

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*

by

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### INTRODUCTION

1. Taylor says her central revelation of life is that “the call to serve God is first and last to be fully human.” What does that statement mean to you? How does it speak to your decisions about vocation, family, life?
2. Taylor notes that her search for real life has led her repeatedly through three distinct seasons of faith—finding life, losing life, and finding life again. How has this pattern occurred in your own faith journey?

3. What losses in your life have led you to surrender your life to God?
4. Taylor speaks of being far more sure twenty years ago about who God is, what God wants of her, and what it means to be a Christian in the world than she is today. Can you relate to that statement? What parts of your faith have become more certain over time? What parts have become less certain?

## PART ONE: FINDING

### CHAPTER 1

1. How does the place where you live impact your faith?
2. Have you experienced a type of work-exhaustion or overload such as the burnout Taylor experiences? If so, how did it manifest itself?
3. What have been your experiences of seeking divine guidance? What do you think of Susan B. Anthony's statement that "I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do because I notice it always coincides with their own desires"?
4. When Taylor first sees the Episcopal church building in Clarkesville, her immediate reaction is that "simply to stand in the presence of that building was to rest."

When have you had such a visceral reaction to a place or building?

## CHAPTER 2

1. Taylor observes that Clarkesville's history as a resort town had made the residents more welcoming of newcomers than they might otherwise have been. How has the history of your town or church shaped your community's attitude—toward newcomers, toward tradition, toward practices of worship, sacrament, and music?
2. Clarkesville's history had also led to shared leadership between year-round and summer residents. What is the mix in your own congregation between new members and old guard, both in the membership rolls and in the leadership? What might this mean for your community in the future?
3. What is the average tenure of pastors or leaders at your own congregation? Do you have at least one leader who has been there for a long time or do you have a large staff with frequent turnover? How has this affected your community?

## CHAPTER 3

1. Taylor describes two of her first intimations of God—lying in a field and being borne up in a pool by her father's arms. Can you remember the moment in which you first fell in love with God? What were your first ideas

- or images of God? How might they differ from how you imagine God now?
2. To what vocation, activity, or service have you felt called? Did the call come from the words of another or from inside yourself?
  3. An Episcopal priest tells Taylor she is an “ecclesiastical harlot.” Does this match your own experience, or have you stayed in one denomination all your life? How did you join your current faith body?
  4. Receiving and then putting on the attire of an Episcopal priest evokes many feelings in Taylor. What reaction do you have when you see someone in a clerical collar or robes? Are you apt to act differently around them? What does the attire of the clergy at your church say to you about your church?

## CHAPTER 4

1. A bishop cautions Taylor that her decision to become ordained will limit her ministry to a smaller box. Why have you chosen the path of lay or ordained ministry? Do you view lay ministry as something less than full immersion, as she did at the time? What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of each path?
2. When the other priests lay their hands on Taylor at her ordination, the weight of their hands presses on her so heavily that she worries about whether she can withstand it. How do you interpret this experience? Have you

ever had people pray for you with a laying-on of hands?  
How did it make you feel?

3. On page 44, Taylor describes her understanding of the significance of the word *priest*. What does this word evoke for you? What distinction, if any, do you perceive between a priest and a pastor?
4. In looking at her own busy schedule of ministry, Taylor mentions the example of Christ, who was always helping people. “Like a single mother,” she writes, “he fed his spiritual offspring from his own flesh and blood until all of his reserves were gone. Then he died. . . .” What do you think of this assessment of Jesus’s ministry? What impact does your understanding have on your life and your ministry? What place does balance have in the life of a Christian?

## CHAPTER 5

1. The move to Clarkesville is emotional for both Taylor and her husband. What transition in your life has been the most difficult? What was hardest to leave behind, and what did you most anticipate about the change? How well did your expectations match the reality of your new life?

## CHAPTER 6

1. What is your reaction to the controversy caused by Taylor’s being the first female leader of a congregation in her

town? She also writes that in a church used to addressing its male priests as “Father,” she found that many of her parishioners seemed to see her as “Mother.” What kind of effects might such a perception have? Does it strike you as appropriate? Why or why not?

2. Taylor notes that a number of parishioners transfer their feelings about significant people in their lives to their pastors. Have you ever experienced such a phenomenon? Why do you think clergy members might be particular targets for such emotions?
3. Throughout this chapter, Taylor describes all the unexpected items that went into her job as pastor. What should and shouldn't be in a pastor's job description? If you were ranking tasks, what would you place at the top of the list and why? What would you place at the bottom and why?

## CHAPTER 7

1. Taylor writes that people find God in books, buildings, and other people, but that she has always met God most reliably in creation. Which of these holds the strongest connection to God for you? What is it about you or about that particular medium that makes it so powerful?
2. According to the Irish, “thin places” are “places on earth where the Presence is so strong that they serve as portals between this world and another.” How does such a phenomenon fit with your view of creation? Have you ever encountered a “thin place”?

3. Taylor writes of feeling maternal about the land on her new property, growing angry about the litter she saw there. “No one had to explain to me why Mother Nature was a she,” she writes. Do you think that women have a stronger connection to nature? Do Christians have a stronger connection to nature? Should they? Why?
4. Place is clearly very important to Taylor. Think about how setting affects your worship. Do you find it easiest to worship God in an old church with historic pews, a contemporary church with bright colors, an outdoor service, or a public place surrounded by other people?

## CHAPTER 8

1. For Taylor, worship is the time when everyone stops multitasking and joins together as one, with “nowhere else to go and nothing else to do but sit there together, saying sonorous words in unison, listening to language we did not hear anywhere else in our lives.” She writes of how the word of God becomes fluid and real when read through the varying voices of the congregation, and of the beauty of singing what could otherwise be said. What are your favorite parts of worship services? How does it make God’s word real to you?
2. Are you comfortable with silence? Why or why not? What do you normally think or feel when there is silence during your worship service?
3. Taylor describes losing track of herself and feeling a sense of mystical union with God and the others in the congregation when she baptizes babies. When have you

experienced such transcendence? Is achieving this transcendence one of the reasons we attend church?

4. Taylor writes that she “knew where God’s fire was burning, but I could not get to it. I knew how to pray, how to bank the coals and call the Spirit, but by the time I got home each night it was all I could do to pay the bills and go to bed. I pecked God on the cheek the same way I did Ed, drying up inside for want of making love.” When have you been too busy, perhaps doing God’s work, to spend time with God? How does her description speak to your experience?

## CHAPTER 9

1. Taylor describes her faith as more relational than doctrinal, and she observes that “whenever people aim to solve their conflicts with one another by turning to the Bible . . . defending the dried ink marks on the page becomes more vital than defending the neighbor.” To her “the whole purpose of the Bible . . . is to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God’s sake. For me, this willing conversion of ink back to blood is the full substance of faith.” How does this description fit with your own understanding of the Bible? How has the Bible encouraged you to engage or not engage the world?
2. Taylor lists several different ways that church members deal with conflict—writing long letters to clergy, sitting quietly until they explode, simply leaving. Do you recog-



nize yourself in any of these depictions? If so, why have you chosen that option? How has your church as a whole handled conflicts such as the Episcopal Church's ongoing discussion about the ordination of gay and lesbian priests?

3. Taylor writes that she is less concerned with *believing* than with *beholding*. She writes that she wants to recover “the kind of faith that has nothing to do with being sure what I believe and everything to do with trusting God to catch me though I am not sure of anything.” How well does this describe your faith? What role do belief and doctrine play in your faith?
4. Do you struggle with serving Christ in *all* people? What people do you have the most difficulty serving?
5. One of the most difficult aspects of leaving Grace-Calvary for Taylor was placing her assistant's job in jeopardy. This dilemma illustrates Taylor's essential problem: her identity as a giver, someone who puts the needs of others before her own, has resulted in a crippling sense of compassion fatigue. Would you classify yourself as a giver? If so, when is it appropriate to put your own needs first? Have you ever experienced compassion fatigue, and if so, what are the symptoms in your own life? How did you deal with it?
6. Taylor realizes that being ordained caused some people to view her as set apart. If you are a clergy member, how have you experienced such a dividing line? If not, do you view members of the clergy this way? Why or why not?

## CHAPTER 10

1. Taylor quotes Walter Brueggemann: “The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you by the grace of God.” Has God ever asked you to turn from the path you thought He wanted you to tread? Why do you think God so often asks us to change?

## PART TWO: LOSING

### CHAPTER 11

1. Many of us long for quiet and free time, only to become unsettled by them when they are finally available to us. Is there any space in your life for being quiet, for doing nothing? What is it that might secretly frighten you about unplanned time alone?
2. What is your practice for keeping the Sabbath, if any? If you tend to let work and chores intrude upon your Sabbath, what are the reasons why? Are they valid reasons, or could you rearrange your life?
3. On her first Sunday after she has left church, Taylor enjoys a “front porch service with the congregation of creation.” What would you appreciate about such a

church service? What might you miss about a traditional service?

4. If we truly try to follow Jesus's example, we might also find ourselves never saying no, never taking time to rest. Is this what God means for us? When is it okay to say no? Do we sin by believing that we are the only ones who can handle certain situations?

## CHAPTER 12

1. Taylor observes that many counselees would probably prefer the anonymity of an old-fashioned confessional. How would such a barrier impact the way you talked to your priest or pastor? How might face-to-face confession challenge you?
2. Why is it so hard for us to accept doubts, depressions, or variations in mood from our clergy? If clergy revealed their spiritual ups and downs more honestly, would it make those who are hurting feel more welcome in church? Is your church a place where you can present yourself the way you really are, or do you feel obligated to put on your best self there?
3. Taylor writes that being identified as the holiest person in a congregation can cause clergy members to become deformed, whether through hubris or through the pain caused by worrying about the disconnect between this view and their personal knowledge of themselves. Do we sometimes confuse our clergy members with God? Does the expectation as Christians to pattern ourselves after

Jesus make this problem worse? Do you ever suffer from “imposter’s syndrome” in your life?

## CHAPTER 13

1. Why do you think many denominations bar pastors from remaining in congregations once a new pastor has taken over? What are some benefits and drawbacks to such a policy?
2. Is your church arranged so that the pastor can see everyone during the service but most people can see only the pastor? How does such a layout affect your experience of community worship?
3. What role comes more naturally to you—leader or member? Taylor wishes that more people led services, so they could “share the power” and “take turns filling in for Jesus.” What do you think about this proposal? If you are a leader in your church, how does the power implicit in that role affect you?
4. Taylor says that being a member of a congregation calls for vulnerability and courage, as you must open yourself to other people’s agendas and trust other people to give voice to your prayers. Does this match your experience or not?
5. Taylor defines being poor in spirit as emptying oneself like Jesus did, surrendering all power—a move just as counter-cultural then as it is now. Is there a time when you voluntarily surrendered power? Where in your life might you be called to do so now?

6. Taylor writes that church should be a starting place, not a stopping place, for discerning God's presence in the world. How do you tend to experience church?

## CHAPTER 14

1. Once Taylor was free of defending the faith, she writes, she found herself able to revisit what it meant to her. She realized that her faith was based more on trust than on certainty. What does this mean to you? Is it true of your faith?
2. Where are you on your spiritual map? In the center or on the edge? Taylor describes the wilderness as “the undomesticated encounter with the undomesticated God whose name was unpronounceable—that, and a bunch of flimsy tents lit up by lanterns aside, pitched by those who were either seeking such an encounter or huddling in their sleeping bags while they recovered from one.” What role do the center and the edge play in your own spiritual landscape? If you have visited the wilderness edge, what has it taught you?
3. Taylor writes, “I saw how Mother Church had not only fed me, clothed me, and housed me, but had also given me brothers and sisters to learn to love. . . . I saw how she had taught me the same things that had helped her older children find their way in the world, as well as a few that she hoped might keep me safe. *Be careful. Don't leave the yard. No more questions.*” Has the church functioned as a mother to you? How has she cared for you? What has she taught you? How has she limited you?

## CHAPTER 15

1. When she is no longer the leader of Grace-Calvary Church, Taylor feels more open to the Lakota spiritual practices that have long attracted her husband. What other religious traditions have attracted and influenced you? What have you learned from these traditions?
2. Taylor notices that Native American religious practices value direct experiences of God above study. Which does your Christian tradition emphasize more? Which has been more influential in your own life and practice?
3. Taylor admires the element of risk in direct encounters with God that Native Americans emphasize. What have you risked in your faith journey?

## CHAPTER 16

1. The readjustment period that Taylor describes after returning to the United States after her sabbatical in Kenya is typical of those who return from the Peace Corps or similar organizations. What did her reactions to the sheer abundance and hectic pace of the United States teach or reinforce for you about our culture? When have you ever left your familiar surroundings long enough to be able to look at them with fresh eyes when you returned? What did you learn about the place and things you took for granted?
2. Since in the Episcopal tradition, confirmation comes at age twelve, Taylor comments that many church members live the rest of their lives as spiritual twelve-year-olds. Is

this true for you or for others you know? Do you think that people you know who have left the church would have done so if they had continued in their practice and study of faith? When did your theological study begin and/or end? How well does your church or tradition educate adults?

3. It is difficult for Taylor to adjust to her classroom, having grown accustomed to the concept of sacred space and the special preparations of that space by church members each week for worship. What does the concept of sacred space signify to you? Do you have a sacred space in your home where you regularly meet God? What makes a place sacred—its purpose, the sacred objects it contains, the view it affords, the way it is treated by those who use it?
4. What does it mean to you to be a part of the priesthood of all believers? How do you serve humanity as a priest each day?

## PART THREE: KEEPING

### CHAPTER 17

1. Taylor writes that the symbol of the cross, which once meant only love to her, now troubles her because of the

- people who have been hurt by those wielding it. What does the cross symbolize to you? Do you find it the most meaningful Christian symbol, or do you have another?
2. Taylor describes the Bible as a field guide to the Divine Presence in the world. How does this differ from other views of the Bible that you have learned or encountered? How might viewing the Bible this way affect your everyday life?
  3. Taylor writes that it is possible to see Jesus as the founder not of a new religion, but of a new way to be human. How does this view strike you? Do you think Jesus's followers saw him this way? If this was indeed his intention, how have we misinterpreted it?
  4. Taylor writes, "The way many of us are doing church is broken and we know it, even if we do not know what to do about it. We proclaim the priesthood of all believers while we continue living with the hierarchical clergy, liturgy, and architecture. We follow a Lord who challenged the religious and political institutions of his time while we fund and defend our own. We speak and sing of divine transformation while we do everything in our power to maintain our equilibrium." Is the way you or your tradition is doing church broken in these ways? If not, why not? What are some other ways in which our way of doing church has fallen short? What are some solutions?
  5. One of Taylor's central insights is that the church is meant for the world, not the other way around. How does the church in the United States perpetuate or work against this image? Your own church?



6. How would you answer Taylor's question, "What is saving your life now?"
7. Throughout the book, Taylor writes about encounters with various birds as metaphors for what is changing in her life. From broken birds to wild geese, to domestic chickens, to fierce hawks, to a lost homing pigeon, what do they symbolize about her journey? What bird best represents your present relationship with God? What insight does it give you about your own journey?