Facilitator Notes

The Church and Slavery: Moral and Ethical Dilemmas

Echoes of Eden in Western North Carolina: The Johnstone Settlement, 1852–1864

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About This Guide

This guide uses the Johnstone Settlement and the broader history of American Christianity to explore one of the hardest questions a faith community can face: how did the church — our church — participate in the institution of slavery, and what do the patterns of that participation reveal about institutional moral life today?

It's designed mostly with two main audiences in mind: faith communities and educational institutions, but book clubs will find it useful, too, especially for personal and group reflection.

The readings pair first-person testimony from Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass with institutional history from James Thayer Addison and the Episcopal Church's own reckoning documents. Together, they surface a pattern that cuts across denominations: the gap between what the church professed and what it tolerated, defended, or refused to name.

The discussion questions aren't a script. Pick the ones that fit your group. Rearrange them, combine them, skip some, rewrite others. The goal is honest, meaningful conversation — not covering every item on a list.

The Readings at a Glance

Participants should arrive having read the materials listed in the Overview. Here's a quick orientation to what each source brings to the conversation:

- **Gralley, *Echoes of Eden*, Introduction; Chapter 4 (focus: "The Enslaved of the Johnstone Settlement") and Chapter 6 (focus: "Rev. Hanckel" and "F.W Johnstone")** — The Johnstone Settlement as case study: wealthy, self-described Christian families from coastal South Carolina who built what they called an Eden in the Appalachian highlands — while depending entirely on enslaved labor and naturalizing racial hierarchy as part of God's order.
- **Addison, *The Episcopal Church in the United States*, Chapter XIII** — Documents one denomination's deliberate institutional silence. The Episcopal Church avoided taking a position on slavery — not out of uncertainty but out of pastoral sympathy, fear of schism, and the conviction that slavery was a political rather than moral question.

- **Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Chapter XIII** — Shows rather than tells. Jacobs uses irony and concrete episodes — Rev. Pike's sermon on obedience, the constable who leads a Methodist class meeting, Dr. Flint's conversion — to expose how Christianity functioned as a tool of social control over enslaved people.
- **US Episcopal House of Bishops, *1994 Pastoral Letter*** — Offers a biblical case against racism and acknowledges it is "endemic in every aspect of society, including the church." But it stops short of naming specific Episcopal complicity or confronting the Church's own pro-slavery biblical history.
- **US Episcopal Church, *2006 Expression of Regret*** — Begins to fill the gaps the 1994 Letter left. Explicitly acknowledges the Church's participation in the institution of slavery. Read alongside the earlier letter to see what shifts — and what remains unaddressed.

Supplemental Reading:

- **Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Chapter IX and Appendix** — Draws the sharpest line in the guide: between the "Christianity of Christ" and "the slaveholding religion of this land." Douglass argues that religious conversion made slaveholders more cruel, not less — providing "sanction and support" for brutality.

Tailoring the Discussion to Your Setting

For Churches and Faith Communities

This material will likely land with both institutional weight and personal resonance — especially for participants who belong to denominations discussed in the readings. Expect the conversation to move between historical analysis and present-day self-examination.

A sequence that tends to work:

- Start with the Religion and the Johnstone Community questions to build a shared foundation in the primary texts, then move to The Role of the Church in Secular Affairs for the institutional dimension.
- Look for questions that bridge past and present. The Role of the Church questions on institutional silence, moral complicity, and the ethics of unity connect naturally to ongoing conversations within many congregations.
- Use the Personal Reflection questions as closing prompts or take-home journaling starters. The question about where "good intentions" might shape your own reasoning consistently opens up conversation no one expected.
- Consider connecting this to your congregation's own denominational history. Many communities have direct ties to the patterns Addison and Gralley describe.

Pacing options:

- **Single session (60–90 min):** One question from Section 1, two from Section 2, one from Personal Reflection.
- **Multi-week study:** Dedicate a full session to each section — religion and community, institutional behavior, personal reflection.

For Advanced Secondary Schools, Colleges, and Seminaries

Academic groups tend to engage through analytical comparison — and this guide rewards that approach. The combination of first-person testimony, institutional history, denominational self-examination, and a specific local case study is a natural model for interdisciplinary inquiry.

A few practical suggestions:

- Assign the readings before class so you can use session time for discussion, not recap.
- Many of the questions are compound. Consider breaking them into smaller pieces and assigning sub-questions to small groups before reconvening.
- Push the comparison between Jacobs's and Douglass's critiques — they're writing from different positions and reaching different conclusions about the relationship between Christianity and slaveholding. The friction between them is where the thinking happens.
- Pair Addison's institutional history with the 1994 and 2006 Episcopal documents for a case study in how long institutional reckoning takes and what it looks like when it finally arrives.

A possible three-session arc:

- **Session 1** — Religion, slavery, and the Johnstone community (Jacobs, Douglass, Gralley)
- **Session 2** — The institutional church: silence, complicity, and the cost of unity (Addison, Pastoral Letter, Expression of Regret)
- **Session 3** — Personal reflection: faith, power, and moral compromise today.

Connecting the Readings: Themes to Track

These thematic threads run across all the sources. Keep them in mind as you move between sections — they'll help the conversation feel like one continuous inquiry rather than separate questions about separate texts.

Faith as Instrument of Control — and of Liberation

Jacobs and Douglass both show Christianity operating as a mechanism of social control: Rev. Pike preaching obedience, slaveholders invoking scripture to justify

bondage, religious conversion making masters more confident in their authority. But both also point toward a counter-tradition — Jacobs's Uncle Fred risking punishment to read the Bible, Douglass insisting on the "Christianity of Christ" as something altogether different from its slaveholding counterfeit. A question worth returning to across sections: when does faith serve the powerful, and when does it challenge them?

The Architecture of Institutional Silence

Addison's account of the Episcopal Church is a case study in how institutions avoid moral reckoning. The Methodists and Baptists split over slavery in the 1840s. The Episcopal Church avoided a split by declaring slavery a political matter outside its purview. That silence wasn't neutral — it protected slaveholders who were disproportionately Episcopalian, and it removed one potential source of moral pressure from the equation. The pattern is analytically distinct from active defense of slavery, and it may be more relevant to present-day institutional life.

The Gap Between Personal Belief and Institutional Practice

Douglass's Appendix is the anchor text here: he loves the Christianity of Christ and hates what passes for Christianity in a slaveholding society. This is not anti-religion — it's a demand that institutions live up to what they profess. Jacobs's account of a kind Episcopal rector and his wife offers a counterpoint: individuals who tried to live out their convictions within a system that made full moral consistency nearly impossible. The tension between personal moral clarity and institutional inertia runs through every section.

Paternalism and the Myth of Benevolence

The Johnstone settlers saw themselves as building a Christian paradise. They likely believed they were providing order, community, and spiritual instruction to the people they enslaved. That self-image — benevolence as a frame for domination — is one of the most persistent patterns in American institutional life. It's visible in the colonization movement (sending freed Black Americans to Africa as a "compromise"), in denominational statements that opposed slavery without affirming Black equality, and in present-day organizations committed to diversity while maintaining structural inequities.

Confession, Accountability, and Repair

The 1994 Pastoral Letter and 2006 Expression of Regret are both acts of institutional confession — separated by twelve years and by significant differences in what they're willing to name. The Southern Baptist Convention formally apologized in 1995, 150 years after the denomination was founded on a pro-slavery platform. These documents raise questions that matter well beyond denominational history: what makes institutional confession difficult? What does it require of leaders? What does it offer to those who were harmed? And what does it demand of members living today who bear no personal guilt?

Preparing for Hard Conversations

Some Principles to Start With

- Set expectations before the first question: honest engagement with the evidence, willingness to examine how privilege shaped both past and present, and genuine respect for everyone in the room.
- Distinguish discomfort from harm. Discomfort is productive — hold space for it without rushing to resolve it.
- Let the primary sources do the heavy lifting. When the conversation gets abstract, return to specifics: Jacobs's irony, Douglass's precision, Addison's careful institutional analysis.
- Don't demand personal confession. Personal Reflection questions are invitations. Important reflection often happens after people leave the room.
- Be honest about contested ground. Whether present-day institutions face the same structural dynamics as antebellum churches is genuinely debatable. You don't need to resolve it — you need to help people think carefully about it.

When Participants Feel Implicated by Denominational History

Some participants — especially those who belong to the Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist, or Presbyterian churches — may feel uncomfortable when the readings describe their denomination's role in slavery. This isn't a problem. It's a door.

- Acknowledge it openly: "Many of us are part of institutions discussed in these readings. That's not an accident — it's part of why this conversation matters."
- Then press on the structural dimension: "What systems made it possible for sincere believers to participate in slavery without seeing a contradiction? And are similar systems at work in any institution today?"
- Use Addison's analysis to keep the discussion grounded in history rather than personal guilt. The Episcopal Church's silence was not the work of uniquely immoral people — it was a structural pattern. What created that structure, and who benefited from it?

When the Discussion Turns to Present-Day Institutional Behavior

Questions about modern parallels — diversity without equity, institutional statements without institutional change, moral silence on politically costly issues — will likely surface disagreements about the contemporary church's role.

Here's what tends to help:

- Keep the historical anchor present. The question isn't "Is my church doing enough?" but "What does the Johnstone story and the Episcopal Church's history reveal about patterns we might recognize?"

- Be precise about the analogy. The slaveholding church is not identical to any modern institution. But the structural dynamics — silence as complicity, benevolence as paternalism, unity as a rationale for moral avoidance — may be.
- If the conversation stalls on contemporary politics, redirect to the personal: "Where have you seen a gap between what an institution professes and what it practices?" (Personal Reflection)

When Participants Resist Present-Day Application

- Some participants will prefer to keep the conversation safely in the past. That instinct is understandable — but the readings won't let it stand. Gently redirect: "What do you think makes this history relevant or irrelevant to current institutional life?" The question honors the resistance while keeping the door open.

A Note on the Local Dimension

For participants in western North Carolina, the Johnstone Settlement isn't distant history. Transylvania County, Flat Rock, and Dunn's Rock are places where many of your participants may live, work, and have worshiped for generations. The discovery that a community of slaveholding families built what they called a Christian Eden in these mountains — and that this story was buried for 170 years — may carry particular weight. That local connection is an asset. It makes the history immediate. It can also make the conversation tender. Be ready for participants to bring strong feelings about local identity into a discussion that's ostensibly about the past.

A Note on the Dual Audience

While book clubs will find this guide useful, it is primarily designed for churches and classrooms — and that's intentional. The relationship between faith and slavery has always been an institutional phenomenon and a deeply personal one. It's shaped by theology and economics, by denominational politics and individual conscience, and it's experienced as conviction, complicity, resistance, and sometimes all three at once.

The questions that matter most here — about how institutions accommodate injustice, what it costs to speak when silence is easier, what genuine accountability looks like, and how the patterns of the past persist in the present — have the greatest impact in the sanctuary and the seminar room.

Quick Reference: Pairing Questions Across Sources

For facilitators who want tight thematic control, these pairings work especially well:

- Section 1, Q1 (social position and religious belief) → pair with Jacobs or Douglass's Appendix—Supplemental Reading (the Christianity of Christ vs. slaveholding religion)
- Section 1, Q3 (gap between belief and practice) → pair with Addison's account of institutional silence (the Episcopal Church's avoidance)
- Section 2, Q3 (political neutrality vs. moral evasion) → pair with the 1994 and 2006 Episcopal documents (what gets named and what doesn't)
- Section 2, Q4 (institutional silence as complicity) → pair with Jacobs and Douglass (what silence meant to those living inside the system)
- Section 2, Q6 (institutional confession) → pair with the 1994 Pastoral Letter and 2006 Expression of Regret (the arc of denominational reckoning)
- Personal Reflection, Q7 (good intentions and paternalism) → use as a closing prompt in any setting; it bridges every section.