

God Colors Outside the Lines

A Short Workshop on Diversity
and God's Church



Diversity is one way God demonstrates genius at coloring outside the lines. Diversity is not only a gift from God, it is also a trait of God. God is unpredictable. God colors outside the lines!

Introduction

Begin by introducing yourself and the workshop title: “God Colors Outside the Lines.” Have participants introduce themselves if they do not already know one other. Explain that the reason you say God colors outside the lines is that God does things in new and unexpected ways!

The unexpected: God colors outside the lines!

Share these examples of how God colors outside the lines:

Genesis 18:12. Sarah laughed when God said he would do the unexpected. She was filled with joy at becoming pregnant, but what was wild and crazy—“outside the lines”—was that it was happening for her at an advanced age. It made her laugh out loud! God’s ability to color outside the lines can bring unexpected joy!

Ezekiel 37:2-4. Ezekiel already suspected that God could color outside the lines when the Lord asked him whether those dry bones could live. Ezekiel knew that the restoration of Israel had been long awaited and longed for, but never in his wildest dreams did he expect to be cast into a barren place surrounded by bones. Yet that is where God placed him. Ezekiel knew enough not to attempt to answer God’s question—he was comfortable with the idea that God could and often does color outside the lines!

How to use this resource

Preparation: Approach this workshop with some lightness. Its purpose is to demonstrate how diversity is a gift from God, as well as a trait of God, worthy of our exploration and embrace. Allow 30 to 45 minutes.

Read the cited scripture texts.

Supplies:

- *Optical illusion pictures. These can be found in books at your public library or on the Internet; search “optical illusions,” “optical illusion pictures,” or “optical illusion art” to find a site that will allow you to print 2-4 images.*
- *Two oven mitts*
- *One paper-covered plastic straw (the kind you would find in a fast-food restaurant)*

Luke 1:13, 18. Zechariah thought maybe God should stay inside the lines, and he was struck mute for sharing that idea; no one heard a peep out of him until he named the baby John.

Luke 1:38. Mary came to expect God’s unexpected grace and mercy. She was the crayon God used to color outside the lines in a big, universe-changing way! Mary was a girl of humble means—outside the lines. Mary birthed God’s son among animals—definitely outside the lines. And God was made flesh—is there anything further outside the lines?

Diversity is one way God demonstrates genius at coloring outside the lines. Diversity is not only a gift from God, it is also a trait of God. In other words, God’s ways are not captured within the borders of our thoughts or the borders of how we choose to live. God’s ways are not contained within our own culture or another culture. God is unpredictable. God colors outside the lines!

Small group discussion

Divide the group into smaller groups of about three apiece. Tell the participants that it will be each group’s job to make sure everyone gets a chance to talk.

The discussion topic:

Share an example of something that has happened in your life that portrays difference.

To get the conversation started, share this story that shows difference:

When first married, a young husband asked his wife to bake biscuits. So the next day, she baked biscuits for breakfast. When he sat down at the table, he said, “How come we’re having biscuits for breakfast?”

She said, “You wanted biscuits.”

He said, “But you don’t eat biscuits for breakfast, you eat them with dinner!”

Where the wife came from, people ate biscuits for breakfast. Where the husband came from, biscuits were eaten with dinner!

Please share with each other your own stories or examples of something that has happened in your life that portrays difference. Take about 5 minutes for this discussion.

After discussion is complete, take a few minutes to see if anyone has a story they would like to share with the larger group.



Close this part of the workshop with the following:

The stories we have shared were about differences. Another word for differences is diversity. When we use the word diversity we are talking about differences. When we talk about God and diversity, we are describing both how God has created the world as well as how God moves in the world.

What do you see: optical illusions

For this section you will need the optical illusion images you found on the Internet or at your public library. You can mount them on poster board to display for all to see or give participants a copy of each one.

Before distributing or displaying the optical illusions, talk about how some of the differences in what we see and in how we understand things are based on our different perceptions. In other words, we all put our own “lines” on the things we see and encounter in life. With those “lines” we give the things we encounter our own definitions. These definitions (which we often share with others) can be incorrect because they are based on how we have been taught to see and understand the world.

Our perceptions are informed by:

- vision: what our eyes actually see
- experiences: what exposure to similar things we have had
- learning: what we have learned to expect, accept, and reject
- setting: where and when we expect to see some things but not other things

Distribute or display the optical illusion pictures and invite participants to share what they see. Listen to them discuss what they see. Point out that once someone points out to us that there is another way of seeing an optical illusion, we may or may not also see it.

Remind the participants that we encounter this phenomenon of diverse perspectives each time family members remember the same incident differently.

This exercise helps us recognize that we all have our own perceptions (lines within which we understand the world) and that no one person’s perceptions are universal or necessarily reflective of God’s perception.

Ask this closing question to this section of the workshop:

Which is the right answer?

Close this part of the workshop with the following:

How many times do we get caught up or hold back because we are looking for the right answer? Can we learn to be satisfied with larger truths, such as “God loves us,” or must every little thing be proven true? Do we seek to be justified by God’s grace through faith or by how often God agrees with what we think is true?

So how do we do better at learning how to color as God colors—outside the lines?

The over-protected: the oven-mitt approach

Note: You may be able to make this point by attempting to pick up the straw using only one oven mitt. But because it is possible to pick up a straw with an oven mitt (though not easy), wearing two oven mitts and also unwrapping the straw is presented as an option.

Put on the oven mitts, and then try to pick up and unwrap a paper-covered plastic straw. Tell the group that when we refuse to move out of our own comfort zones, we can find it hard to grasp, receive, or use new information.

While removing your hands from the mitts, share that when we are willing to move out of our comfort zones, we can honestly encounter real and new concepts, feelings, and ideas. By stepping “outside the lines” of our comfort zones, we can open ourselves to being students of life, students of God’s ways, without feeling like we must fully understand everything we enjoy or do or, worse, spending time judging our neighbors or even people whom we have never met.

Conclusion

Share the following:

God colors outside the lines. God continues to make us take a second, third, even fourth look at things. And even after multiple looks, we may still not all agree or see the same thing. But maybe we were never intended to! Maybe diversity was not given as a challenge but as a blessing! We can be more than okay with our diversity. We can learn to love God's art of coloring outside the lines of the expected.

We can expect to continue to be surprised and challenged, because who among us has the mind of God? At the least, we can choose to be comfortable with God's habit of coloring outside the lines. At the most, we can come to expect to find God's unpredictably creative and healing nature active within our lives!

Close the workshop by saying something like:

It is exciting to think about God coloring outside the lines and God's habit of pulling us outside of our lines of culture, society, and even the institutional church, to enjoy and celebrate God's diverse ways! We've seen some things in our short time together that may have surprised you. In fact, you may wish to take a second and even third look at some of the things that we have just now shared in this workshop!

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