Congregational conversations

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The program Scientists in Congregations, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, sought to cultivate a conversation on science and faith within congregations. About 35 congregations participated. We asked some pastors who were involved to describe their experience and what they learned.

We called our effort the Pascal Project in honor of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662), the brilliant French mathematician often considered the first thinker to seriously consider the intersection of faith with the natural sciences. First, we recruited a group of 25 people who were interested in the topic. Calling ourselves the Pascal Forum, we read several recent books and met roughly once a month for lectures, video presentations, and discussion.

Toward the end of the first year, teams drawn from the forum met with groups in the congregation, ranging from the ushers to the confirmation class. The teams shared what they were learning in the forum and asked members what issues of science and faith were most interesting or troubling to them.

Reflecting on these conversations, the forum designed the third phase of the Pascal Project: a series of lectures open to the surrounding community as well as the congregation. These lectures were well attended and consistently engaging. They

also led us to some conversations and conclusions that I and many other participants did not expect.

We found, for example, that brain science, not evolution, is the cutting-edge discipline in the conversation on science and religion. New questions posed by brain science include, Is there a God gene—a predisposition bred into our species by evolution to believe in a transcendent and unseen reality? Would such a gene be evidence for God? We also learned that there is a fascinating debate within brain science about the extent to which human beings actually exercise free will.

The seminars led many of us to a more nuanced understanding of Darwin. Many participants who thought they had reconciled evolution and their faith in God found themselves having to ask troubling questions about the terms of divine creation-by-evolution. “Survival of the fittest” implies a process strewn with pain, suffering, unnumbered individual deaths, and serial mass extinctions. How does a believer reconcile that process with a creator God of love and compassion?

Many of us were fascinated with what scientists often refer to as the “fine-tuning” of the universe. We found these cosmological discussions fascinating and to some extent faith affirming. We were also warned, however, about the danger of positing another “god of the gaps”—a god who merely occupies the space of human ignorance about the cosmos.

An overarching impression gained by members of both our congregation and the larger community is that the discussion has not been served well by the popular media, which often reduce issues to a naive dichotomy, misrepresenting the intellectual complexities and spiritual nuances.

—**Michael Lindvall**, pastor at the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City

St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church launched its program in science and faith by forming a planning committee of scientists and pastors, which in turn developed a series of programs aimed at youth and adults. Scientists within the congregation shared the work they do and their views on the areas of potential compatibility of science and faith. We also brought in topflight scientists to discuss the relationship between science and religion. They covered a number of hot-button issues: God and origins, evolution and creation, what it means to be alive, what it means to be

human, and how—and why—we should think about the relationship between science and faith. We developed and implemented a six-week adult education course, a four-week youth class, and a four-week sermon series, in addition to hosting four large-scale events for the community.

Some people worried that congregation members would perceive a threat to their views—especially views about the creation and the historical Adam and Eve. One scientist feared that even in our highly educated community people might distance themselves from him when they found out about what his work entails. And we wondered if some would think the materials were too "pro-science" and not "pro-faith" enough.

Our fears were not realized. The turnout for our adult education classes tripled. Our nighttime programs drew between 100 and 250 community members. We had visitors who were encouraged (or at least curious) to see a church taking science seriously. And even the most conservative theological folks in the congregation were open to the program and were willing to, at worst, agree to disagree.

Some snapshots of success: a senior member of the congregation approached a leader with tears in her eyes to give a hug and say that she had never in her many years of attending church had an opportunity to wrestle with the connections between science and faith. Another church member said that wrestling with the potentially divisive issues related to science and faith provided her some models for wrestling with other potentially divisive issues and for "staying in the conversation without walking away." She said the experience was so meaningful because "the scientists were also church members, people we know and trust."

A scientist on the planning committee said the experience was transformative: "I always thought of my work [as a scientist] as completely separate from my actual faith or something that needed to 'be dealt with.' But through presenting my own perspective on the compatibility, for me, between science and Christian faith, I came to see how my work and my Christian faith can be deeply integrated." We brought in wonderful speakers, but the best ambassadors in our effort were the scientists who sat in the pews.

—**Elaine Howard Ecklund**, sociologist at Rice University and author of *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think*, and **Jeff Smith**, senior pastor at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Houston

At Pinnacle Presbyterian, we decided to bring the most formally trained folk together first and get them talking. A group of 12 to 15 met monthly for two years—meetings interspersed with lectures by outside speakers, a sermon series on theologies of creation in light of science, and a lot of talking about what we were doing. The first year's conversations were pretty general, and it took time to build rapport.

The second year saw individuals in the group giving presentations on personal interests—from public health to evolution. A scientist said: "Being a part of this effort has given me the courage to be more open about my faith at work, and it has brought a new dimension to my worship experience because I feel less fractured overall."

Near the end of our second year we invited physicist Karl Giberson to preach, lecture, and meet with our youth. He preached about how a mathematician can appreciate God. His lecture, along with the sermon series and a lecture on prayer and health, elicited the most interest.

We then opened our monthly roundtable to anyone who would come. The group almost tripled overnight. That attendance was sustained through another year of monthly programming. As word spread, more people attended from outside the congregation. Other groups in the church began to take up the questions, reading books together and viewing videos. The group's monthly meetings included presentations on memory loss and the theological issues it raises, the theology of technology, process theology, math, and cosmology.

We learned that this conversation should not be over structured or pushed too fast. It takes time and unfolds at its own pace. It requires a critical mass committed as much to each other as to the questions at hand. And it benefits from lead pastors and lead scientists publicly showing that they respect each other.

The experience left me with the following lessons.

We need a new sense of wonder. Though I've experienced the church as a place where the most interesting questions are asked, scientists tell a different story. They speak of how their pull toward a career in science was like a calling, but their curiosity was silenced in church, as if it were a threat to their faith. Eventually, they compartmentalized their science from their faith. We should have enough

confidence in a creating and creative God to embrace a curiosity about how creation works.

We need a new kind of iconoclasm. So much of the faith and science dialogue still mystifies one side or the other. People say things like “science says” or “the Bible says” when the best scientists know that much of scientific thought is provisional, and the best theologians and pastors know that there are some theological questions that have never been answered.

We need to be careful when we talk about God. The great theological traditions have always known that God does not exist the way that things exist. God is not part of the realm of being except as we (miraculously) know God in Christ. When Christians don’t articulate this point, many people will reject theology when they realize that science doesn’t find God somewhere.

—**Wes Avram**, senior pastor of Pinnacle Presbyterian Church in Scottsdale, Arizona

We wanted to make Sunday mornings a time when both God’s special revelation in scripture and God’s general revelation in creation would be explicitly addressed. With that in mind, I developed a series of sermons, working with a group of scientists who served as consultants.

At one of these consultations, I told one scientist that I thought God’s truth in epigenetics, his field of research, was in line with the truth in the second commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of their parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me” (Deut. 5:8–9).

He exclaimed, “Yes, that is exactly what epigenetics is about! The ‘sins’ of the parents really are, to some degree, passed on to their children, as are their loving behaviors. We now know that our environment and our choices can influence our genes, and that these changes are heritable.”

As we discussed the implications of his research, I realized for the first time that God wasn’t being cruel or capricious in speaking about the sins of parents being passed

on to the third and fourth generation. God was being gracious—warning people about a potential physiological curse: “Look, in about 5,000 years you’ll understand; scientists are going to discover this thing called epigenetics, and you’ll realize why I said this.”

The other sermons in the series were on geophysics and the ground of all being; the kidney; homeostasis and the Holy Spirit; the hydrology of the Bow River; and the biomechanics of a runner’s leg. By intention I sidestepped evolution and the origins of the universe, hoping to avoid people’s prejudgments and biases. Kidneys, rivers, and rocks don’t come with any “faith vs. science” baggage. I hoped that our community would learn to discern, appreciate, and trust God’s words in creation—learn to read that other God-inspired book.

Most consultations began with the scientists doing the talking in response to my questions. Keeping a knowledge of the scriptures and the gospel in mind, I waited for a moment of connection, when the scientist’s words connected to a particular attribute of God or a theological concept. When I shared my thoughts, I’d hear: “Hmmm . . . that’s interesting . . . I’ll need to think about that . . . I’ve never seen it that way before.” While some look at me a bit askance, most respond positively. Even if they don’t fully believe what I’m saying, they’re intrigued that a pastor would show a kind of reverence for the work they do.

This project has made a significant imprint on our church’s DNA. It had an impact on the more than 88,000 people who have listened to our science sermons online. Scientists in the community have now taken on a more active role in the church. While it took some time to convince a geophysicist that words he spoke as part of the “Geophysics and the Ground of all Being” message were actually part of the sermon and not just an illustration, he eventually caught on. He came to realize that the seismic data and geological analogies he worked with were tools that enabled him to exegete the geoscientific word of God. After I preached that sermon, he told me that he had a profound sense of God’s presence as he gave his talk: “I’ve never felt that kind of connection between my work and my faith before.”

—**John Van Sloten**, pastor of New Hope Church in Calgary, Alberta

Some in our congregation were offended by our attempts to harmonize science and religious belief. They suspected that we were on a slippery slope to theological

compromise with the world. At least one family left the church over our programming. Some portions of our congregation clamored for “equal time” to argue for young earth creationism or intelligent design.

My scientist colleague and I pledged ourselves to reach out personally to those people. While we didn’t always convince them, our efforts at least attempted to model a loving way to navigate this controversial territory.

What became clear was that questions of biblical interpretation often drove the debate. How do we read scripture, particularly the creation accounts in Genesis 1–2? What interpretive methods could affirm the Bible’s authority without falling into a wooden literalism that neglected the historic and cultural clothing of God’s eternal Word? We spent several sessions in adult Christian education treating these topics and trying to show a middle way that preserved historic biblical orthodoxy yet refused to treat the Bible as a modern science textbook.

As a pastor, one of the chief challenges I wrestled with in leading this program was how to strike a healthy balance. On the one hand, I needed to allow enough room for different positions to be discussed and debated; on the other hand, I didn’t want to imply that all options were equally valid. Certain interpretations were better supported than others.

As a teacher, I strove to highlight these approaches. It was stressful. The science-faith dialogue remains a minefield of assumptions and deeply held beliefs. Challenging these beliefs (whether related to the age of the earth, for example, or the literal existence of Adam and Eve) can be unsettling to congregants. I learned that the classroom provides a more constructive venue for these discussions than a pulpit ever could.

Our program also taught me that certain branches of science are easier than others to share with a congregation. While we offered a seminar led by a Christian evolutionary biologist (who did a remarkable job showing evidence for natural selection), we chose a different topic for a congregation-wide event: an astrophysicist used beautiful slides to speak about deep space and the formation of galaxies and stars. This worshipful presentation engaged all ages.

We also treated the medical sciences in our offerings, which had widespread appeal. Over 250 people gathered for a conference on “Health, Science, and Faith: Is Medical Science in Need of Spiritual Care?” Dr. Harold Koenig of Duke University

documented the positive effects of spiritual care, and Christian author Philip Yancey reflected on “the gift of pain.” It was estimated that one-third of conference participants came from outside our congregation.

Our program attracted attention in the local newspaper and participants from other congregations. Parachurch campus ministries participated in the events and cosponsored one of them. Perhaps the anecdotal feedback we received was most gratifying. One longtime member wrote us: “Because you were willing to open a dialogue within the church membership about very important and significant things, I feel renewed. . . . I have not only found that there are many within our congregation who struggle with the same issues I do, but that we can come to a reasonable, thoughtful reconciliation.”

—**Carl S. Hofmann**, pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Boulder, Colorado