



# Real. Present. God. In Life Issues

by Rev. Michael Salemink, Executive Director, Lutherans for Life

Life issues involve so much more than political issues or personal choices. Situations like a surprise pregnancy or a terminal diagnosis affect people. This also includes Christian believers, Lutheran congregation members, and people that we—and our students—know and care about. The Devil's deception that we can use death as a solution to suffering and difficulty ruins bodies, consciences, relationships, and lives.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ brings us—and our neighbors—a better way. He creates, redeems, and calls every human life to be His own precious treasure. His crucified-and-risen forgiving grace gives each one worth and purpose. Nobody's age or appearance can improve upon it. No one's abilities or experiences can impair it. He abides alongside us invisibly and physically in all our life-and-death realities. He makes the immediate and eternal difference we need. This joy equips us with courage.

This hope empowers our compassion. We get to live as Gospel-motivated voices for life. We can proclaim and put into practice the sanctity of every member of our race.

These studies explore sensitive and serious topics: abortion, assisted suicide, and ethical disagreements. “Real. Present. God. In Pregnancy!” examines the situation of surprise pregnancy. We'll recognize the complications and pressures it can cause. And we'll discover the blessings that God works in spite of the burdens. “Real. Present. God. In Dying!” considers the context of terminal diagnosis. We'll confront the reasons someone might want to hasten death as well as the risks of doing so. And we'll discern the comforts that come to life's ending from faith in the Heavenly Father's care. “Real. Present. God. In Controversy!” reflects on speaking the truth in love about life. We'll deliberate what makes dialogue about life issues uncomfortable. And we'll identify how our Savior Himself takes responsibility for our Christian witness.

Some participants will have firsthand knowledge of these life-and-death events. Many will have encountered heated conversations about life issues with peers, teachers, and even relatives. Skilled leaders will facilitate space for listening and sharing. They will exemplify and ensure genuine and respectful exchanges of ideas, so that students can investigate truth, love, and life together within the security of fellowship. Leaders may preface each study by inviting students to commit to confidentiality. “Let's keep the sentiments, suggestions, and stories contributed among us private.” A retreat or lock-in dedicated to preparing students to face life issues might serve this purpose especially well. However, the studies will also suit a series of youth nights or Sunday gatherings.

Of course, leaders will prudently seek parental (and pastoral!) notification, permission, and involvement. Life-minded medical and mental health professionals may have helpful perspectives to offer also, perhaps as guest presenters or panel participants. And Lutherans For Life (888-364-LIFE) places ourselves at your service for further resources or counsel.

*Leader's notes are in red throughout.*



# Real. Present. God. In Life Issues

## SESSION 1: REAL. PRESENT. GOD. IN PREGNANCY!

### Opening Discussion

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The 2006 film *Bella* follows Nina's surprise pregnancy. Check out the theatrical trailer at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJ9AkTrbxgk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJ9AkTrbxgk). Morning sickness gets her fired from her job. The baby's father abandons her. Her dad died when she was young. Her mother feels distant. She has no siblings and no other friends. So she schedules an abortion.

**What circumstances might make a pregnancy a surprise?**

*Pregnancy may come as especially surprising when the mother is a student, a soldier, or over forty; when a couple is facing financial pressures; when using contraception; when conception occurs during sexual assault; when the mother is suffering medical conditions; when a couple's relationship is unstable or abusive; and when doctors diagnose fetal deformities or disabilities.*

**What difficulties do you imagine someone (female or male) faces in a surprise pregnancy?**

*Surprise pregnancy can bring guilt about irresponsible sexuality, grief over lost future opportunities, anxiety at increasing responsibilities, worries about getting or keeping a job and procuring or providing necessities and completing education, isolation and abandonment, physical pains and changes, and anger at self or partner or God.*

Hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj talks about her abortion in the song *Autobiography*. Her reflections begin around 2:30 at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHbFm6UfCX4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHbFm6UfCX4). She relates the grief and guilt she suffers many years later. She even apologizes to her unborn baby: "Mommy was too busy trying to have fun...to conceive you then leave you, the concept alone seems evil...I listened to people who told me I wasn't ready for you." Abortions can cause many other problems, like the ones listed at [word-of-hope.org/resources/faqs](http://word-of-hope.org/resources/faqs).

**Which of these do you think would be the worst, and why?**

*Post-abortion symptoms include pain, hemorrhaging, nausea, infection, increased risk for cancers, increased risk for subsequent pregnancy complications, increased risk for infertility, numbness, depression, nightmares, eating disorders, self-harm, substance abuse, sexual dysfunction, promiscuity, guilt, anxiety, anger, relationship breakdown, communication difficulty.*

### In God's Word

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In Psalm 46:5 the Heavenly Father promises His people, "God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns." Pregnancy, especially surprise pregnancy, can make a person feel afraid, angry, ashamed, and alone. Yet God comes near to this situation in some very special ways. Read Psalm 22:9-10 and Psalm 139:11-16.

**What do these words tell you about God's presence in pregnancy?**

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**Key Point:**  
Pregnancy can make a person feel afraid, angry, ashamed, and alone. Yet God comes near to this situation in some very special ways.

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*God uses the darkness and hiddenness of the womb to work something wonderful. The Almighty Maker not only controls circumstances but cares about the persons affected. He is bringing forth life for us to receive and enjoy despite our inability to manage or understand it.*

**What three activities does Isaiah 43:1 say God engages in to make every human life precious?**

*Our Heavenly Father creates, redeems, and calls every human life, each genetic member of our race, as His own precious treasure forever.*

Raising children involves suffering. All relationships require sacrifice. Sinful human nature does not enjoy selflessness or servanthood. But God still regards procreation as a gift. Psalm 127:3 calls children “an inheritance from the Lord.”

**How does Jesus praise parenting in John 16:21?**

*He highlights how it sacrifices self for the survival of someone else and the way it yields joy. Procreation and parenting participate in God’s miraculous activity of giving life and making more human beings in His image and to His delight. The loving embrace of family negates many pains and failures.*

**What do you see as some of the many blessings that childbearing brings?**

*Having and raising children gives great purpose to our lives because others depend upon us. Children show their parents affection and share God’s own forgiveness and unconditional acceptance. They provide companionship and the chance to have an influence on the world and make a difference for the future of humankind. They remind us about the fun, wonder, and innocence God has built into creation. They connect us more intensely to our families and communities.*

In fact, little children teach us about faith and salvation. Jesus explains that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Mark 10:15). And 1 John 3:1 rejoices over “what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are!” Read Isaiah 1:2 and John 15:5.

**In what ways is each one of us like a child?**

*We cannot completely take care of ourselves to ensure our own survival and salvation. We don’t always comprehend what’s best for us. We face danger every day from the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature. We often concern ourselves only with our own immediate desires, and we sometimes wreak havoc on ourselves, others, and everything around us. We depend helplessly upon the mercy of our Father in heaven. We belong to God and are beloved by Him.*

**How do 1 Peter 1:3 and Isaiah 46:3-4 and Hebrews 12:5-6 and Isaiah 66:12-13 express God’s parenthood toward us?**

*God brings us into being and sustains our existence by His grace. He protects and provides for our bodies and hearts from fertilization in our mother’s womb until final breath in His time and according to His will. He instructs and directs with His Word and Church so that we avoid danger and achieve great deeds. And His presence and promises comfort and encourage us even in our afflictions and failings.*

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Abortion ends the life of a human being. Our Lord considers it a very serious sin. “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6). Abortion even leaves its survivors as victims. It harms the mothers and fathers who take part in the procedures. It scars the doctors and supporters who make it possible. “Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:15). Read Ezekiel 18:32 and 1 Timothy 2:4.

**What does God feel about somebody who has participated in violence against life?**

*God deeply grieves all aggression and death dealt against His little ones. He laments any lives getting lost. So He loves those who take part in abortion or assisted suicide just as much as He loves their victims. He reaches out in forgiveness and healing to save from every sin.*

**How does He deal with them in Romans 5:6-10 and Genesis 50:20-21 to make things right?**

*He has sent His Son Jesus to suffer the punishment for even these evils. He has already paid the price, made up for the wrongs, settled all the debts, and reconciled every account. He forgives us without our even asking for it. He rescues everyone who trusts Him so that their sins do not crush them, no matter what their history or their predicament. And He not only sets free from the grip of guilt but He also makes our mistakes into demonstrations of His compassion so that we embody and mediate His grace in a way that saves others.*

## Closing

**We may not face surprise pregnancies this week, but we will probably encounter interrupting, irritating, or burdensome interactions. How might the assurances we’ve learned about help you?**

*I will remember how God holds every person in my life dear. I will recognize them each as a gift and a privilege from my Heavenly Father. I will rejoice at the opportunities they offer me to show love and share life. I will treat them with greater patience. I will listen with courage and speak with compassion.*

Close with prayer.

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**Additional Resource: Hearts broken by violence against life can experience God’s mercy through Lutherans For Life’s Word of Hope crisis care and healing hotline: 1-888-21STORY or [www.word-of-hope.org](http://www.word-of-hope.org).**

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# Real. Present. God. In Life Issues

## Session 2: Real. Present. God. In Dying!

### Opening Discussion

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Will Traynor suffered a serious accident that left him paralyzed. His injuries cause him great pain and sadness. He used to enjoy a very active life, but now he only wants to die. He doesn't have any illness, and he's only thirty-five years old, but he'll never get any better. He relies on others to feed him, clothe him, bathe him, and care for him around the clock. He plans to go to Switzerland in six months. There the laws will let doctors give him drugs and make him dead. Then Louisa Clark become his attendant and falls in love with him. You can watch their conversation about physician-assisted suicide at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn5CKA7bwLs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn5CKA7bwLs).

**What concerns does Will say make his condition so frustrating? What do you think the experiences of other individuals with a life-ending (terminal) diagnosis have in common with his? What differences might there be?**

*Will specifically references contracting infections, inability to care for himself, being limited in activity, his body frequently hurting and quickly deteriorating. Many terminal illnesses come with physical pains, impair the body's operations, and require hospitalization or intensive assistance. However, not every terminal illness involves severe or extended soreness, and often procedures and medications can make the pain tolerable (or relieve it entirely). Some terminal patients continue to live independently and enjoy their activities as much as before.*

**What do you think might drive someone to seek an assisted suicide or support it?**

*The most common reasons given in favor of physician-assisted suicide include loss of autonomy/independence, decreased enjoyment of favorite activities, becoming a burden to family, inadequate pain control, cognitive decline, reduction in quality of life, lack of financial resources, and maintaining dignity in the dying process.*

Most states and most countries have outlawed physician-assisted suicide. Surveys regularly report that most voters oppose it. Almost all medical associations disapprove of the practice. For centuries doctors have taken the Hippocratic Oath. This ancient statement swears to use medical knowledge and technology to heal rather than harm. Part of it promises, "Neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course."

**What do you suspect makes physician-assisted suicide so unpopular?**

*It means intentionally making somebody dead, much like murder. We want to trust our medical professionals always to work for our well-being and never to engage in killing. Doctors might have made a mistake in diagnosing the condition or predicting its duration. Sometimes even dying people recover and live longer. It suggests that some lives aren't worth living anymore. It's been outlawed around the world for centuries. It deprives us of some of the most precious times with our loved ones.*

**What risks might it pose to (1) a patient's loved ones, (2) doctors and hospitals, (3) persons with disabilities, (4) persons suffering depression, and (5) elderly persons?**

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*Assisted suicide doesn't end suffering but rather inflicts it upon the loved ones left behind. It may tempt certain relatives to pressure someone into assisted suicide so they can get a quicker or bigger inheritance. It might require doctors and hospitals to violate their own conscience participating in it. It may create an expectation for elderly persons or those with disabilities to die sooner so that they don't become a burden to society. And persons suffering depression may come to give up on getting better and view assisted suicide as the solution to their difficulties.*

### In God's Word

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Situations involving decisions about life and death can be quite complicated and difficult. We do not always detect how one person's life connects to and affects others. Sometimes doctors misdiagnose, and even physicians aren't able to tell the future. But we cannot undo death once we have brought it about. It often has significant consequences and ones no one foresees. Read Ecclesiastes 8:8 and Deuteronomy 32:39.

**Who is responsible for determining the manner of our living and the time of our dying?**

*Not doctors, governments, society, or even ourselves. The Heavenly Father reserves for Himself the right to determine how we live and the responsibility for deciding when we die.*

**Why do John 10:10 and John 11:25-26 call this fact a comfort for us?**

*Jesus is a good Lord who is always bringing forth abundant and everlasting life for us. Even when we hopelessly behold only darkness and death, He is working us a life better than we could imagine, ask, or arrange for ourselves.*

**What makes physician-assisted suicide sinful?**

*It trusts my own perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and judgments more than the words and ways of my Almighty Maker. It prioritizes my comfort above the needs of my neighbors.*

**What does Matthew 10:28 say endangers us even more greatly than physical suffering?**

*Whereas pain and death only last temporarily, being cut off from God's gracious salvation because of our unbelief subjects us to eternal agony.*

Psalm 46 reassures us "God is a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way." His power puts purpose and hope and joy in every life, no matter what age or appearance or ability. Maggie Karner was a Lutheran wife and mother. She developed terminal cancer. You can see at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJwWKDGBS5o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJwWKDGBS5o) how the Gospel of Jesus Christ gave her great faith and gracefulness in her final days.

**How does Psalm 22:1, 14-18 show us the Lord God understands our hurting?**

*Jesus has brought God alongside humankind in our suffering and dying by becoming flesh and undergoing death. He bore our sicknesses and carried our sorrows, bleeding and weeping the way that we do.*

**Where does Psalm 23:4-6 locate our Heavenly Father when we suffer, and what does Isaiah 53:3-4 proclaim He is doing about it?**

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**Key Point:** Situations involving decisions about life and death can be quite complicated and difficult. We do not always detect how one person's life connects to and affects others.

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*Our Good Shepherd goes through the very valley of death's shadow itself with us. He does not desert us when we get into trouble. He preserves us from experiencing even worse. He rescues and protects us from hell and the devil, the world and our sin. He delivers comfort and peace, hope and healing.*

Illness, disability, and advancing age may impact our autonomy. We become less independent than we would like to believe. Death also makes us afraid, because it is the instrument of Satan and the enemy of God's kingdom. Often discomforts lead us to conclude that God is punishing us. So using death against ourselves tempts us with the illusion of getting a little control amidst chaos.

**What better blessing than autonomy does God deliver to His people (1 Corinthians 12:26-27; Psalm 91:11-12)?**

*God has not created us for independence. Instead He has designed us to need Him and one another. He surrounds us with community, a fellowship of faith that shares in both our sorrows and our celebrations while offering sympathy and strength in our weakness. And the communion of saints encompasses heaven and earth, all that we feel and even what we cannot see.*

**What does Jesus teach us in Isaiah 53:5 and Psalm 103:10-12 about punishments from God?**

*In His atoning sacrifice on the cross, Jesus has emptied pain of any punishment or payback. God does not make us suffer in order to get even with us or put us in our place. He isn't smiting us out of disappointment or anger because He has already forgiven all our disobedience.*

**What purposes does He impart that can make our pain worth it (2 Corinthians 4:11-12, 17)?**

*God shines in our suffering to benefit others. He shows His great love and strength in sustaining those who cannot sustain themselves. He makes His power perfect in our frailty. When we break, we have opportunity to sensitively approach others in their brokenness and witness about the One who holds us together and heals us.*

**How does the faith God gives help us face dying (Psalm 16:9-11)?**

*He will swallow up our suffering in death and make of it a peaceful sleep and a portal into a sweeter place. We know that He who raised Jesus will resurrect our bodies, restore and perfect us, and appoint us as princes and princesses reveling in and reigning over the new heavens and the new earth.*

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**Key Point:**  
God shines in our suffering to benefit others. He shows His great love and strength in sustaining those who cannot sustain themselves. He makes His power perfect in our frailty.

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## Closing

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**When you encounter suffering or difficulty this week, which of God's promises above will be most encouraging?**

*Allow for responses. Answers will vary.*

Close with prayer.





# Real. Present. God. In Life Issues

## Session 3: Real. Present. God. In Controversy!

### Opening Discussion

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Pastor Skip worries about Mary. He suspects she may have gotten into trouble. He asks her classmates Hilary Faye, Tia, and Veronica to help her. He believes that by speaking the truth in love to her, they can remind her of the strength her Christian faith gives her. Witness the uncomfortable conversation here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWVFp9Ra-Wc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OWVFp9Ra-Wc).

**Have you ever found yourself in an interaction like this about spiritual matters? How did it turn out?**

*Even though we may have the best motivations and intentions, conversations about faith can be intensely personal, emotional, and adversarial. We cannot predict the differences between our beliefs and experiences and those of others, nor can we control their reactions. And sometimes our own lack of sensitivity in communicating can cause offense. When we do find agreement and encouragement in dialogues about such important perspectives, it brings great joy and builds genuine relationship.*

**What went wrong in the girls' dialogue? What aim did they have in mind? What approach did they use?**

*It seems the girls focused more on meeting their own needs than on listening for the needs of their friend. They wanted to change her behavior and produce a particular predetermined response, so they expressed their concern in a very intimidating and dominating fashion. Naturally, their friend perceived it as an attack, and defensively separated herself from them even more—the opposite of what they wanted.*

**What often makes conversations about life issues uncomfortable?**

*Life issues such as surprise pregnancy and terminal diagnosis involve a person's most closely held beliefs. Often they touch on deep hurts from previous experiences. The high life-or-death stakes fuel anger, anxiety, guilt, and grief. We tend to passionately express and defend our convictions about the meaning and value of a person's life and one's ethical obligations to one's neighbors.*

**Why might we sometimes sidestep speaking the truth in love?**

*We may wish to avoid the tension. We may not have confidence about our principles. We may not feel prepared to share them clearly and winsomely. We may not want to make someone mad or get told we're wrong. We may fear opening ourselves up to criticisms or accusations. We may not really care about a neighbor's well-being.*

Cultural voices frequently advise us that love matters more than truth. "If you have the choice to be right or be kind, choose being kind over being right." (See, for example, these recommendations: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhTOEm9RxRo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IhTOEm9RxRo)). This may effectively avoid disagreement, but it may fail to resolve some very serious dangers.

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**Key Point:**  
Life issues such as surprise pregnancy and terminal diagnosis involve a person's most closely held beliefs. Often they touch on deep hurts from previous experiences.

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## In Life Issues

### In God's Word

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**Look at James 2:15-17. What can go wrong when we unlovingly speak truth? Can we tell somebody the whole truth if we don't care for his or her well-being?**

*Speaking the truth unlovingly may inflict unnecessary harm upon somebody. It may send an unspoken message of condemnation that goes against the compassion we're trying to put into words. If our manner doesn't communicate how precious a treasure each person is to God and His people, then we may ruin rather than rescue. No matter how accurate a statement may be, if it testifies more that "I'm better" than that "you're beloved," it's an incomplete articulation of the Gospel.*

**Read Ezekiel 33:7-9. Can we fully love someone without honesty? What can go wrong when we neglect truth in our attempts to love?**

*Leaving out important information because it causes discomfort still amounts to lying. A real friend sounds the warning when danger approaches, even if it startles somebody. Failing to do so may result in stronger and longer pain than a momentary upset. After all, unrepentant sin leads to everlasting death.*

**What do 1 John 3:1, 1 Corinthians 13:6, and 1 Peter 1:22 say about why truth and love always belong together?**

*God is the author and perfecter of love. His love always speaks, and His love speaks truth to us. He declares and proclaims love instead of only feeling it. Love gives birth to words, and words bring about actions. Love cannot tolerate falsehood, because deception always ends in destruction. Just as faith without works is dead, love puts itself into motion through truth.*

Psalm 46 proclaims that our Lord "utters his voice and the earth melts" (46:6). It also promises that this Heavenly Father "makes wars cease to the ends of the earth" (46:9). His love and His voice are strong, but they bring risks as well. This discussion, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLj988xA08I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DLj988xA08I), in which Uncle Ben warns Peter Parker (Spider-Man) about the consequences of his actions, illustrates some of the pains.

**In John 15:13-15, what motivates God to speak the truth to us? What two messages does He share, according to John 1:17, Romans 6:23, and Luke 24:47-48?**

*God's great love for humankind compels Him to present His commandments to us. He deeply desires our well-being. His truth consists of Law and Gospel, sin and salvation, repentance and forgiveness, what we must do and what He does for us.*

**How do 2 Thessalonians 3:15 and James 5:19-20 describe our motivation for speaking truth? What attitudes and approaches do 1 Peter 3:8-9, 15-16 suggest?**

*We speak because we want to safeguard and strengthen each other, not only for this age but for the world to come. We convey this best through humility, sensitivity, gentleness, respect, patience, courage, and compassion.*

**Find Psalm 51:15 and Matthew 10:20. What makes our truth-speaking more than just opinion?**

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**Key Point:**  
No matter how accurate a statement may be, if it testifies more that "I'm better" than that "you're beloved," it's an incomplete articulation of the Gospel.

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# Real. Present. God. In Life Issues

*God Himself promises to speak and work through our words and witness. That means He will also bless the minds and hearts of those who hear.*

**What comfort and encouragement do Psalm 33:6, 9 and Luke 21:15 give us about the outcomes?**

*God's Word always accomplishes exactly what He wills. It creates repentance and faith. It brings forgiveness and salvation, relief and healing, comfort and joy. His truth never fails, and He will do good things for the persons to whom we speak truth. He takes full responsibility for the effects, even if the conversation causes discomfort for us or our counterparts.*

## Closing

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**The next time you find yourself in disagreement about God's obvious truth—maybe a topic of conversation among your friends or a subject of discussion in class this week—what one discovery we've made here will ease your anxiety about speaking up?**

*Allow for responses. Answers will vary.*

Close with prayer.