

The Faith Forum

HANDBOOK FOR PARTICIPANTS

in Local Ecumenical Dialogue

That All May Be One

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The Faith Forum Program - *Christians Seeking Unity in Christ*

Though there is extreme polarization among the many churches, there are also many Christians who want to acknowledge their commonalities with other fellow Christians—even those of other denominations. Though our churches have many differences, we share a common belief in Jesus Christ (even though, again, we may understand Christ in various ways).

These Christians who want greater unity are propelled by Christ's prayer in John 17:21-- "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." Many of these Christians are involved in the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement that has this unity as its goal and helps the churches work with each other. Christians are seeking this unity in different ways, but one way is by dialoging with each other.

- ✧ Division has always come more easily than unity, and there are many fresh and examples of rifts and schisms that plague us at this very moment.
- ✧ But, we also live in a time when the walls that divide humanity across the globe are crumbling at a rate never before experienced in human history—and Christianity is affected by these developments. Among the churches, walls of misunderstanding, walls of prejudice, and walls of conflict that are centuries old are weakening.
- ✧ The walls themselves are losing their prominence, because fewer and fewer people find comfort within them. The barriers are used less and less to differentiate ourselves from "other Christians." Christians are reaching across, around, and through the chasms to make connections with those on the other side. These are acts of courage which follow the Gospel call to unity and peacemaking.
- ✧ It is a challenge today for people who are very different from each other—like the Jews and Gentiles were—to fellowship together (I Cor 8). However, Scripture is clear that divisions and factions are not acceptable (I Cor 11:17-22). St. Paul's answer to the Corinthians inspires Christians in the 21st century who are seeking unity in Jesus Christ. St. Paul explains that the Body of Christ, "is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ," (I Cor 12:12). As Christians we are called to fellowship in love with each other. The future will be built by collaboration and not by isolation.
- ✧ People are gaining a better understanding of others and of themselves because of reaching out to fellow Christians. Many people have gained a deeper awareness of what we all hold in common and an expanded acceptance of what divides us. Make no mistake about it: there is today a movement toward healing and unity in the Body of Christ, and this movement is alive and growing!

About Faith Forum

Why faith forum?

- ✧ Christians need unifying efforts on many levels—institutional, theoretical, personal, practical, and local. There are theologians doing much work toward unity, but few people among our parishes doing dialogue about their Christian faith. The idea behind the Faith Forum program is to give everyone the opportunity to participate in this vital movement and shape its development. Your input is needed. Unity will never be achieved without your contributions.

What is faith forum's goal?

- ✧ The Faith Forum program works within this movement toward unity and its goal is clear: *to foster greater unity within the Body of Christ*, in response to Jesus Christ's prayer, "that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me," (Jn 17:21).

Who participates?

- ✧ Almost anyone who takes her or his religious and spiritual life seriously can participate. Engaging in the work of moving toward greater unity is difficult. It requires courage, patience, and a willingness to bring a sense of humility to encounters with others. You may feel like you are swimming against the current, both within yourself and within your church's culture. After all, throughout the history of Christianity, division and alienation have come much more easily than healing and understanding.

Where does Faith Forum come from?

- ✧ Faith Forum comes from the Faith & Order Commission, which is one of the five commissions of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUSA). Their website is at www.nccusa.org. The NCC was formed by the churches who are seeking to be better united with each other and helps the churches achieve this goal through education materials, dialogue opportunities, research, and ministry projects.
- ✧ Faith & Order began in the early twentieth century when missionaries and students who were doing practical ministry wanted Christians to work more closely together in witnessing the Gospel to the world. Though they were focused on action in the name of Jesus Christ, it became clear that what they believed about Christ (and other beliefs) affected everything they tried to do together. Out of this realization came the idea to convene a world conference which would focus on the matters of "faith" (doctrine; belief) and "order" (application of beliefs in the church's life; such as the sacraments, mission, and ministry).
- ✧ For several generations now, people within Faith & Order have dialogued about the differences that divide Christian churches. Many milestones have been reached, and many more lie ahead. Today, Faith & Order hopes you will join the dialogue towards unity in Jesus Christ "so that the world may believe."

Frequently Asked Questions About Christian Unity

Why seek unity? Why is this effort of seeking unity important?

Because...

- ✧ ...on the night before his death, Jesus prayed that all who believe in him might be one (John 17:21).
- ✧ ...Scripture teaches that there is one body of which Christ is the head (Eph 4:4,15-16).
- ✧ ...when you engage in dialogue with another person about what each of you believes, your religious and spiritual life is deepened and enriched.
- ✧ ... it is all too evident that our divisions can cause serious harm and that greater understanding helps heal our wounds.

What does "fostering unity" actually mean?

- ✧ It does *not* mean trying to persuade everyone to alter their beliefs so that no differences exist. It is *not* an effort to use compromise to create a "one-size-fits-all" form of Christianity. Unity does *not* require uniformity.
- ✧ Instead the goal is to find, identify, and embrace the common ground that already exists, and **also** to seek ways to acknowledge and accept those areas where division is present. "Fostering unity" means resisting the tendency to notice only points of differences and conflict. It means taking concrete steps towards a greater awareness of our commonly held beliefs and practices.

How is the goal of fostering unity achieved?

- ✧ Dialogue helps us foster unity. In dialogue we make mutual efforts to learn more about the beliefs of each other.

Why does dialogue work?

- ✧ **One of the reasons that we benefit from dialogue is that none of us can know everything.** We can always learn more. For example, people participate in Bible Study groups year after year, because new facets of meaning keep appearing in Scripture. Each Christmas there is a possibility that you will gain some new insight into the Christmas story. We can learn from each other.
- ✧ **Dialogue can make us aware of similarities.** If you are engaged in a dialogue with someone, you have common ground by the very fact of your mutual participation in the exploration. Over and over again, people who dialogue discover that they have more in common than they thought they would.
- ✧ **Dialogue also works because it corrects our misunderstandings.** Often we have inaccurate perceptions of others, and we can never correct these perceptions unless we engage "others." When we change our perceptions, we change our relationships, and this can bring a deepening conversion.

- ✧ **Dialogue is a form of spiritual discipline; through practicing dialogue, our self-control and patience are strengthened.** People frequently learn that there are more differences than they had expected in the ways in which various Christian groups speak about and celebrate the love of Christ. These differences can be challenging, but they can also be exciting and can bring people together.
- ✧ **The differences can deepen our own spiritual and religious lives.** Learning from others can lead to new ways of praying and new ways of viewing the world. Knowing more of the faith heritage of other Christians deepens and enriches their own faith life in ways they could never have anticipated.
- ✧ Additionally, many religious figures have touched the lives of people far beyond their respective groups: such as St. Francis of Assisi, St. Nicholas, and Martin Luther King, Jr. If we limit our exposure to our own church tradition, or worse yet, to a specific segment within our community, we create spiritual poverty and atrophy.

Is the ecumenical movement concerned only with the pursuit of dialogue?

- ✧ No! Dialogue can be a beginning, but if all we do is talk, then we fall short of the goal. The ideas we discover need to be put into action and need to have an impact on our lives. If dialogue produces understanding, insight and other gifts for our lives, then we need to harvest these fruits by finding ways to make Christian unity real in our lives.

Weekly Guidelines for Good Dialogue

Talking about our most important religious beliefs can be really difficult.

Faith Forum is about yearning for the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," (Eph 4:3). We will learn to love each other even when we fundamentally disagree, but it will be difficult.

Keeping the following goals in mind will help:

Our Goals are:

- ♦ To love each other
- ♦ To increase understanding of each other's faith

Our Goals are NOT to:

- ♦ convert others
- ♦ figure out who is right and who is wrong

Everyone is expected to listen and to help protect the process from debate/conflict.

Some Challenges to dialogue are:

- ♦ We believe different things.
- ♦ We talk about what we believe in different ways.
 - For example, there is no way to compare group 1's formal written statements (creeds) with those of group 2, if group 2 does not use written documents.
- ♦ Agreement one week followed a week in which we do not agree can lead to frustration.
- ♦ One word may mean different things for different people.

Three Basic Responses We might have in Conversation:

1. *I hear you and I'm with you.*

You understand what the other person is saying about their belief and you **agree** with it. This is easy and comfortable.

2. *I hear you, but I'm not with you.*

You understand the point being made, but you **disagree** with it. This can be uncomfortable, but at least you heard/understood each other.

3. *I don't hear you. I can't get it.*

You don't understand what the other person is saying. This aspect of their faith is so outside your experience (and maybe your language) that you can't even imagine it. This can be disturbing, because it creates a feeling of alienation that is deeper than disagreement. There is no easy solution, but do not give up hope. There is always the chance that understanding will come from more conversation.



We all have something to offer, and when we seek to learn from each other, we all are enriched. In this way we move a little closer to being a Church (a Body of Christ) here on earth that is *one*, as it is in heaven.