

The Asphalt Gospel—Discussion Guide **Sometimes you have to go a long way to make a difference.**

In 2006, six ordinary people set out on a walking journey to change the face of Christianity in America.

The Asphalt Gospel tells their story.

If you could change the face of Christianity in America,
what would be different about it?
Would it be more compassionate?
More in touch with everyday life?
More justice-oriented?
Would the kind of Christianity you embrace include
Jesus' authentic welcoming of diverse people and viewpoints?

This Discussion Guide is divided into four sections.

1. The first serves as an introduction to the movie and the group Crosswalk America. It will be helpful for group leaders to review the introduction but isn't necessary for the group to read before watching the film.
2. The second section includes a one-page summary of *The Phoenix Affirmations*, a document that is referenced frequently throughout the film. It may be helpful to invite the group to read *The Phoenix Affirmations* together before watching the film. We encourage your group to engage the affirmations following your viewing of the film. For more information about this statement of faith see the introduction and for the full version visit www.crosswalkamerica.org.
3. The third is a guide for general discussion, allowing each viewer to respond to the film from "wherever they are" in their lives and faith background and journeys. It contains *Observations, Reflections, Interpretations, Decisions, and Going Deeper*.
4. The fourth section raises additional questions about life and faith. There are suggested film clips to watch as you engage the questions.

Leaders are encouraged to preview the film with several other group members. Invite them to identify themes that would interest the group as well as places in the film that would provide good illustrations of those themes. You will want to think about Bible passages that connect with those themes and the spots in the film you have identified (for additional Biblical references view the full version of The Phoenix Affirmations at www.crosswalkamerica.org).

Section One –

The Story behind *The Asphalt Gospel* Film...

The “Three Great Loves” according to Jesus...

And one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question, to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22: 35-40, RSV)

On Easter Sunday, 2006, under the banner of a fledgling non-profit organization called CrossWalk America (CWA), a group of regular citizens from Scottsdale and Phoenix (Arizona), Oakland (California), and Seattle (Washington) left their jobs, families, and homes to walk across the USA. Over the next four and a half months each one would personally speak out for the principles of an emerging progressive Christian faith, especially as they are articulated in *The Phoenix Affirmations*. The *Affirmations*, based on Jesus’ “three great loves” - love of God, neighbor, and self - seek to offer hope, empowerment, and direction to people of faith looking for an alternative to the Christian faith as expressed by leaders of the Christian right.

Along the roads and pathways from Phoenix to Washington, D.C. (reached on September 3, 2006), the CWA group stopped in more than 100 towns and cities, and was supported by more than 150 congregations representing 11 Christian Protestant denominations, Roman Catholics, and several Jewish groups. They spoke with people in churches, retreat and community centers, radio and television stations, and newspaper offices, to introduce *The Phoenix Affirmations* and invite into open conversation Christians and non-Christians alike. The goal was to change the public face of Christianity toward a more compassionate, loving, and just form of Christian faith and practice.

But the effort involved many more than these seven inspired and dedicated core walkers! A support group of literally hundreds formed the “Home Team” back in Arizona, California, and Washington. These teams were responsible for planning the walk route, finding host churches and families, writing and disseminating advance publicity and follow-up articles, planning a final celebration event in Washington, D.C., and giving support to the families and congregations that the seven had temporarily left behind. Furthermore, thousands of supporters all over the USA and Western Europe supported CrossWalk America’s goals by contributing money and by doing “Prayer Walking” at home with a CWA pedometer attached to their clothing. By the end of the summer, 41 million steps were logged into the CWA website in support of *The Phoenix Affirmations* from participants in the United States and from as far away as Australia and Great Britain.

The film, *Asphalt Gospel* [© CrossWalk America 2006] documents the story of the walk and its effect on the core walkers as well as the thousands of other people involved. This film presents timeless questions about life and faith and provides a rich base for individual study and group discussion. It is best viewed after reading *The Phoenix Affirmations*, included in this discussion guide.

To learn more about CrossWalk America visit us on the web at www.crosswalkamerica.org. Two additional resources, *The Phoenix Affirmations* (Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D., 2006, Jossey-Bass) and *Asphalt Jesus* (Rev. Eric Elnes, Ph.D., 2007, Jossey-Bass), are available on the web or from many of you favorite booksellers.

Section Two -- *The Phoenix Affirmations*

The public face of Christianity in America today bears little connection to the historic faith of our ancestors. It represents even less our own faith as Christians who continue to celebrate the gifts of our Creator, revealed and embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Heartened by our experience of the transforming presence of Christ's Holy Spirit in our world, we find ourselves in a time and place where we will be no longer silent. We hereby mark an end to our silence by making the following affirmations:

As people who are joyfully and unapologetically Christian, we pledge ourselves completely to the way of Love. We work to express our love, as Jesus teaches us, in three ways: by loving God, neighbor, and self. (Matt 22:34-40 // Mk 12:28-31 // Lk 10:25-28; Cf. Deut 6:5; Lev. 19:18)

Christian love of God includes:

1. Walking fully in the path of Jesus, without denying the legitimacy of other paths God may provide humanity;
2. Listening for God's Word which comes through daily prayer and meditation, studying the ancient testimonies which we call Scripture, and attending to God's present activity in the world;
3. Celebrating the God whose Spirit pervades and whose glory is reflected in all of God's Creation, including the earth and its ecosystems, the sacred and secular, the Christian and non-Christian, the human and non-human;
4. Expressing our love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural.

Christian love of neighbor includes:

5. Engaging people authentically, as Jesus did, treating all as creations made in God's very image, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality, or economic class;
6. Standing, as Jesus does, with the outcast and oppressed, the denigrated and afflicted, seeking peace and justice with or without the support of others;
7. Preserving religious freedom and the Church's ability to speak prophetically to government by resisting the commingling of Church and State;
8. Walking humbly with God, acknowledging our own shortcomings while honestly seeking to understand and call forth the best in others, including those who consider us their enemies;

Christian love of self includes:

9. Basing our lives on the faith that, in Christ, all things are made new, and that we, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination – for eternity;
10. Claiming the sacredness of both our minds and our hearts, recognizing that faith and science, doubt and belief serve the pursuit of truth;
11. Caring for our bodies, and insisting on taking time to enjoy the benefits of prayer, reflection, worship and recreation in addition to work;
12. Acting on the faith that we are born with a meaning and purpose; a vocation and ministry that serves to strengthen and extend God's realm of love.

Section Three – *Personal Responses to the Film*

Observations:

- What scenes do you remember?
- What locations, settings, events, or characters stand out for you?
- What lines of dialogue struck you and why? What colors? Objects? Sounds? Music?
- Where did the film bring to mind events in Jesus' ministry? His teachings? His words?

Reflections:

- Where was there emotion in the film? What emotion(s)?
- What were the personal struggles depicted and whose struggles were these?
- Where did *you* feel emotion? What feelings / emotions?
- What surprised you?
- With what character(s) do you identify?
- In what way(s) do you identify with that/those character(s)?
- Was there a turning point in the film? In which scene or conversation? Why was that a turning point for you? What changed after the turning point (in your understanding, your emotions, etc.)?
- What scene, conversation, or event seemed like a turning point for those walking?

Interpretation:

- What symbols did you see in the movie?
- How were the personal struggles of particular characters universal in nature?
- What was the film *really* about? (That is, what is the main theme of the film?)
- Why did the filmmakers choose that title? What does the title mean?
- How did the film's observations about the ministry of Jesus affect your understanding of Jesus?
- What was so compelling about *The Phoenix Affirmations* that seven men and women would leave their jobs and homes to walk for 4 ½ months?
- What kind of faith was so inspiring and motivating that seven people dared this long walk and hundreds more volunteered their time and effort to support it?
- Did the idea of a walk turn out to be crazy or productive? What have been the results?
- Why did these seven people decide to leave their jobs, homes, and churches to walk across the country to talk about their Christian beliefs?
- What would it take to motivate YOU to do something similar?

Decisions:

- Who voiced your opinions, faith, feelings or experience in this film?
- Who was your "hero" among the walkers (if any)? Among the people whom they met? Among those with differing beliefs and views?
- What will you personally take away from this film?
- How are you different as a result of seeing this film?
- How does this film inform your life or give insight into your particular situation.
- Have any of your beliefs, values, or understandings of Christianity changed after watching this film? In what ways?
- Does this film inform your ability to speak to others about your own beliefs?
- What occasions might be places for you to have a similar dialogue about your faith?
- What would it take to inspire *you* to stand up and speak out in a similar way for something you believe in strongly?

Going Deeper:

After some general discussion, you as the leader could choose one or more scenes to discuss in more depth, with particular questions for that scene. You will know your group's interests, life experiences, and questions, and will be best equipped to create helpful and challenging questions for discussion.

Section Four – Additional Questions for Discussion

The Misinterpretation of Jesus' Teachings:

- What do you think about the claim that "The Christian Right has hi-jacked the Christian faith"? How do you understand this claim?
- Do you agree or disagree that the Christian "right" has misinterpreted Jesus' core teachings as they are recorded in the Gospels? How might Jesus' teachings been misinterpreted? If they have been misinterpreted, what might be the reasons for this happening? What resources might you read to learn more about this concern?
- How might these same questions apply to the Christian "left" and "center"?
[Suggested clips: 34:10-37:20, 1:08:35-1:11:33]

How does the media effect the public's understanding of Christianity?

- Is the media's effect on the public's understanding of Christianity a positive or negative effect?
- How can churches and religious groups control the content and slant that publicity puts on their beliefs and practices? Or is it possible at all? If not, are there alternatives available for conveying our understanding of the Christian story in the public square?
[Suggested clip: 27:08-30:05]

Different paths to God?

- Do you believe that there are legitimate different paths to God? Why or why not?
[Suggested clips: 19:50-21:00 and 34:10-37:20]

"How the strong treat the weak?"

- It has been said that the true test of a nation or society is "how the strong treat the weak." What do you think about this idea?
[Suggested clips: 55:25-57:07]

What happened at the Jesus First Baptist Church?

- Why do you think they welcomed the CrossWalk America Group so warmly when their beliefs were so far apart? Was God's Spirit working there? Or was it a mistake?
- What implication does the walkers' experience have for your church or gathering if any?
[Suggested clips: 16:55-19:50]

Who would Jesus Love?

- "For Christians, the problem is not how to reconcile homosexuality with scriptural passages that condemn it, but how to reconcile the rejection and punishment of homosexuals with the love of Christ." – *An Open Letter from Rev. William Sloane Coffin to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops 2000* Issues around sexuality continue to be polarizing in church and society. How did the CWA team confront this reality? What was the result?
- Is there safe space within your community to talk about difficult issues?
- Is it possible for anything good to come from these conversations or should people on different sides of the issue simply "agree to disagree"?
[Suggested clips: 48:38-55:25 and 43:10-45:50]

"Young people in the USA perceive a strong hate message from most religious groups today."

- Do you agree with this statement? Why might it be true? What can we do to remedy this perception?
[Suggested clips: 4:20-6:50]

Religion and World Politics:

- How does this film inform the question of the relationship between religion and world political relationships?
- In an international world, can we afford to separate ourselves into religious factions, surrounding ourselves with people who all think exactly like we do, and that do not have the capability of relating or finding common ground with other world religions or governments?

- What is the effect on a nation's social, economic, and political life of fundamentalism in ANY religious group (very conservative Christianity or other religions) or on the social and political relationships between countries?
 - What new steps do we need to take, as citizens of the USA, to find common ground between world religions and political groups? Do we need to "agree to disagree"?
- [Suggested clips: 21:00-24:07, 39:10-40:40, 57:07-1:01:19]

How could your church generate conversations with other churches and religious groups, like CrossWalk America has done across this country?

[Suggested clips: 1:23:50-1:30:05]