Dear Viewers and Discussion Facilitators,

I began to make QUESTIONING FAITH: CONFESSIONS OF A SEMINARIAN when my dear friend and seminary classmate, Alan Smith, died just as he began his ministry. His death sent my own faith into a tailspin and I set off on a journey to understand how different people reconcile their beliefs with tragedy.

In making a film, it was my hope that my quest might serve others who have found themselves in similar situations, or who are sure to at some point in their lives. And so with great joy, I welcome you into the fold of those who have worked on, participated in and engaged QUESTIONING FAITH. I delight in the image of an ever-increasing circle of folks tying their colored strips of cloth together, as diverse as the earth's plants and places and creatures, but joined in community.

Everyone suffers. Everyone dies. It is my hope that our film and your process of engaging with it helps to ease the pain that life can bring and that it connects you with others, regardless of how different they are, so that we may all find comfort in the hard times and, when we feel we can no longer proceed, there will always be someone to carry us through.

Thanks for engaging and peace be with you,

Macky Alston

The Discussion Guideline

The people and events portrayed in QUESTIONING FAITH: CONFESSIONS OF A SEMINARIAN present a rich and provocative opportunity for group discussion. From the meaning of suffering, faith and doubt, to the impact of religious diversity on contemporary life, to the challenges involved in caring for people with terminal or life-threatening illnesses – the film can be used to examine a variety of important topics and concerns.

A Formidable – but Rewarding -- Challenge

Be aware that the film's central issues – the relationship between questioning and faith, and the meaning of suffering and death in human life – are extremely difficult for most people to talk about, even in the most comfortable and secure of settings. These are complex, multi-faceted issues that don't lend themselves to a single interpretation or approach. Facilitating a post-viewing discussion group of the film is a formidable challenge, but it can be an enormously rewarding one.

Creating a Core Experience

To assist with this challenge, the facilitator's guide describes a core group experience that provides a structure for discussing the issues in the film. The primary objective of the group discussion outlined here is to allow participants to share their experiences and beliefs in the same open, respectful, non-confrontational spirit exhibited in the worship service near the end of the film, in which the central characters bind themselves together in their diversity with colored ribbons.

The guide is simply that: a guide. Its content may be arranged or supplemented by discussion facilitators according to the needs and interests of each group.

- For instance, some groups or group members may feel the need to focus on the World Trade Center bombings and other violent activities in the news. Others may choose to focus on more personal experiences of suffering and loss.
- Similarly, groups composed of participants with comparatively modest life experiences, or with little previous knowledge of one another, might concentrate more heavily on discussions of the experiences of the characters in the film. Groups of more mature participants, or members of an existing religious community, might spend more time sharing their own experiences and beliefs.

In each case, the openness and depth with which key issues are discussed should be determined by the group members themselves. Discussion facilitators will need to adjust the content and the style of discussion to reflect each unique group, considering factors such as:

- the participants' relevant life experience,
- their familiarity with one another,
- their level of comfort in dealing with diversity and discussing difficult topics, and
- specific interests that they bring to the discussion.

As presented here, the discussion guide leads participants from a general discussion of suffering and faith, to an examination of the experiences and beliefs of the characters in the film, to an opportunity for participants to share and reflect openly about their own experiences of suffering, loss and questioning faith.

For groups that do not have time to follow this program, a list of the five most commonly asked questions are provided to serve as post-screening conversation starters. For groups that desire conversation focussed on concerns particular to their community, additional questions are provided for facilitating discussions with groups with specific interests, including:

- Multi-faith groups,
- Caregivers working with people with terminal or life-threatening illnesses,
- Members of religious organizations (e.g., churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.),
- Gay/lesbian organizations and HIV/AIDS service providers,
- College students, and,
- Seminarians.

These additional questions are designed to follow and supplement the core group experience, but may also be used to lead separate post-viewing discussions.

Getting Started

The film covers a broad range of important issues and concerns and will raise difficult, even painful, questions and associations for many viewers. After the film has ended, instruct the group members to take a minute or two to reflect on what they've seen and to prepare themselves for the discussion. (Discussion facilitators of groups representing religious communities may want to close this period of reflection with a spoken prayer or a shared moment of silent meditation.)

Before opening the discussion to the group, ask each participant to write down three words or phrases that describe their thoughts or feelings after watching the film. As each participant shares what he or she has written, list each word or phrase on a notepad or chalkboard for everyone to see. Ask the participants to identify the thoughts and feelings that many people share, as well as those thoughts and feelings that were only expressed by a few people or a single person. Point out to the participants that the discussion to follow – like the film they've just seen – will allow group members to examine their common feelings and beliefs, as well as the ways that they differ, in response to the issues raised by the film.

What Does It Mean to Question Faith?

(For the discussion facilitator: Here and throughout the discussion, encourage participants to express differing views, giving each participant adequate time to explain his or her belief in relation to his or her own experience. Rather than debating the merits of each position, encourage participants to explain to one another why they believe what they do – and how their belief, or lack of belief, provides them with comfort, strength or meaning in the face of suffering and loss. Here and throughout the discussion, instruct participants that cross-talk is not allowed until called for by the discussion facilitator.)

In the course of the film, QUESTIONING FAITH, Macky Alston asks some probing questions related to his own experience of faith and doubt in confronting suffering and loss:

> For those participants who believe in God, how does one reconcile belief in a loving God or a prevailing goodness with the presence of suffering in the world?
>
> Does God use suffering to test us?
>
> Is suffering a punishment for sin? Or a result of our past actions?
>
> Do we find the meaning of suffering and death only in a life that comes after death? Or are the real answers available to us now?
>
> What's the appropriate way to express our anger and frustration about the bad things that happen to us and the people we love? Is it ever okay to be angry with God or dissatisfied with the way the world is ordered?
>
> How do faith and questioning fit together in the lives of those who experience suffering and loss?

For which of these questions do you think you have the answers?

Is this something you've always known and never questioned? Or did you come to believe what you do believe in response to particular experiences or events?

Are there any questions that confuse you, or that you feel you don't have the final answer for?

> How does that make you feel?
>
> What do you do when you don't know how to answer a question about what you believe?
>
> Who do you talk to? What resources do you consult?
>
> Is it ever okay for you not to have all the answers?

How have the bombing the World Trade Center and other violent activities in the news affected the way you feel and talk about your faith or values?

> How are these experiences different from other suffering and loss you've experienced in your life? Or in the lives of those you care about?
>
> In what ways are the experiences the same?
>
> What opportunities have you had to share and express your feelings about these recent events?
>
> Have you found that you've had access to the support and guidance you've needed in responding to these events? Why or why not?

Can you think of any questions that Macky, or one of the other characters in the film, didn't ask but that you would like to ask?

If Macky Alston were here, what would you ask him?

Reflecting on Other People's Experience of Suffering and Loss

In his struggle to understand the meaning of Alan Smith's death, Macky encounters a number of other people who are dealing with suffering or loss. These people represent a variety of religious traditions (including non-belief), with emotional responses that range from anger and frustration to confidence and serene acceptance.

(If participants have difficulty getting started, the discussion facilitator may want to provide a list of characters to prompt them.)

With which of these characters do you identify personally?

> What is it about them, and the way they respond to their own suffering, that you identify with?

How does it make you feel to see someone respond to suffering and loss with attitudes and beliefs similar to your own?

Did you learn anything about yourself by watching and listening to the things they said and did?

Which characters do you **not** understand or identify with?

How are they different from you?

Have you met people that remind you of them? Are there people in your life now who believe and act the way they do?

How do you respond when you encounter people whose beliefs are different from your own?

Can you think of anything you learned by observing the experiences of the people in the film whose attitudes and beliefs are different from yours?

How important are religious beliefs in determining how people respond to suffering and loss?

What are some of the other important factors that determine how people respond?

In the outdoor service at the end of the film, Macky and his friends use pieces of colored cloth to tie their different beliefs and experiences together.

How does watching the scene make you feel?

How were the people in the film able to come together the way they did, in spite of their differences?

What essential feelings or experiences did they share with one another?

In what ways did they remain different from one another, in spite of the common feelings or experiences that brought them together?

Can you think of any experiences in your own life in which people of different attitudes and beliefs came together to share a common experience or meaning?

Can you think of any other activities or images that would express the commonness – and diversity – of people who have experienced suffering and loss?

Sharing My Own Experience

Inevitably, each of us will go through periods of suffering and loss, both in our own lives and in the lives of those we care about. Like the people in the film, each of us experiences and interprets suffering and loss differently. For some, suffering leads to experiences of intense questioning and doubt – at times completely disrupting the things we believe or the way we look at the world. For others, suffering is a reminder of the importance of faith and the comfort and strength that can only be found in spiritual meditation and religious belief. Most of us live between these two extremes, however, questioning, renewing and, at times, adjusting our beliefs in response to the suffering and loss that we experience along the way.

(For the discussion facilitator: Hand out different-colored index cards to each participant.)

In the next few minutes, we're going to talk about our own suffering and loss – and the role that questioning and faith have played in each of our experiences. In discussing our experiences, our challenge as a group will be in demonstrating the same respect for and tolerance of one another's differences that Macky and the other characters in the film demonstrated toward one another. As we share our experiences (and listen to one another), let's try to remain as focused as possible on explaining how our individual beliefs bring strength, comfort and meaning to our lives – instead of simply defending our respective positions.

While all participants are welcomed and encouraged to talk openly about their experiences, not everyone will be expected to do so. If you've had experiences that are too painful or too recent to talk about in public, or if you don't feel you've experienced enough to share with the group, it's perfectly okay to remain silent throughout the discussion that follows – or to speak only when you feel comfortable. I am going to ask, however, that each one of you take a moment to reflect about the suffering and loss that you've experienced in your own life – and then to write the name of a person or event through which suffering or loss has touched you. By placing these cards in the center of our group, we will visibly link our experience with the shared experience in the film that informs our discussion.

(For the discussion leader: Collect the colored cards and place them in the center of the group. Allow an additional moment of silence before proceeding.)

Now, let's take a few moments and allow some of you to share briefly about the people or personal experiences that you wrote on your cards.

In what ways did these experiences of suffering and loss lead you to question your own faith or basic beliefs?

Are there any ways that your beliefs have changed in response to the suffering and loss that you've experienced in your life?

What resources have you turned to when confronted with suffering or loss?

What has been most helpful to you in coping with and understanding your experience?

What hasn't been as useful?

During difficult times, have you discovered any new resources – things that you didn't know about or take seriously before – that provided you with comfort, strength or meaning?

Who have you talked to about your questions and your feelings, or gone to for comfort and advice?

Who has been the most helpful to you?

What do you say when you talk with someone else who has experienced suffering or loss?

In what ways has watching this film, and participating in this discussion, caused you to question and reflect?

In what ways has it strengthened your faith and your convictions?

In what ways has it led you to reevaluate the things you believe?

Before we leave, let's take a few moments to reflect silently on the things we've discussed and the experiences and beliefs that we've shared. (*Leaders for groups representing religious communities may want to end the discussion period with a spoken prayer or silent meditation.)*

Thank you all for your participation.

Five Most Commonly Asked Questions

The following list of most commonly asked questions may be useful for groups who do not have sufficient time to use the complete discussion guide.

- The film presents a number of different people, representing different religious traditions and ways of life. With whom in the film do you most identify? Why is that? Whose beliefs and experiences do you have more trouble understanding or relating to? Why is that?

- The film also presents a number of different ways of understanding the issue of suffering and death. Does the film represent the way in which you understand and cope with the issue of suffering and death in your own life? If so, which position or way of responding is closest to your own? If not, how do you understand and cope with the issue?

- What role do questioning and doubt play in the development of your own beliefs and values? What are some of the things that make you doubt what you believe? What are some of the things that strengthen your beliefs and convictions? Are there situations or settings in which it's useful or important to question what you believe? Are there times when it's not okay to doubt?

- At the end of the film, people from different traditions openly share their different beliefs and experiences with one another, tying together colored ribbons to unite themselves in a single community. How did watching that scene make you feel? How are people from different traditions fundamentally alike? How are they different?

- What lesson or lessons did Macky Alston learn in the film? Are there any ways in which watching the film has changed how you look at things?

Additional Discussion Questions
Caregivers Working with People with Terminal and Life-threatening Illnesses

Suffering and loss can lead us to question the things we feel and believe in all areas of our lives – from our most personal and deeply held beliefs and convictions to the rules and assumptions that guide us in our professional lives.

What are the primary beliefs and values that motivate you and guide you in your work with people who are seriously ill?

> What are the professional concepts and rules that guide you in your work?
>
> What are the other personal, ethical or religious beliefs and values that guide or inspire you?

How do the two – personal beliefs and professional values – fit together in your day-to-day work with patients?

> Have you ever had experiences when the two came into conflict?
>
> If so, how did you deal with that?
>
> Who did you go to, or what resources did you consult, for guidance?

The film portrays the experience of people of different faiths and backgrounds who are dealing with serious illness, many of them in a clinical setting.

Have you provided care for people like any of the characters portrayed in the film?

> If so, how was that a rewarding experience for you? How was it difficult or challenging?
>
> Have you had experiences with other people with beliefs or from difficult backgrounds – not portrayed in the film – for whom you found it difficult to provide treatment?

What do you do when the religious beliefs of a patient or family member conflict with your own personal or professional values?

> Who do you talk with for guidance? What resources do you consult?

Have you ever had experiences with a patient's suffering or death that caused you to question your own personal beliefs or professional assumptions?

Additional Discussion Questions
Examining Different Religious Traditions

The characters in the film represent a number of religious traditions and spiritual practices, each with its own beliefs and perspectives about suffering, death and the role of faith in human life.

What are the different religious traditions that are represented in the film?

> Which of these traditions were you familiar with before you saw the film?
>
> Which of them did you not know very much about?
>
> Did any of the characters behave in ways that surprised or confused you, based on what you know about the tradition they represent?
>
> What other religious traditions are you aware of that were not represented in the film?

What are the common beliefs and practices that all these different religious traditions hold in common?

> In what fundamental ways are they different from one another?
>
> What does each of these traditions have to say about suffering and death? How does this compare with your own tradition?
>
> How does each of these traditions deal with the issue of religious questioning and doubt? Again, how does this compare with your own tradition?

How important are religious traditions and beliefs in determining who people are – and in how they cope with suffering and loss?

More and more people these days distinguish between religion and spirituality in defining and talking about their own beliefs and values.

> Is this a distinction that is meaningful for you? Why or why not?

The film also presents characters that don't believe in God or don't belong to a particular religious tradition.

> In what fundamental ways are people who don't believe in God different from those who do? In what ways are they alike?
>
> How is the experience of suffering and loss different for a person who doesn't believe in God or belong to a particular religious tradition? How is it alike?

Additional Discussion Questions
Gay/Lesbian Groups and HIV/AIDS Service Providers

Alan Smith's relatives in Memphis were unable to talk openly about the fact that he died from AIDS or that he was gay.

> How did it make you feel to see the way they dealt, or were unable to deal, with Alan's lifestyle and his illness?
>
> Why do you think they had such a hard time talking about Alan's illness and his sexual orientation?

Have you had similar experiences, in which people you care about are embarrassed or uncomfortable to talk about AIDS and homosexuality?

> How did you cope with that? How do you respond to them?

What types of experiences have you had with organized religion in your own life?

> How have those experiences made you feel? For those of you who have had negative experiences, how have you coped with them?

What role do religious beliefs or spiritual values play in determining who you are?

> How well do your current beliefs and your current lifestyle fit with the beliefs and traditions of your childhood?
>
> Are there any ways in which the two conflict? If so, how do you deal with that?

How is the experience of someone with AIDS different from the experience of someone with another life-threatening illness? How is it similar?

How is caring for someone who has AIDS – or who has died from AIDS – different from caring for other people who have died or are seriously ill? How is it similar?

How has AIDS – both the general epidemic and your own direct experience with it – affected what you believe and the way you understand the world?

> In what ways has it strained or caused you to doubt your previous beliefs?
>
> In what ways has it strengthened your values and beliefs?
>
> What people or experiences have been most meaningful to you in coping with and making sense of the continuing presence of AIDS in our society and in your personal life?

Additional Discussion Questions
Seminarians

How do we reconcile, asks theologian James Cone in the opening moments of the film, our belief in a loving, all-powerful God with the presence of death and suffering in our lives?

How have you reconciled this issue in your own life and theological training?

> Is it something for which you feel you have the answer? Or are you still struggling with it?
>
> What teachings or texts have been most meaningful to you in trying to understand the relationship between God and human suffering?
>
> What does the presence of suffering and death in the world tell us about who God is?
>
> What role do suffering and death play in your own denomination or religious tradition?

The characters in the film interpret suffering and loss in many different ways, expressing different aspects of their own personalities and religious traditions. What are some of the different ways that people in the film interpret human suffering?

- Suffering is God's punishment for sin.
- Suffering is a test of one's faith.
- Suffering is an opportunity for growth.
- Suffering is a reminder of the preciousness of life.
- Suffering experienced firsthand makes one more sensitive to the suffering of others.
- Suffering is proof that there is no God.
- It's up to each one of us to transform our suffering into meaning and joy.

Which of these positions is closest to the way that you feel? Why is that?

With which positions do you disagree? Why is that?

How have your own experiences of suffering and loss helped shape your faith and your beliefs?

In your religious training, have you had the chance to interact with or get to know people from the traditions represented in the film or other traditions?

> If so, what was that like for you?

What did you learn from those encounters? About the other tradition and its followers? About yourself and your own tradition?

Finally, can you think of specific resources (e.g., books, films, scriptural passages, etc.) that have helped you in dealing with suffering and loss, and that you would like to share with the rest of the group?

Additional Discussion Questions
Religious Organizations (e.g., churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.)

The film portrays people from different backgrounds and traditions as they confront suffering and loss in their lives.

What are the basic beliefs and values of your religious tradition?

> How do you learn about what people in your tradition believe?
>
> Are your own personal feelings and beliefs ever different from what your tradition teaches?
>
> If so, how do you deal with that? Who do you talk to and what resources do you consult to help you?

How does your tradition address the issue of suffering and loss?

> What are the main resources (documents, scriptural passages, songs or hymns, etc.) that give you comfort or guidance?
>
> What are the rituals or other activities that help you and other people in your tradition deal with suffering and loss?

How did you feel when you heard the questions that Macky and the other people in the film asked about God and faith?

> Did any of their questions make you uncomfortable?
>
> Were there any questions or doubts that you could identify with?
>
> How have you responded to those questions when they've occurred in your own life?
>
> Who do you talk to and what resources do you consult when you have those types of questions?

In the film, Annie was very open about expressing her anger with God when she learned that she had cancer.

> Do you think it's appropriate for people of faith to feel and express anger with God?
>
> Have you ever felt angry with God?

Finally, how do you balance faith and questioning in your own life?

How has questioning strained or strengthened your own faith?

What is the relationship between faith and suffering and loss? How have suffering and loss strained or strengthened your own faith?

Additional Discussion Questions
College Students

College is a time of new and intense experiences. For many people, college provides the first encounter with people from other cultures and religious traditions. It's also a time for testing the values and beliefs of childhood in a challenging new setting, for debating opinions and beliefs, and for experimenting with new ways of understanding the world.

What are the different areas in your life in which you are currently exposed to suffering and death, either personally or through the media?

> What are the biggest questions you have when you experience suffering and loss in your life – or when you witness it in someone else's life?

How did you feel when you heard the questions that Macky and the other people in the film asked about suffering and faith?

> Were there any questions or doubts that you could identify with?
>
> How have you responded to those questions when they've occurred in your own life?
>
> Who do you talk to – or what resources do you consult – when you have questions about suffering and loss?

What other experiences in your life have led you to question or doubt the beliefs and values that you grew up with?

> How have you dealt with this new experience of questioning and doubt?
>
> Who have you talked to for advice or understanding? What resources have you drawn on in trying to answer the new questions in your life?

Have any of these experiences and periods of questioning caused you to change any of your basic beliefs and values?

> If so, how does that make you feel? Is changing one's beliefs a good thing or a bad thing?

How important is religion, or spirituality, in determining who someone is and how they experience life?

> How important is it for you personally?
>
> Is religious faith a help, or a hindrance, in trying to find the answers to the questions in your life?