we are missing the whole point. And when we see our parish as an insider club that serves itself, we can forget the radically inclusive message entrusted to us: God’s love is for *everyone*, and God expects us to transform the *whole world* through that love.

Through the incarnation, God showed up in the real world to show us that our faith is not just about talking the talk, but also walking the walk. It can be risky. It can be confusing. It can hurt. But living out our faith can also bring us great purpose, peace, and joy.

This series connects the Bible with the tough questions that youth (and adults) encounter in their neighborhood, in school, among friends, and even online. This process will help you as a leader break open these issues in a fun and meaningful way, sparking conversation and the kind of life change Jesus invites us to embrace.

## » THE ROLE OF PARENTS

As children enter middle school and high school, they become more independent, self-reliant, and, well, self-centered. This can bring parents to make assumptions that this is the time to step back, giving their child more space to form their identity. While there is truth to that at some level (adolescents definitely shouldn’t be smothered), this is a stage of life when parents should in fact *lean in*. The apparent confidence and bluster youth show on the outside can mask the insecurity and confusion on the inside. Youth need their parents to be involved more than ever.

## » WHOLE FAMILY FORMATION

Parents are the primary teachers of their own children, and parishes are waking up to the fact that faith formation programs need to bring parents into the process if they hope to see faith passed on to the next generation. Recent studies give us more and more evidence that the role of parents is the most important factor in determining whether a child will embrace faith as they move toward adulthood. Research from the Center for the Applied Research on the Apostolate shows that parents who talk about their faith and show through their actions that their faith is important to them are more likely to have children who remain Catholic.

## More about Whole Family Formation >>>

To learn more about how your parish can take a comprehensive whole family approach to faith formation, visit [GrowingUpCatholic.com](http://GrowingUpCatholic.com).



While whole family events with elementary-aged children are on the rise, the role of parents can be an afterthought in youth ministry. We have designed the sessions in this series to work with or without parents present, and we encourage you to offer them as parent-child events.

If you choose to involve parents, it is important to consider before each session how to best do so. Many of the activities in this series are high-energy, creative, or silly. Some parents may need some encouragement to get out of their heads and have fun with the group. A few activities involving physical contact would be inappropriate for parents and youth to participate together, and we have noted them as such.

There are a number of ways to approach discussions with parent participation. Unless you have a small group, you will likely want to break into smaller groups for conversation. Some youth may be self-conscious and unable to be completely honest and open in a group situation with a parent present. For this reason, you may choose in some cases to assign parents to different groups from their own children, or to have separate parent and child groups altogether. Be sure to cover expectations around confidentiality. It is inappropriate for a parent (or youth) to share with another parent what their child said in a small group.

Note that even if parents and their children do not share all conversations together in the session, they will still have a valuable shared experience and can have extended conversations about it later.

### >> **THANK YOU**

The role you play in gathering, animating, praying with, and forming youth is a valuable one. Thank you for all you do to serve the church and its families!

Bible-based Explorations of Issues Facing Youth

# » TESTING THE WATERS «««

## Basic Tenets of Faith

### » INTRODUCTION

Navy blue skirt or pants, white shirt, dark shoes, pair of jeans, a tan or khaki jacket. Every wardrobe needs some basics, a foundation for the rest of the closet. Just so with faith; you need the basic outline, tenets of belief.

These concepts—liberation, covenant, salvation, baptism, discipleship, and community—are central to Christianity. They are the navy blue and tan basics of Christian faith. Though we tend to think of them in terms of the church, their roots are in the experience of the Israelites as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Therefore this unit looks first at the basics of God's action to liberate the Israelites from slavery and to make them a community bound in covenant with their liberating God in Exodus.

Then, in the fullness of time, God sent the Son, Jesus Christ, whose faithfulness, even when it meant his death, saved us from ourselves so that we might be a people for others. Once we make a deliberate choice to turn away from whatever separates us from God, and turn toward a life of discipleship, we make a public statement in the form of baptism. Or, in the case of those baptized as infants, our parents make that commitment on our behalf. Baptism marks our embarking on a life of following Jesus in the company of the faith community.

This unit will ferry participants through these six basic tenets of the Christian faith in a roughly chronological look at salvation history and how believers respond to it. This short course on the basics is a way to test the waters (baptismal) of Christianity before diving in. For those who've "passed through the waters," it will be a chance to review basics. As a primer on Christianity, this unit could also be nicely paired with another In Real Life unit called *Mantras*, *Menorahs*, and *Minarets*, which looks at basics in other major faiths.



## EXTENDER SESSION

Extender sessions suggest special activities related to the issue of the unit. They help accommodate the diversity of parish schedules. Since each unit is undated, participants may study units in their entirety and still participate in special events of the parish that get scheduled simultaneously with Bible study time. Extender sessions can be used anytime, but the one for this unit best follows **Session 1 or 2 (Option A), or after Session 5 or 6 (Option B)**. Calculate now whether or not you will be using the extender session.



## THE TEACHING PLAN: The parts of the session guide

» **Faith story.** The session is rooted in this Bible passage.

» **Faith focus.** This is the story of the passage in a nutshell.

» **Session goal.** The entire session is built around this goal. What changes—in knowledge, attitude, and/or action—do you desire in your group?

» **Materials needed and advance preparation.** This is what you will need if the session is to go smoothly. You'll feel more at ease if you've taken care of these details before you meet your group.

## » FROM LIFE TO BIBLE TO LIFE

The teaching plan we use is called *life-centered*. However, when we write each session, we always begin with Scripture. We ask, what does this particular passage say, especially to youth? Each session moves from life to Bible to life. So the Bible is really at the center of this way of teaching.

In every session we try to hit upon a tough question that participants might ask. Find out what questions on this issue are important for your group. Feel free to bring your own input and invite your group members to add their own experiences.

## » TEACHING THE SESSION

The five step-by-step movements will carry you from *life to the Bible and back to life*. Each session takes about 45 to 50 minutes. If there is a handout sheet for the session, take note of any complementary activities and stories.

1. **Focus.** This activity is intended to create a friendly climate within the group and to draw attention to the issue.

2. **Connect.** Talking, drawing, role playing, and other activities invite participants to express their own life experience about the issue. Also use memory, reason, or imagination to get the group thinking about *why* they view the issue the way they do.

3. **Explore the Bible.** With a minimum of lecturing, dig into the faith story and search for answers to ques-

tions raised in the first activities. The Insights from Scripture section will help clarify the faith story. Help participants discover how the faith community understands the Bible passage.

4. **Apply** the faith story. This is the "aha!" moment when participants realize the faith story has wisdom for their lives.

5. **Respond.** What will the group do about the issue in light of what they have learned from their own experiences set alongside the faith story? At this point, the faith story becomes lived rather than a mere intellectual exercise.

## » LOOK AHEAD

Here are reminders for what you need to do for the next session or two.

## » INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Here is a resource for Explore the Bible. Don't try to use all the material given. Take what you need to lead the session and answer questions your group may have. Let the Insights section inspire you to think and study more about the passage for the session.

## » **HANDOUT SHEETS**

Occasionally, there will be a handout sheet to complement your session. If you choose to use this, you will need to make enough copies for the group. These sheets may include questions, stories, agree/disagree exercises, charts, pictures, and other materials to stimulate your group to think and discuss.

Generally, no participant preparation is required unless the session plan calls for you to contact selected group members for specific tasks.

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE

SAMPLE - DO NOT REPRODUCE



## »» SESSION 1

# YOUR BASIC ‘WAY OUT’ GOD

### »» KEY VERSE

“The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.” (Exodus 15:2)

### »» FAITH STORY

Exodus 15:1-21

### »» FAITH FOCUS

Having experienced the drama of being saved from the Egyptian army, both Moses and Miriam sang songs of praise to God. Their two songs shout out the story of God’s saving grace, of God’s liberation. They highlight a basic tenet of our faith—that God is a liberator, one who provides *a way out*. For Jews and Christians alike, this event of liberation is a pinnacle in the story of faith (salvation history). It is an event not just of the past, but one that accompanies the faithful throughout life.

### »» SESSION GOAL

For participants who sometimes wonder whether or not God is involved in human history, introduce them to this turning point in salvation history—the exodus.

### »» Materials needed and advance preparation

- Chalkboard/chalk or newsprint/markers
- Twister games, or children’s large cardboard blocks, large cardboard appliance box and tape (depending on option you choose in Focus)
- Index cards, pencils
- Bibles
- Copies of handout sheet for Session 1
- Hoses and water source (option in Respond)



## TEACHING PLAN

### 1. FOCUS 10 minutes

»» **Option A:** If you can get your hands on a large cardboard appliance box, use it to box up one or more of your participants. Provide tape to tape it shut. Other possibilities include building a tower around a person out of children’s large cardboard blocks (from your church nursery?) so that the person inside is “stuck” unless they break down the wall. You could also lock one or more youth in a closet for about 10 minutes (though be careful of very real fears this may expose). The idea is to let youth feel, even momentarily, as if they’re stuck without a way out.





## DOING DRUGS AS A WAY OUT...

Peer pressure got the kids doing drugs? Not really, reports Knight-Ridder News Service. It's more likely that kids who do drugs are trying to find a way out of their problems, to escape. Plus, they just like the feeling. What youth don't yet understand is that in the long run drugs pose obstacles to developing problem-solving skills.



**“The God celebrated [in the songs of Moses and Miriam] is not an abstract God, an idea, however lofty. This God is known because the action can be recognized in specific events.”**

Etienne Charpentier,  
*How to Read the Old Testament*



» **Option B:** Play Twister to achieve the same purpose: Let participants feel, even momentarily, as if they're stuck without a way out (except if they fall). Depending on the size of your group, have multiple games going. Let the adults have fun, too, but playing their own game!

## 2. CONNECT 5-8 minutes

As a group, tell stories of scary times when you were (literally or figuratively) locked up, locked out, tied up, boxed in, twisted up, and couldn't find a way out.

Discuss in small groups of 2-4 people (write the questions on the chalkboard or newsprint):

1. How do you feel when you can't get out of a place or a situation?
2. What do you do; kick, scream, yell, pray, run, something worse?
3. Where do you think God is when you're scared and can't find a way out?

Shift to the next activity by saying: *Most likely we've all felt stuck or locked up, with no way out. We've wondered where God was. That's how the Israelites must have felt as slaves. Then something happened, something they would remember as long as there were storytellers.*

## 3. EXPLORE THE BIBLE 10-12 minutes

Briefly recap the story of the exodus: how Moses got Pharaoh to let the people go, how the slaves fled before the Egyptian army, how they came to the banks of the Red Sea and God provided dry ground for the crossing, how the waters rolled back over the army, drowning the Egyptians.

Invite participants to read Exodus 15:1-21 *aloud*. The victory songs are better that way! Essentially, there are two choruses responding to each other (you could even divide in two and do it that way—antiphonally). One is about the power of God in general (vv. 2-3, 6-7, 11, 18), and the other one celebrates specific acts of God (vv. 1, 4-5, 8-10, 12-17). Then choose one of the following options:

» **Option A:** Rewrite the song of Moses (vv. 1b-18) into a rap. Don't try to get all the biblical facts and images into the rap, but use the story as a launching pad. If participants are not into rap, try developing a country and western song, or a blues style. If singing is not your group's "thing," develop a dramatic reading or one-act play.

» **Option B:** Distribute copies of the handout sheet for a Bible study on how God helped the Israelites find a way through their post-escape problems.

» **For Both Options:** If participants question the "warrior God" imagery in these passages, point out that this may be seen as symbolic language; "speaking of the warrior is a way of saying that, 'God is not distant; [God] is not absent from human struggles for justice and liberty'" (Etienne Charpentier).

Also, if you have time, help participants answer these questions (also taken from Charpentier):

- What specific actions of God are celebrated in vv. 4-5 and 8-10?
- At this period it was thought that God had a precise purpose in liberating the Israelites (v. 17): what was it?
- What does v. 18 teach us about the faith of Israel and its political system?

#### 4. APPLY 5-10 minutes

Say something like: *In the song of Moses, God provides a way out—God parts the waters of the Red Sea and the people of Israel cross over to a safe place on dry ground. That does not mean that God makes the “other side” perfect. It means you get to keep going.*

At this point, tell the following story:

*Basil Marin was pastor of Family Mennonite Church, a congregation in south-central Los Angeles. One night as Pastor Basil returned to his home from a meeting, he was hit in a head-on collision by a car driven by a person fleeing a high-speed police pursuit. The accident investigators estimate Pastor Basil’s car was struck at about 90 mph.*

*Mistaken for the subject of the pursuit, Pastor Basil awoke to a gun barrel of a Los Angeles police officer’s service revolver pressed into his ear. In the collision, Pastor Basil sustained serious injury. Nevertheless, the police handcuffed Pastor Basil and made him lie face down, on a broken nose, in the highway, until they discovered his Bible on the front seat of the car with his name on the cover. Only then did the police summon an ambulance and transport him to a hospital, where Pastor Basil spent two weeks recovering from the worst of his injuries. After the incident, Pastor Basil sought reconciliation with the officers who mistook him for the subject of their chase. The police refused to meet with him. Later, Pastor Basil said that it was his belief that God was with him during the accident, and that God never abandoned him, that has kept him from hating the police.*

Ask: *How did Pastor Basil get out of his predicament? What do you think God’s role was in providing a way out?*

#### 5. RESPOND 10-15 minutes

Ask each participant to take an index card, and write on the card one area in their life where they would want God to provide a way out. Then rearrange the chairs in your meeting place so that you have two rows of chairs with an aisle between the rows. Invite each participant to walk between the chairs, placing their cards in a box, symbolizing that they are willing to walk between the waters of their crisis and disappointment and trust God to provide a way through their situation, and onward, maybe not to a perfect resolution, but always to a fresh start.

x x x x x x x x  
o —————> box  
x x x x x x x x

**Note:** In a camp or retreat setting, or if you can do this activity outside, have participants walk between a couple of people with hoses, who arc the water over their heads, symbolizing the waters of the sea through which the Israelites passed.

Close with a prayer thanking God for providing a way out, and asking God to give each participant courage to walk through their fears and crises to God’s way through.



**“The God of Exodus is the God of history and of political liberation...”**

Gustavo Gutiérrez,  
*A Theology of Liberation*



**LOOK AHEAD**

For next session, one of the activity options requires one deck of cards (Uno, Rook, or Dutch Blitz) for every four people. Another calls for a tent. You may also want to make a poster on newsprint of the Ten Commandments, as a refresher for your participants.

If you plan to do the Extender Session option of a Seder or Haggadah service, collect your resources (see sources listed in Extender) so you can have the service following this or the next session.





**Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister during World War II, was quoted as saying, “Success is never final. Failure is never fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts.”**



## INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE

Exodus 15:1-21 is part of a larger unit (Exodus 13:17–18:27) that describes the perils of the initial passage to freedom for Israel. They departed Egypt, journeyed to Mt. Sinai, and there entered into a covenant with God. Coping with the ongoing crises associated with leaving Egypt is the central theme of this section. In each story, Moses and the people of Israel are inadequate to meet the challenges of their newfound freedom. God had embraced the Israelites when they were a people in bondage, then proved to be an active, dynamic, and interested participant as they met each crisis. God parted the waters (14:19-30), provided fresh water (15:22-27; 17:5-6), fed them with manna (16:14-15), gave Aaron and Hur the idea of lifting Moses’ arms up over the battle with the Amalekites (17:8-13), and gave Jethro the wisdom to suggest Moses could not run the entire operation of moving God’s people to the Promised Land by himself (18:19-27).

Exodus 15:1-21 is a pair of Hebrew songs that celebrate God’s involvement and reliability in dangerous times. There are two songs in the text; vv. 1b-18 is Moses’ song, made up of a chorus (v. 1b) and six couplets (vv. 2-18); v. 19 is a transitional narrative statement; vv. 20-21 describe the song of Miriam and the women, which is Moses’ chorus (cf. v. 21).

### » WHAT ABOUT THE BLOOD?

Participants may see the Hebrew Bible as a difficult and confusing collection of materials. Our churches preach peace, yet in Exodus 15, a whole army gets slaughtered. But there is a rabbinical story (*midrash*) of Exodus 15 that describes Moses celebrating the victory over Egypt, only to discover God crying over the destruction of the Egyptians. This story is not primarily about “beating the bad guys.” It is a reminder that God takes the initiative to save people, and cautions the reader from becoming too arrogant and self-reliant. That Moses and the people of Israel seemed to fail at every turn is not to suggest they are somehow stupid. Life is full of failures. Exodus 15 is a celebration of God’s ongoing journey with us, as we move in life away from all that enslaves us, toward the freedom (albeit costly) offered in Jesus Christ.

Even the locale of this event of liberation is significant to the story. Bodies of water, like the Red Sea, served in the Hebrew Scriptures as symbols of chaos. The people of Israel had to journey through the midst of chaos to get to a new start. Often, the only way available to us in the middle of our disappointments is to rely on God for a way out when everything is chaos, and recognize that life is not about avoiding chaos, but having God as a companion on the journey when chaos is at hand.

### » THE WAY OUT

The message of the exodus is that God provides a way out. *Ex houdos* comes from the Greek meaning “out way,” the way out. In other words, the entire Bible is about *another way*. When the infant Jesus’ life was in danger, his parents took him “another way” to escape Herod (Matthew 2). The magi went home “another way.” Then Jesus started teaching “another way.” The early church was known as The Way. A basic tenet of both Jewish and Christian faith is that God is a liberator, *one who provides a way*.

# YOUR BASIC 'WAY OUT' GOD

The people of Israel were en route from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land when the Egyptian army tried to recapture them and return them to slavery. God rescued Moses and the people by parting the Red Sea, thus providing an escape for Israel, which Moses and Miriam sing about in Exodus 15:1-21. Yet after the escape, the road to freedom wasn't any easier. Using the chart below, examine a few of the situations the people of Israel faced after they were freed, and how God worked to help them find a way through their problems.

Text	Problem	The Way Out
Exodus 14:1-31	Egyptian army attempts to recapture Israel	God parts the Red Sea, allowing Israel to escape
Exodus 15:22-27		
Exodus 16:1-36		
Exodus 17:1-7		
Exodus 17:8-16		
Exodus 18:13-27		