

Do the Right Thing

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

PURPOSE

The goal of this program is to help participants learn to make ethical decisions that they can apply consistently to similar situations with family members, friends or members in the larger community who come from different generations and faith practices. People who participate in this series will have a better understanding of what they consider to be right and wrong. They will also know how to offer a religious or ethical basis for their decisions. They will be better able to explain their decisions to others who do not necessarily share their religious or moral traditions/beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

“I thought it would be easier when I grew older,” Eleanor said to Kay. “But the rules I live by aren’t shared by my children, and their rules don’t seem to apply to their children.” We have all said that, or felt like saying it.

Like Eleanor and Kay, many of us grew up in the depression and during World War II. Everyone knew the rules, and few people questioned them. We lived by self-discipline and the discipline of the Bible. Most people went to church or, at least, did not question the Ten Commandments, the “standards of morality,” and the motto of “Duty, God, and Country.”

Our children grew up in the 60’s, the time of Civil Rights protests and demonstrations against the war in Viet Nam. They questioned all standards of the past and trusted no one over thirty. And because they often rejected the traditions of the past, they frequently did not participate in the life of the Church or enroll their children in church school where their children might have learned different standards of moral decision-making. Their children have entered their teenaged years and young adulthood in the digital age. With an infinite variety of television channels and uncensored web sites, they are more knowledgeable than their grandparents and parents in the ways of the world. Unfortunately, they may not be any more mature or able to make long-term ethical decisions than we were at their age.

We now live in an intergenerational world, where we live longer and have more overlap with our children and grandchildren. We are in contact through telephone and e-mail, even when we do not live nearby. We often do not know how to make decisions in today’s culture or to guide our children in making ethical decisions that both we and they can accept.

CASE STUDY METHOD

There are twelve issues addressed in this resource. The issues are:

- “ ‘Til Death Do Us Part”
- How Long Should We Parent Our Children and Grandchildren?
- Over the Hill to Grandmother’s House We Go
- Neither Nutrition Nor Hydration
- Separation of Church and State
- Our Responsibilities Toward Other Generations
- The Impact of Zero Tolerance
- Perceptions
- Love at an Early Age
- What Right to Privacy?
- The Tattler
- Censorship and 1st Amendment Rights

Each issue has one or more case studies. There may be more case studies described for some of the issues than you can use in one session. In some situations additional materials are included so that you can choose those case studies most applicable to your situation.

Look over the case or cases offered for the lesson before the group convenes. If several are given, decide how many of them you will use with the group. Feel free to adapt the case studies to make them more relevant for your group. You may decide to create a “series” of one to four weeks on a particular issue, using one or two case studies each week. You might even want to try your hand at writing new case studies after you have experienced these. We would welcome additions to this resource and will give appropriate credit to anyone or group who contributes new cases.

We hope this program will offer you a method of making decisions that you can use with your families and in the larger community. Believing that “practice makes perfect,” we offer you a guide and a series of case studies that will help participants develop their own standards for ethical decision-making. There are two formats for these sessions: fifty or ninety-minute sessions. The primary difference will be the depth of the discussion.

The Two Formats

Standard Format for the Fifty-Minute Session

Begin each session with prayer and/or a reading from scripture. (5 minutes)

Introduce the method of learning and the case study/studies for the session to all participants. (10 minutes)

Small groups discuss the case study and prepare a report of their conclusions. Each group needs to work towards a conclusion about the ethical issues in the assigned case or cases. Participants will also describe a method or principle for justifying their ethical decision. (20 minutes)

Small groups report and larger group discusses. (15 minutes)

Closing Prayer

Standard Format for the Ninety-Minute Session

Begin each session with prayer and/or a reading from scripture. (5 minutes)

Introduce the method of learning and the case study/studies for the session to all participants. (10 minutes)

Small groups discuss the case study and prepare a report of their conclusions. Each group needs to work towards a conclusion about the ethical issues in the assigned case or cases. Participants will also describe a method or principle for justifying their ethical decision. (35 minutes)

BREAK (10 minutes)

Small groups report (10 minutes)

Larger group discusses reports (10 minutes)

Large group reflects on the group's growth in understanding and using ethical principles. (5 minutes)

Closing Prayer

A TYPICAL GROUP SESSION

Opening Prayers

- When the group gathers, begin with an opening ritual. This may mean lighting a candle, singing a hymn or chant or offering a prayer suitable for the gathering. For the first session, the leaders will plan and lead this time. In subsequent sessions, participants can offer the prayer and/or lead the hymn or chant.

Introduce the issue for the session

- Briefly outline the central issue for this session.
- Refer to case study/studies but do not read the material verbatim or tell the whole story. Just give enough hints about the dilemma to “whet their appetite.”
- Remind the group that they are to break into small groups (unless you have ten or less participants) and each group will need to select a reporter and timekeeper to keep the group on task.
- Remind the group that their task is to:
 - define the problem/dilemma
 - identify an ethical principle
 - form a plan of action

Distribute copies of the case study/studies

- Take a minute or so for participants to review the assigned case study/studies.
- Divide them into small groups or, if you are meeting in a large group, start the discussion. Remind the group that they have 25 minutes (or whatever you have available at this point in the session).
 - Ask the participants to focus on the case study assigned for their group. The small groups should discuss and come to conclusions about ethical standards on their assigned case study before they talk about any other case studies or relevant personal experiences. **Note:** The role of the leader or small group timekeeper is very important here. Make sure each group stays focused on the work at hand, even when one or more members may prefer to discuss another case study.

Guide the group discussion

- Allow the small groups twenty-five to thirty minutes to re-read the case study, discuss it in the group, and develop some moral principle that would guide them in making a decision. (If the gathering is composed of only one group, you may lengthen the group discussion time.) This moral or religious principle should help them explain their decision to their children, other family members or members of the broader community. Post a sheet of newsprint on which you have written their task:
 - Define the problem/dilemma in the case study
 - Name a moral principle

- Identify a Biblical basis for the principle
- Apply that principle to the case study, suggesting a solution/action plan/response
- During this period, the leader should move from group to group, helping to facilitate discussion if it is lagging, for example, by asking questions, but not suggesting answers about the ethical problems presented.
- If you are planning to use several case studies that illustrate the same issue, ask if the group can hold to their moral principle through the entire list of moral dilemmas. If the group cannot, then they need to go back to the Bible or to Christian doctrine and find some broader principle that will hold for all situations.

Lead the concluding discussion

- Re-convene the large group in a circle for the last fifteen minutes. Ask the reporters to summarize their group's case study and the group's decisions and justifications for those decisions. Invite the group to discuss and comment on the moral issues.
- Write the ethical principle developed by the group, the biblical or doctrinal basis of this principle and the group's conclusion on newsprint in a place where participants can read what has been transcribed. (You can also ask the small groups to do this and bring their newsprint to the larger group as their report.)
- Ask participants if they could live by the ethical or doctrinal principle in other case studies based on the principle. (Here the leader may tell participants about other case studies in the series that are not currently being used.) When appropriate, the group may be reminded of the case studies on the same issue that were discussed in the previous week or weeks. Ask participants if they were able to be consistent throughout the series.
- After the second or third session, ask the group to reflect on their work together (ninety-minute sessions):
 - How are we working together as a group?
 - What have we learned—individually and as a group?
 - How is our work impacting our understanding of ethics?
 - How is our work impacting how you make decisions?
 - How is it impacting how you think about others and their decisions?

Closing Prayers

CASE STUDY SAMPLE

Issue #3

Over the Hill to Grandmother's House We Go

Three Endings for One Issue

(Note: You are to react to this case study three times, in response to each of the calls, considering each request for the third bedroom as an independent request. You are to respond to the practical and ethical questions for each request for housing. In past years each of the person(s) making the request has been welcomed into your home.)

Case Study

After long and successful careers in a large northern city, you and your spouse have retired to Bay City. You purchased a large, older home on the bay so that family members would feel welcome whenever they could come south. While you have made many friends in Bay City and enjoy the intellectual, cultural and social life of your new hometown, you very much miss personal contact with your families. You especially look forward to the winter holidays when your big home on the bay is filled with the laughter of grandchildren, the earnest conversation of your children and the shared experiences of your own siblings.

This year you have already designated two of the upstairs bedrooms for daughter Janet, her husband Fred and granddaughters Betsy and Kimberly. Betsy is now thirteen and becoming quite a young lady. Kim is a boisterous ten-year-old tomboy.

Call One:

Your son calls from France, where he heads a large manufacturing plant. He apologizes because he cannot bring his family “home for the holidays” for the first time in many years. His company is moving swiftly to expand into Eastern Europe and he cannot leave Europe at this time. However, he asks if you will provide hospitality for your granddaughter (his daughter) who will need a home for the holidays. You have always liked nineteen-year-old Annette and you look forward to her visit.

Annette calls to ask if she can come to your home for the winter break. She casually mentions that she has met this wonderful guy and they have been living together for nearly six months. Since he is an international student, he will not be able to fly to his home for the holidays. Could she bring him with her? They won't be any extra trouble since they can share a bedroom.

Questions for Discussion:

- What moral issues are involved in this case study?
- Are there other issues that you face with family members and your friends in Bay City?
- You always have a series of parties for friends in the neighborhood, the art community and your church/synagogue during the holidays. All the family guests in your home have traditionally helped host these gatherings and you have proudly introduced them to your friends new and old. How will you handle this situation—or will it be a problem at all?
- Would you react differently if your two younger granddaughters, Betsy and Kimberly, were not coming down for the holidays?
- Would you react differently if they were coming at another time of year when they would be your only visitors and when your social calendar would be more quiet?

Call Two:

Your daughter, Cindy, calls. You are especially pleased to receive her call because she has not been home or very communicative since she was divorced two years ago. She is a professional person who supports herself and her one child. She tells you how much she misses you both and adds that she and your grandchild, Bobby, want to come home for the holidays. They want to bring a friend with them.

Cindy also talks freely about her divorce for the first time. "Mother," she says, "I've found out who I really am. I never liked being around men, even though I was married to one for ten years." "Now," she adds, "I've finally come out of the closet. I joined a local club for lesbians and met the most wonderful and compassionate person. She teaches at the City College. In fact," Cindy continues, "we have celebrated our union with a covenant/marriage ceremony at the Metropolitan Community Church. When we come down for the holidays, we want you all to join us in celebrating our first anniversary!"

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- Would you react differently if your two younger granddaughters, Betsy and Kimberly, were not coming down for the holidays?
- Would you react differently if the family members who made the phone calls were coming at another time of year when they would be your only visitors and when your social calendar would be more quiet?

Call Three:

George was always your favorite brother. He's just two years older than you. You played together as children, roomed together for the two years you overlapped in college and continued your warm friendship in adulthood. Two years ago, you were present with him when his beloved wife of 45 years died. Six months later, George told you then he didn't know what he was going to do with the rest of his life. He didn't want to marry again and he did not think he could live alone. Secretly you were pleased with his thinking. George had retired with only one asset, the family business. The business, now run cooperatively by George's son and daughter, is doing quite well. You understood his concern that another marriage could cloud the business and family relationships, if a new wife and her children became heirs to George's property.

George called to announce that he wanted to leave the cold north land and come to Bay City to celebrate the holidays at your home. During the conversation, he mentioned that he had met a wonderful lady, Charlotte Patton. They had seen each other for several months, found much in common and had decided to move in together. George mentioned that he had both religious and financial reservations about the arrangement. Years of religious education had taught him about adultery and "living in sin," but the arrangement was working beautifully. Charlotte had similar reservations. She was the widow of an Army Colonel. As a widow of a high-ranking officer, she had a generous pension and medical and other benefits. She would lose all of these if she married again. The "living together" arrangement seemed perfect for them. Generally (with one exception) their children had accepted the new relationship. They had even found a church that had welcomed them. George assured you that he and Charlotte didn't want to be a problem, but he wanted to introduce his new love to all the family.

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Authors: Roger Jackle, Martha Lamar, Wm. Fred Lamar

—End of Sample Pages—

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or to be added to our mailing list call
LeaderResources
800-941-2218**