



Nia Shand

When I Told My Church

Video (8:41): Nia Shand, professional dancer, and co-founder of the Brooklyn, N.Y.–based performance art duo, Nia & Ness

Nia Shand is a Brooklyn-based contemporary dance artist, co-founder of the dance/poet performance art duo “Nia & Ness.” Their work has been recognized among the Brooklyn-based Creators Collective’s top artists of the year. A self-described “life explorer,” she has tried karate, skiing, horseback riding, and plays both the violin and viola. She majored in at Temple University and after graduating college joined the DAGAGA Dance Company, with which she performed throughout Germany and France.

When I Told My Church

Preparation

Select a room or location to offer the study. Every session needs a room that has the capability to access the video via internet and to project the video for groups of various sizes. Check to be sure equipment is working properly. For this session, space enough for group dancing is also preferred. *This video can be found at www.gcorr.org/series/vc3.*

Preview the video. Watch the video a couple of times. The first time, at least for the first two to three minutes, watch the video without sound. Pause the video and simply think about what comes to mind for you. Then start the video over and watch her dance and listen to Nia Shand’s voice. What comes to mind now? Finally, read through the lesson plan. Ponder the question: what does it mean to lead with love? Post the group covenant of care for the session.

Gather the following materials:

- Bible for reading the Scriptures – Luke 11:5-10 and I John 3:16-20
- Listening & Looking Guide (one for each person or project on a screen)
- Pens and pencils
- Index cards
- Construction paper
- Scissors, preferably one for each participant
- Blue painter’s tape

Also prepare:

- Paper hearts of various sizes and colors
- Post a sheet of newsprint (or poster board) with these words at the top “My name is” and “I am _____.” Complete the phrase with information about yourself. Include space enough for everyone in your group to write about themselves. (Have extra sheets available in case your class members write large.)
- Post a second sheet of newsprint and write across the top, the words, “I am Nia Shand.”
- Post a third sheet of newsprint with the words at the top: “Leading with Love.”

THE STUDY SESSION

Get Started [15 minutes]

Welcome everyone to the session and take care of housekeeping matters. Read – or ask a volunteer to read – this statement of purpose: “The General Commission on Religion and Race presents Vital Conversations to help start the dialogue on subjects that may sometimes be difficult to approach. We are all part of the beloved community, and we welcome perspectives that bring enlightenment and understanding.”

Begin the study session by drawing people’s attention to the newsprint with the heading “I Am Nia Shand.” Explain that the presenter today is a young woman who introduces herself by name and defines four aspects of who she is. Invite everyone to make their own list using “I Am” statements. If possible, sit or stand in a circle, and ask each one to introduce herself or himself using their statements.

You may wish to model the exercise for the group either by introducing yourself with your “I Am” statements or using the following sample: “I am Barbara Jean. I am a pianist. I am a writer. I am a single woman. I am an activist.”

Ask someone to read aloud the Scriptures Luke 11:5-10 and I John 3:16-20. Allow time for prayer. Invite someone to lead the group in prayer; if no one volunteers, open with a prayer of your choice.

Read and post the group covenant, and highlight the key components: confidentiality; everyone’s voice matters; disagree with care; do not attack anyone. Invite the group to add thoughts and ideas to the covenant (especially if there are new persons). Modify the covenant as needed.

Invite the group to watch the video by sharing this introduction: Nia Shand is a young woman. She is a dancer. She is a lifelong “church girl.” She is a woman who prays. She is a child of God longing for Christians to show love that truly embraces young people. She laments, “How

are you going to expect young people to stay in the church or come to the church if you aren't willing to make changes, positive changes, more inclusive changes?"

Then tell the class that because Ms. Shand is a dancer, her video will be viewed in a way that is a little different from those in previous classes. In fact, for the first few minutes, the group is simply to watch Nia dance.

Play one to two minutes of the video then pause it. During the pause distribute the Listening & Looking Guide. Explain that this is a resource to help them capture thoughts and ideas from the video presentation as well as a place to make note of visions they have for ministry. Direct the group to the first question and ask them to capture their reflections in writing.

Play the Video [15 -20 minutes]

Divide the group into two smaller groups by counting off "One. Two." Assign group 1 to watch the video, paying special attention to Ms. Shand's dancing.

Ask group 2 to focus on the words Ms. Shand is saying during the video. Encourage them to jot down notes, but stress that they should focus on listening and experiencing the words.

At the conclusion of the video, allow five minutes for all group members to add more information and answer questions on their Listening & Looking Guide. Say they will have more opportunities to add more information to the sheet and to reflect upon their notes. (If time permits – and the group wants to – show Ms. Shand's video again.)

What Do Our Hearts Say? [15 minutes]

As people finish making notes on their Listening & Looking Guide, ask them to take a pair of scissors and construction paper and cut out paper hearts (of varying sizes). Note: If someone is particularly good at this, allow them to cut out hearts for those who find this task daunting.

Using information from the Listening & Looking Guide, invite people to write names of people or issues and concerns on their hearts and place them on the newsprint with the heading "Leading with Love":

Name of someone (first name only or pseudonym) of a person who feels alienated because of their sexual identity.

- Describe a challenge or pain being experienced because of love other than man-woman romantic love.
- Recall any words from the video that depicted cares and concerns for Ms. Shand as she "came out" as lesbian to her mother and her church family.
- Write a brief prayer, vision statement or dream for a more inclusive church.
- Write the word "love" in a language other than your own, or draw your idea of love.

Reflect and Share [10 minutes]

Have members review the information recorded on the guide sheet. Add additional thoughts, complete their vision, their commitment, and their social media share. Invite anyone who wishes to share their commitment to do so after a time of individual reflection.

Closing Meditation: Dance with Nia Shand [5 minutes]

Ask all who are able and willing to stand on their feet or sit in a chair with hands free of paper, pens, scissors, phones or Bibles. Explain that we are invited to move and dance with Nia Shand, to use our bodies and movements to share her longing for a world where every person who loves God and longs to worship God will have a home.

Say that you will play a section of the video (begin anywhere), and the group is invited to move in worship, in expression of petition, in expression of joy. Ask members to dance as fully with their bodies as they are able – hand-waving, head-nodding, toe-tapping, leaping, yoga poses, twirls and whirls are all acceptable.

After a few minutes, bring the video volume down to barely audible and ask people to remain in place while you read this closing prayer (or share one of your own choosing): Holy and loving God, we thy people pledge to follow your call to love. Help us to open wide our hearts and our arms to show love to as many as we can. Make our hearts a home for others. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Listening and Looking Guide: Nia Shand

What came to mind as you watched Nia dance without hearing any sound?

Group 1: When you focused on the movement, what did you hear?

Group 2: When you focused on her words, what did you see?

Nia Shand described a moment when she felt as if her church “didn’t see me for me” anymore. In what way can you identify with that experience? Have you been targeted or rejected?

Answer her question: “What kind of positive impact are we going to make on the world?”

What does it mean to “lead with love”?

Cultivate a new vision: Nia Shand shares that her girlfriend continued to accompany her to church and they found love and acceptance. How can acceptance be experienced right away?

Make a commitment: _____

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