

volume 22, number 19  
september 4, 2016

# FaithLink

Connecting Faith and Life



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The science fiction series *Star Trek* celebrates its 50th anniversary this fall. How has *Star Trek's* optimism about humanity's future contributed to its success? How does Christian faith shape the ways we help build our society's future?

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## Hope for the Human Adventure

*Star Trek* premiered on NBC on September 8, 1966. Although the far-future adventures of Captain Kirk and the crew of the starship *Enterprise* ran only three seasons, *Star Trek* never ended. It spawned five spin-off series, and a sixth will debut in January. It has jumped from the small to the silver screen 13 times; the most recent movie, *Star Trek Beyond*, opened in July and has, as of this writing, grossed over \$210 million worldwide.

Last month in Las Vegas, some 5,000 people gathered to celebrate *Star Trek's* golden anniversary. They represent a fraction of the franchise's fan base. Will Nguyen, staff writer for the fan website [TrekNews.net](http://TrekNews.net), told an interviewer, "There are fans in Indonesia, in Japan, in Mexico, in Guatemala; there are huge conventions in Germany and in the UK. . . . It speaks to the vitality of the idea of *Star Trek*."

What is *Star Trek's* most vital idea? For many, it's the series' optimistic vision of humanity's future. The tagline for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979) expresses this optimism: "The human adventure is just beginning."

The late 1960s didn't automatically inspire optimism. "The real 1960s," journalist Lance Morrow reflected, "began on the afternoon of November 22, 1963 . . . [as though] Kennedy's murder opened some malign trap door . . . and the wild bats flapped out." The Cold War was "hot" in Vietnam. Racial tensions often turned violent. Countercultures challenged social norms. The threat of nuclear war loomed over it all.

Against this backdrop, *Star Trek* depicted a society full of promise, bright with hope. As actor and longtime *Star Trek* fan Simon Pegg (who currently plays Scotty, the *Enterprise's* chief engineer) recently wrote, "*Star Trek* promised a glittering future for a species that seemed eternally incapable of getting along." One fan told researchers, "As a kid who was taught to hide under my desk in case of atomic bombs, *Star Trek* presented a much better outlook altogether."

The temptation to fear society's "wild bats" remains. But Christians, who worship Jesus as risen Lord, reject facing the



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## Core Bible Passages

In **Psalm 8**, the psalm-singer displays a sense of wonder at the universe that would be right at home on *Star Trek*. Contemplating the cosmos leads to humility before its Creator. The realization that God made human beings “only slightly less than divine” (**verse 5**) is not license to “play God” but to accept responsibility for ruling creation as God rules, with wisdom. Seeing what’s on “the final frontier” of space can lead us to appreciate and cherish what we’ve been given on Earth.

In **Revelation 21:1-5**, the early Christian prophet John envisions “a new heaven and a new earth” (**verse 1**). The New Jerusalem that John sees is more beautiful than even the most advanced of *Star Trek*’s starbases, but it isn’t the result of human effort and achievement: It descends from heaven, as a gift (**verse 2**). Christians ultimately have hope for the future because Jesus’ resurrection is God’s promise of our own and God’s pledge toward the day when “death will be no more” (**verse 4**).

John’s vision is of heaven come to earth. God will restore and renew all creation. What we do to restore and renew society now anticipates and, by grace, brings something of that future into the present. As theologian Karl Barth asked, “*Last* things do not take place on earth, and yet why should not *little* things and even *great* things do so?”

future in fear. Can *Star Trek*’s optimistic vision connect with Christian hope? Can this science fiction phenomenon teach us about how we, living as “salt” and “light” (**Matthew 5:13-14**), help build a future society for everyone’s good and for God’s glory?

## Embracing Diversity

In *Star Trek*’s future, humanity embraces diversity. As Kirk says in one episode, “Where I come from, size, shape, or color makes no difference.”

Kirk commanded a diverse crew. Uhura (the black, female communications officer), Sulu (the Asian helmsman), and Chekov (the Russian navigator) were familiar, welcome faces—as was Spock, the ship’s half-human, half-alien science officer. The crew worked together professionally and peaceably, each member making specific contributions to a shared mission. “They made it hard to imagine doing an episode without all of them,” says the Reverend David Ealy, pastor of Hawfields Presbyterian Church in Mebane, North Carolina.

The *Enterprise* crew offered a weekly glimpse of a future free from racial prejudice. When nine-year-old Whoopi Goldberg saw Nichelle Nichols playing Uhura, she ran through her house shouting, “Come quick, there’s a black lady on television and she ain’t no maid!” Because of that, she said, “I knew right then and there I could be anything I wanted to be.” Decades later, Goldberg, an Academy Award-winning actress, played a recurring role as Guinan in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

While surveys show 67 percent of American churchgoers think their congregations do enough to encourage diversity, eight in ten worshippers still attend services in which a single racial or ethnic group makes up at least 80 percent of the congregation. Christians have theological reason to pursue more diversity. We worship a God who is diverse in God’s own self (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and who brings people “from every nation, tribe, people, and language” (**Revelation 7:9**) into Christ’s body (**1 Corinthians 12:12-18**).

Ealy thinks *Star Trek*’s presentation of diversity powerfully parallels “the vision God has for the church. Everyone [on the *Enterprise*] had their gifts and roles but they were never in a vacuum.” The church can show society an even more compelling, real-world model of diverse community united in common mission.

## Mastering Technology

While faster-than-light starships and transporter beams remain in science fiction, much of the technology in *Star Trek* parallels developments we now take for granted. Cell phones and smartphones aren’t so different from the crew’s communicators. The Internet functions as did the ship’s computer: an instantly accessible, seemingly infinite source of information. And virtual reality brings “holodecks”—the programmable, fully immersive simulators of later *Star Trek* series—ever closer.

*Star Trek* affirms humanity’s intelligence and inventiveness but insists we must remain masters of our machines. For example, in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the Borg—a race of organic

## “Far Beyond the Stars”

In *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (1993–99), Avery Brooks, playing Captain Benjamin Sisko, was the first African American commanding officer to lead a *Star Trek* series. In the episode “Far Beyond the Stars,” Sisko experiences an alternate reality in which he is Benny Russell, the only black writer for a science fiction magazine in New York in 1953. He is the victim of prejudice both subtle and overt; he is even beaten by police.

Benny writes a story about a black space station commander. Offended by the idea of “a Negro captain,” the magazine’s white publisher pulps all copies of the issue containing Benny’s story. “You can pulp a story but you cannot destroy an idea,” Benny insists. “That future, I created it, and it’s real.”

An author with several officially licensed *Star Trek* stories to his credit, including one connected to this episode (“Isolation Ward 4,” *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds IV*, 2001), Kevin G. Summers appreciates how the episode links the fight against prejudice to faith. In the alternate reality, says Summers via e-mail, “Sisko dreamed constantly of a better future. . . . His struggle was so similar to the Apostle Paul’s that Sisko’s father even quoted the Bible in the episode: ‘I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course. I have kept the faith.’”

beings so completely fused with computers they’ve lost all traces of individuality—emerged as one of the gravest threats in the *Star Trek* universe.

Even earlier, the original series episode “The Ultimate Computer” voiced concern about society’s increasing automation. An advanced computer is given temporary control of the *Enterprise* to show how efficiently it can run the ship. Kirk admits to Spock the computer’s performance is “impressive.” “Computers make excellent and efficient servants,” Spock acknowledges, “but I have no wish to serve under them.” Technology is important in *Star Trek*’s future, but it doesn’t replace people or deny their dignity.

These caveats resonate with biblical skepticism about technology. The ruins of the tower of Babel show how quickly human achievement can lead to sinful pride (**Genesis 11:1-9**). The prophet Isaiah mocks blacksmiths and woodcarvers who mistake what they’ve manufactured for gods (**Isaiah 44:9-20**). But Scripture also looks forward to the time when people will skillfully turn the technology of warfare into instruments of peace, beating “swords into iron plows and . . . spears into pruning tools” (**Isaiah 2:4**).

Human ingenuity is good when used in peaceful, life-affirming ways and in alignment with God’s will. The church can communicate a vision of a society in which technology enhances all people’s lives.

## Exercising Humility

The original *Star Trek* gave few hints about what role human religion played in its society. Characters occasionally acknowledged humanity’s “many beliefs.” Once, Kirk told an alien who claimed to be the ancient Greek god Apollo, “Mankind has no need for gods. We find the one quite adequate.”

On many occasions, however, Kirk exposed and overthrew beings or machines who received or demanded worship, including the aforementioned “Apollo.” When a crewmember suggests giving Apollo the devotion he desires—“He’s kind, and he wants the best for us”—Kirk warns her, “Accept him, and you condemn all of us to slavery.”

Kirk’s view seems to mirror the humanism that *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry embraced. “I have always been reasonably leery of religion,” Roddenberry once said, “because there are so many edicts in religion. . . . I wanted my world of the future to be clear of that.”

But is *Star Trek* inherently hostile toward all religious faith? Kevin Neece, author of the forthcoming *The Gospel According to Star Trek*, doesn’t think so. “False gods need to be taken down,” he says. In *Star Trek*, “the cardinal sin . . . is playing God. It is always looked down upon and always leads to destruction.” Neece says *Star Trek* advocates humility: “For all humanity’s advancements, there is the constant theme that we are still learning and have much progress yet to make.”

Christian faith holds human beings’ smallness and sinfulness in healthy tension with our status as the creatures whom God has entrusted with responsibility for tending creation wisely (**Genesis 2:15; Psalm 8:5-8**). Only God can bring about a completely new

## Star Trek and the Environment

Coincidentally, 2016 also marks the 30th anniversary of *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, one of the most financially successful and widely popular *Star Trek* movies. In this time-travel tale, Kirk and crew trek back to the 20th century to get a pair of humpback whales, a species hunted to extinction long before *Star Trek*'s 23rd-century setting but also one that, it turns out, holds the key to Earth's survival.

Full of funny “fish-out-of-water” moments, *Star Trek IV* also offers an environmental message. As Kirk says, “When man was killing these creatures, he was destroying his own future.” The movie depicts fictional consequences of all-too-factual “human arrogance” (Spock's phrase) in our relationship to nature.

Christian faith affirms that God has given human beings “dominion” over the earth (**Genesis 1:26, 28**, NRSV). But dominion need not equal domination. Scripture testifies to the delight God takes in *all* God's creatures (for example, God proudly parades one wild animal after another before Job in **Job 38–42**). God calls us to responsible stewardship of nature. When we care for the natural world and use it wisely, we not only work to save society “from its own short-sightedness” (as Kirk is told he has done in *Star Trek IV*); we also actively glorify God, who has made so many things so wisely (**Psalms 104:24**).

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world, but the church can show by example that God calls us to work to make this old world as much like the one to come as possible—a world where all people may, as Spock says, “live long and prosper,” sharing in the human adventure that God has prepared.

## United Methodist Perspective

John Wesley consistently stressed that Christian faith isn't solely about individual salvation and sanctification. As Chester Custer explains in *The United Methodist Primer*, “Personal salvation must be expressed in ministry and mission in the world. We believe . . . that faith should inspire service. The integration of personal piety and social holiness has been a hallmark of our [Wesleyan] tradition.” The earliest Methodists believed themselves called “to reform the nation . . . and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.” Christians help shape society in ways that serve all people and glorify God.

The United Methodist Church's Social Creed balances trust in God as the ultimate hope for humanity's future with present responsibility for hope-filled, social action in concluding, “We believe in the present and final triumph of God's Word in human affairs and gladly accept our commission to manifest the life of the gospel in the world.”

The Reverend Dave Barnhart, pastor of Saint Junia United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, captured this balance in a post for the Ministry Matters website: “The future does not depend on our ‘building’ the kingdom of God. Our activity of doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly [with] God is a response to the coming justice of God. Seeing the reign of God approaching on the horizon, we move to do what we can to ‘humanize’ our present world.”

## Helpful Links

- Watch Will Nguyen's complete interview with CCTV-America from the *Star Trek* 50th anniversary convention: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-YPjkfIpas>
- Learn more about *The Gospel According to Star Trek*: [www.gospelaccordingtostartrek.com](http://www.gospelaccordingtostartrek.com)

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**FaithLink**: Connecting **Faith** and **Life** is a weekly, topical study and an official resource for The United Methodist Church approved by Discipleship Ministries and published weekly by Cokesbury, The United Methodist Publishing House, 2222 Rosa L. Parks Blvd., P.O. Box 280988, Nashville, TN 37228-0988. Scripture quotations in this publication, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Common English Bible, copyrighted © 2011 Common English Bible, and are used by permission. **Permission is granted to photocopy pages 1–4 of this resource for use in FaithLink study groups.** All Web addresses were correct and operational at the time of publication.

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## Star Trek and Christian Faith

How has *Star Trek's* optimism about humanity's future contributed to its success? How does Christian faith shape the ways we help build our society's future?

## CREATE Your Teaching Plan

Keeping in mind your group members and your group time, choose from among the OPEN, EXPLORE, and CLOSE activities or from "Teaching Alternatives" to plan the session.

## OPEN the Session

### Pray Together

God beyond time and space, you have promised us a future with hope in the resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. May your Spirit guide this time of conversation and learning, that we may follow him into the future as those who seek society's good today. Amen.

### Introduce *Star Trek*

Brainstorm with participants a list of everything they know about *Star Trek*. Suggest that much about it has entered the popular culture by "quizzing" participants on these *Star Trek* terms: *Enterprise* (the starship in the original series); *Vulcans* (the logical, emotion-suppressing alien race to which Spock belongs); *Klingons* (the main alien "bad guys" of the original series); *warp drive* (the faster-than-light technology the *Enterprise* uses); "*Beam me up*" (a reference to the transporter device that "beamed" characters to and from alien worlds); "*to boldly go . . .*" ("where no man/one has gone before," the *Enterprise's* mission).

## EXPLORE the Topic

### Solicit Participants' Attitudes About the Future

Read or review highlights from "Hope for the Human Adventure." Invite participants to react to Lance Morrow's characterization of the 1960s. Ask: What similarities and differences do you see between society in the 1960s and society today? Do you think society is better off, worse than, or about the same as it was in the 1960s, and why? Do you consider yourself optimistic about the future of human society? Why or why not?

### Discuss Diversity in Society

Read or review highlights from "Embracing Diversity." Ask: Why was *Star Trek's* depiction of a multiracial, multicultural crew working together significant for 1960s television? Where do you see similarly diverse depictions of society in popular culture today?

Review the survey statistics about US Christians and diversity. Ask: How do you react to the author's assertion, "Christians have theological reason to pursue more diversity"? How diverse is our congregation? What do (or could) we do to encourage more diversity?

### Discuss Society's Relationship to Technology

Read or review highlights from "Mastering Technology." Ask participants to identify technological changes in their lifetimes that once seemed like science fiction. Review the summary of the episode "The Ultimate Computer," including Spock's answer to Kirk. Ask: Do you think, overall, that technology is serving us or that we're serving technology in today's society? Why? How does our congregation use current technology? What are the benefits? What are the potential pitfalls? How can (or how should) we model a godly relationship to technology for our society?

## Reflect on Psalm 8

Read Psalm 8 aloud antiphonally as a group (two groups of readers, alternating verses; everyone reads verse 9 together). Ask: What conclusions about humanity's place in God's universe does the psalm-singer draw from observing the heavens? How do we exercise our dominion over God's creation in responsible ways? How much humility do you think our society shows before God, and why?

## Discuss Humility Before God

Read or review highlights from "Exercising Humility." Read aloud Kevin Neece's statement that in *Star Trek*, "the cardinal sin . . . is playing God." Ask: Do you think humanity tries to "play God" too much in current society? If so, how? What responsibility do Christians have to warn society about "playing God"? What is our congregation doing to encourage society to show humility before God? How do we balance proper humility with acknowledgement of the good things human beings are capable of doing?

## Reflect on Revelation 21:1-5

Recruit a volunteer to read aloud Revelation 21:1-5. Ask: What features of God's new heaven and new earth most attract your attention, and why? How would you answer someone who said, "Since God has promised to make all things new, we don't need to worry about making the world a better place"? How would you answer someone who said, "If we work hard enough, we can create a perfect society"?

## Consider "United Methodist Perspective"

Read aloud together the conclusion of the Social Creed, quoted in this section. Ask participants to talk about what these words mean to them personally: How, specifically, are we "[manifesting] the life of the gospel in the world" as individuals and as a congregation?

## CLOSE the Session

### Read and Pray the Newspaper

Distribute recent newspaper issues. Ask participants to identify a story they believe highlights the need for the gospel in current society. Distribute index cards. Have participants use one side of the card to write a brief prayer about this social need. Have them use the other side to write at least one practical way they as individuals or as a part of the congregation can work to meet this social need.

### Pray Together

Eternal God, only you know the future—but we know, because we know you, that we need not face the future with fear. Send us into this world you so love with boldness, speaking your message of hope and loving our neighbors as Jesus Christ loved us. Amen.

Optional closing prayer: Sing (or read aloud together) the hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory" (Harry Emerson Fosdick, 1930): [http://www.hymnary.org/text/god\\_of\\_grace\\_and\\_god\\_of\\_glory](http://www.hymnary.org/text/god_of_grace_and_god_of_glory).

## Teaching Alternatives

- Begin the session by showing Will Nguyen's interview to provide context for discussion (see "Helpful Links").
- Provide images of outer space for participants to look at as Psalm 8 is read, for example, from such sites as <http://hubblesite.org/gallery/>.
- Arrange a time to watch an episode of the original *Star Trek* series as a group. Discuss how the themes identified in this FAITHLINK issue, or other relevant themes, are seen in the episode and relate to Christian hope for the future. In addition to the episodes named in the essay, some especially suitable episodes would include "Where No Man Has Gone Before," "The Corbomite Maneuver," "Balance of Terror," "The Devil in the Dark," "Arena," "A Taste of Armageddon," and "Let That Be Your Last Battlefield."

Next Week in  
**FaithLink**  
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## The Rio Olympics

The Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro offered a window on a full range of stories, from inspirational performances to discouraging scandals.

What have we learned from the games? How do these learnings resonate with our Christian beliefs?