

**THE FAITH FORUM PROGRAM**  
**for**  
**Local Ecumenical Dialogue**

*That All May Be One*

Bruce Lilly  
Ann K. Riggs

Edited, revised, and formatted by Juliana M. Mecera

For the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in  
the United States of America

2007

# Table of Contents

<b>PART I: An Introduction to the Faith Forum Program – Christians Seeking Unity in Christ</b>	
Welcome to Faith Forum!.....	1
A Movement Toward Unity In Christ .....	2
The Goal of Faith Forum.....	3
Frequently Asked Questions about Christian Unity and Faith Forum.....	4
A Brief History of Faith and Order.....	7
<b>PART II: How to Structure Your Faith Forum Program</b>	
Initial Considerations.....	8
The Faith Forum Segments	
Segment One: Exploring the Ancient Church Creeds and the Basic Struggles of Ecumenical Dialogue.....	11
Segment Two: Confronting the Contemporary and Timeless Issues of Poverty and Racism.....	13
Segment Three: Examining the Relationship between American Christianity and Ancient Christian Faith.....	15
<b>PART III: Other Topics, Challenges of Dialogue, and Beyond Dialogue</b>	
Other Topics You Might Want to Explore.....	17
The Challenges of Dialogue.....	20
Moving Beyond Dialogue.....	22

## PART I: An Introduction to the Faith Forum Program – *Christians Seeking Unity in Christ*

### Welcome to Faith Forum!

*You are to be commended for looking into Faith Forum—a new way to engage your Christian neighbors!*

*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,” (RSV). Many of these Christians are involved in the ecumenical movement. The ecumenical movement that has visible 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.*

- ✧ What follows is an explanation of the Faith Forum Program. Faith Forum was created by Christians who are doing ecumenical work. There are lots of different kinds of ecumenical work; Faith Forum’s focus is ecumenical dialogue. The authors hope that Faith Forum will encourage and help more Christians to talk with their local Christian neighbors about their different beliefs and practices.
- ✧ Part I explains the ideas behind the Faith Forum Program; the basics about ecumenism; Faith Forum’s goals; and answers questions about Christian unity.
- ✧ Part II suggests and introduces topics that Christians could dialogue about.
- ✧ Finally, Part III acknowledges that dialogue is challenging; provides tips for dialogue; recommends other possible discussion ideas; and hints at the many possibilities that open up as a result of dialoging with fellow Christians.

**Leader’s Tip:** This booklet, *The Faith Forum Program for Local Ecumenical Dialogue*, is based on theory and provides you—as the leader of your local group—1) important background information about Christian dialogue and 2) an overarching framework of how this program might work. **Read this along with *A Step-by-Step Planning Guide for Leaders and Facilitators of Faith Forum Groups* for specifics.** You also might want to refer to *The Participants Handbook to Local Ecumenical Dialogue* for an abbreviated version of the philosophy behind Faith Forum.

## A Movement Toward Unity In Christ

- ✧ We stand at the dawn of the third millennium of Christian history. From this momentous vantage point, we can survey the past, assess the present, and envision the future. As people who profess a faith in the Gospel of Jesus, how have we succeeded? How have we failed? Where do we stand today? And how should we move forward?
- ✧ There are no conclusive answers to these questions. Individual perspectives and points of focus will affect our conclusions. This is particularly true for the issue of Christian unity. Do we live in a time of extreme polarization within the Body of Christ, or are signs cropping up in every corner of a movement toward unity in Jesus Christ? Given that evidence can be brought forward to support either side of this debate, the truth must be a blend of the two. Overall, we must conclude that we live in a time of great change, great danger, and great opportunity.
- ✧ Division has always come more easily than unity, and there are many fresh and fervent examples of rifts and schisms that plague us at this very moment. Yet, 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 not immune to this development. Within the Body of Christ, walls of misunderstanding, walls of prejudice, and walls of conflict that are centuries old are weakening.
- ✧ How Jews and Gentiles—very different peoples—can fellowship together (I Cor 8) remains a challenge today, but Scripture is severe when it comes to divisions and factions (I Cor 11:17-22). St. Paul's answer to the Corinthians is one that surely inspires Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who are seeking unity in Jesus Christ: 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, NRSV). As Christians we are called to fellowship in love with each other. The future will be built through engaging in collaboration, not by clinging to outmoded conceptions of isolation.
- ✧ The walls themselves are losing their prominence, because fewer and fewer people find comfort within them. The barriers are used less and less as the most important means by which an individual defines his or her Christian identity. 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 calls to unity and peacemaking. The result is greater understanding both of others and of ourselves, a deeper awareness of what we all hold in common, and an expanded acceptance of what divides us—in other words, a more healed and unified Body of Christ. Make no mistake about it, there is today a movement toward greater unity and this movement is alive and growing.

## The Goal of Faith Forum

- ✧ The Faith Forum program works within this movement 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, NRSV).
- ✧ The targeted audience is everyone. Ecumenical dialogue takes place among church leaders and theologians in many formats, but there are not enough structures in place that provide the framework and the resources to facilitate the same encounters among everyone else. Faith Forum fills that gap.
- ✧ The people who choose to participate must be those who take their religious and spiritual lives seriously because 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.

## Frequently Asked Questions about Christian Unity and Faith Forum

### *To begin with, why pursue unity? Why is this effort important?*

- ✧ Because on the night before his death, Jesus prayed that all who believe in him might be one (John 17:21). Because Scripture teaches that there is one body of which Christ is the head (Eph 4:4,15-16). Because when you engage in dialogue with another person about what each of you believes, your religious and spiritual life is deepened and enriched. Because it is all too evident that our divisions can cause serious harm and that greater understanding helps heal our wounds.
  
- ✧ This means that when we answer the Scriptural call for unity—Jesus Christ in Jn 17:21 and St. Paul in 1 Cor 8 and 11:17-22—we are engaged on two levels: 1) a level that affects the spiritual lives we develop internally and 2) a level that affects our involvement in the world.
  - **Personal Dimension:** Any time you faithfully enter into ecumenical dialogue with another person, you walk away enriched. The encounter opens up new questions, and you discover gaps in your own understanding. You learn to see things in new ways. You see yourself through someone else's eyes, and the experience broadens and deepens your self-awareness and understanding. Many individuals find that their faith is strengthened and nurtured by the exchange of ideas with people who have different ways of talking about living their Christian faith. That exchange can be profound and moving.
  
  - **Involvement in the World:** A movement toward unity can have an affect on the community that is every bit as valuable. We live in a culture that suffers from a high degree of polarization around certain issues. The depth of alienation can be severe. Many Christian communities are rife with division and schism, and if we remain largely ignorant of what others believe, we find it easier to view them in a negative light and to dismiss their point of view. Fostering oneness in Christ helps to heal divisions within the Church, and it has a broader impact culturally. A more unified Christian community promotes the work of healing rifts within the larger culture. For example, when there is greater understanding of each other, we are less vulnerable to those who use divisive issues unscrupulously for political or personal gain.
  
- ✧ There are also prominent aspects of the Church's mission within a community and around the world that are too big for small groups to undertake alone. A bigger community is required. This means that division undercuts the Church's ability to fulfill its mission. We need to find ways to work together. Through efforts to find our common ground and to gain a better understanding and acceptance of those ways in which we truly differ, we make it possible to live out our faith in the world more powerfully. It turns out that seeking unity is a vital way to bear witness to Christ's love in the world

### ***What does "fostering unity" actually mean?***

- ✧ This is a vital question. It may be best to start with what "fostering unity" does not 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. The goal is *not* to dilute or abbreviate the message of the gospels.
- ✧ 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. All too often, the beliefs we hold in common are lost from sight because our attention is entirely captivated by our differences. "Fostering unity" means making a conscious effort to resist this human tendency to notice only points of contention 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?***

- ✧ The basic tool for achieving this goal is dialogue. The concrete steps that we can take are those of engaging in mutual efforts to learn more about the beliefs of each other. The structure of the Faith Forum program and the challenges of engaging in dialogue are discussed in more detail below.

### ***Why does dialogue work?***

- ✧ One of the reasons that we benefit from dialogue is that none of us can know everything. We always can 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 also gain from diversity. If we were all the same, how would we ever learn anything new? Other people sometimes have a better grip on some aspect of the truth than we do. Truth cannot be contained within walls or limited to our familiar attempts to express it. Many religious figures have touched the lives of people far beyond their respective groups. St. Francis of Assisi was Catholic, but many Protestants and Orthodox revere his message and the example of his life. Although Saint Nicholas was a Greek Orthodox bishop, his impact on Christians worldwide is beyond dispute. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered speeches that were actually sermons, and while he was a Baptist pastor, his ideas have dramatically inspired people of all faiths. If we limit our exposure to our own church tradition, or worse yet, to a specific segment within our community, are we not creating spiritual poverty and atrophy?
- ✧ If you are engaged in a dialogue with someone, the two of you already have common ground by the very fact of your mutual participation in the exploration. One experience that is repeated over and over again when people engage in dialogue is that they discover that they have more in common than they anticipated. Our perceptions of others are often inaccurate, but these inaccuracies are never corrected without engagement. When

we change our perceptions, we change our relationships, and this can bring a deepening conversion. Dialogue is a form of spiritual discipline, and through its practice, our self-control and patience are strengthened.

- ✧ Of course, people who participate in ecumenical dialogue also encounter differences. In particular, people frequently learn that there are more differences than they had expected in how various Christian groups speak about and celebrate the love of Christ and the new life of faith. When this happens, many people find it to be thrilling, not alienating, because their spiritual and religious life is expanded by the encounter. 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.

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

- ✧ No! The desire to dialogue with each other comes from our common belief in the centrality of Christ, and our dialogue with those who are different from us should lead to a strengthening of our belief in Christ and a renewed vigor in our witness to Him.
- ✧ Additionally, if all we do is talk, then we fall short of the goal. The ideas we discover need to have an impact on our lives. Thought should be married to action. A focus on one without the other produces either ideas that change nothing or acts that are superficial. Dialogue is an entrance, an opportunity, a beginning. In the end, it is our actions that reveal what truly guides our spirit. If dialogue brings new avenues of understanding and a new depth of acceptance, then we need to harvest these fruits by finding ways to make greater Christian unity real in our lives.
- ✧ Ultimately, efforts to foster unity must operate on many different levels. They must take place on the institutional, the theoretical, and the personal levels, and they must include the work of moving beyond dialogue. The new insights gained through encounters with others must translate into concrete changes in the ways we live out our 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.



## A Brief History of Faith & Order

Faith Forum is a product of the Faith & Order Commission, one of the five commissions of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC). Although the commission is housed in the NCC, Faith & Order is an institution with its own identity and its own tasks. It is a movement that works within and extends beyond the councils of churches on the local, regional, national, and global levels.

As a movement, Faith & Order began in the early part of the twentieth century. Missionaries and students who were engaged in practical ministries were the pioneers of a push for Christians to work more collaboratively in witnessing the Gospel to the world. One motto from that era reflects the eagerness of that time: "doctrine divides and service unites." It soon became clear however that the details of what we believe affect everything we try to do together. Out of this realization came the idea to convene a world conference which would focus on the matters of "faith" and "order."

"Faith" (or "doctrine") pertains to the elemental aspects of Christian creed and belief. Describing your faith is describing those ideas that hold a central place in your conception of being a Christian.

"Order" (or "polity") pertains to the practical application of beliefs in the life of a church and its members." Some of the areas that are most commonly brought into focus when discussing "order" are the spiritual and sacramental life, as well as mission and ministry.

Although there is a tendency to rely on the simple characterization of "faith" as belief and "order" as action, this is a mistake, because beliefs and actions do not exist as entirely separate realms. For many churches, belief includes specific ideas about the order of church life. Thus the distinction between faith and order is not absolute, but it is still valuable for ecumenical dialogue. From the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, it has been clearly evident that Christians could find more common ground in their various beliefs about Jesus than in their ideas about the way the Christian church should live. By using faith and order as focal points for encounters, Christians can learn a great deal about each other.

There are many milestones in the worldwide development of the Faith and Order movement. One of the most relevant in the United States is the North American Conference on Faith and Order that was held in Oberlin, Ohio in 1957. The commission was established at that time to ensure that work toward unity would be ongoing, and not happen only periodically when conferences could be held. The Oberlin 2007 conference celebrated fifty years of the Faith and Order Commission in this country.

Throughout its history, Faith and Order has supported ecumenical dialogue. For several generations now, people within this movement have sought to resolve the differences that divide Christian churches. Many milestones have been reached, and many more lie ahead.

## PART II: How to Structure Your Faith Forum Program

In order for any program to succeed, the structure must match the needs of the participants. However, no Faith Forum dialogue group will be the same and the needs of participants will be diverse, thus Faith Forum leaves the creation of the structure up to you.

An example of a meeting is: starting with fellowship, moving to a short 10-minute recap of the reading material by one participant and/or leader, continuing with discussion in small groups of 4-6 people for an hour, and concluding by allowing one person from each group to share the main points of their discussion with the group at-large. However, leaders should feel free to choose a format that best fits their particular group's needs.

The considerations described below and the 3 Faith Forum Segments, which include topics and books to discuss (pg. 12) should be viewed as a guides, not as a rigid format that cannot be altered. Further guidance can be sought through prayer, your pastor/priest/congregational leader, or an educational professional so your program best fits the needs of those individuals who are taking part in it.

### Initial Considerations

**Leader's Tip:** The following paragraphs will cover only the broad topics that are part of putting together a local Faith Forum group. The booklet, *Step-by-Step Planning Guide for Leaders and Facilitators of Faith Forum Groups*, gives you the specifics—including a detailed list of tasks for the steering committee; tips for accomplishing these tasks; weekly topic ideas; detailed sample weekly agendas; and even suggestion discussion questions. The *Step-by-Step Planning Guide* is a great resource for you!

#### ***Finding participants***

✧ The aim of Faith Forum is to reach across divisions, so the ideal group would be composed of people from several different Christian communities, with an additional goal of diversity in terms of gender, race, age, and cultural background. This will be easy to achieve in some locations and almost impossible in others. Yet, even in communities that do not have a wide spectrum of believers, there are always those whose faith differs significantly from your own. These are the people whom you should seek for dialogue.

#### ***Using a steering committee***

✧ It may be helpful to create a steering committee, composed of one member from each congregation that is participating. The steering committee could meet on the off weeks or just prior to each meeting. The point of these meetings would be to discuss the development of the program, the success of the structure, and the plans for future meetings.

- ✧ Among other tasks and responsibilities, the jobs of the steering committee are:
  - to choose a series topic based on the suggestions in this booklet and in the booklet *A Step-by-Step Planning Guide for Leaders and Facilitators of Faith Forum Groups*
  - to choose the specific sub-topic for each meeting
  - to decide the number of times (and frequency) that your Faith Forum group will meet for dialogue
  - to schedule the meetings
  - to select chapters from the books to be read prior to the meetings, based upon participants' abilities and time
  - to introduce participants to guidelines for dialogue (see pg. 20 "Challenges of Dialogue")
  - to outline a specific structure to follow at the meetings

### ***Scheduling meetings***

- ✧ How often your meetings are scheduled will depend in part on such practical matters as how closely the participants live to one another and how many other demands they may have on their time and attention. If the participants all live in the same small town you may be able to meet twice each month, following the schedule of the school year. If the participants will be drawn from across your state, meeting three or four times a year may be more successful for your group.
- ✧ It will be important to plan your schedule so that you can keep a sense of momentum and continuity without turning your meeting time together into an unpleasant burden. A general rule of thumb, however, is to limit a Faith Forum dialogue "series" to a 6-8 week time frame with 6-8 meetings, no longer than 2 hours each. Faith Forum is intended to be stimulating, enriching, and even fun.

### ***Conducting meetings***

- ✧ The Faith Forum program has three segments, each designed around themes and books chosen for this purpose. There are also other books that can be brought into the process, depending upon the needs and interests of each group. (These segments and the literature are described below, beginning on pg. 12.) Even though reading material forms the foundation for dialogue, there are many other ways to bring forth important ideas for discussion. Groups can watch videos together that address religious themes, share music, or utilize other forms of art.
- ✧ It is not intended that you should cover one book in one meeting or even that you move from segment to segment in one Faith Forum dialogue series. For example, you might begin a Faith Forum program; plan 6 meetings; and work through the material covered in only half of one of the suggested books.
- ✧ Each meeting can begin and end with spoken or silent prayer.

### ***Spending time together outside of meetings***

- ✧ Dialogue is wonderful, but there is no need to limit contact to meetings and talk. Pursuing mission work together can be an excellent way to build bridges. For example, if people from two different churches are serving meals at the local homeless shelter or soup kitchen on separate evenings, why not coordinate activities to do this work together on the same evenings? Another great way to learn more and gain greater understanding is to go to the recreational activities of other churches, such as fish fry's, parish fairs, covered-dish suppers, or Christmas concerts. One additional possibility is for the group to have recreational outings of its own, such as a trip to a baseball game or a picnic in the park.

## The Faith Forum Segments

Faith Forum is divided into 3 basic segments, each with its own topic and reading materials, which are to be used as the foundation for each Faith Forum series. Thus, the basic idea is that participants will read a selected chapter from a book before coming to the Faith Forum meeting. This will help focus and inform discussion. Faith Forum participants should not feel the need to read an entire book at before each meeting. For example, the steering committee could choose a single chapter to cover at one meeting. For some this will be too much and for others to little, so this decision will vary from group to group, keeping practical considerations in mind.

The segment topics and their corresponding reading materials for dialogue are outlined below. For each segment, an explanation of the topic and summaries of the books are provided, along with questions that can be used to direct reading and discussion.

**Leader's Tip:** The following general explanations of the 3 segments of Faith Forum will give you an idea of the types and variety of issues that you can talk about in your local Faith Forum group. However, refer to your trusty *Step-by-Step Planning Guide for Leaders and Facilitators of Faith Forum Groups* for specific ideas about how to break up these books and topics into manageable reading sections and narrower topics for discussion. The *Step-by-Step Planning Guide* has suggested series topics for a 6-8 week Faith Forum group; suggested weekly sub-topics; charts with possible weekly reading assignments; and discussion questions. The *Step-by-Step Planning Guide* will help you get a concrete idea of how Faith Forum could work for you and will help you plan the details!

### **Segment One: Exploring the Ancient Church Creeds and the Basic Struggles of Ecumenical Dialogue**

Two books are used for this segment:

- ✧ *Confessing One Faith: The Origins, Meaning, and Use of the Nicene Creed—Grounds for a Common Witness—A Guide for Ecumenical Study*—from the Commission on Faith and Order, NCCCUSA.
- ✧ *Twelve Tales Untold: A Study Guide for Ecumenical Reception*—edited by John T. Ford and Darlis J. Swan.

One of the benefits of using the Faith Forum program is that it provides a structure for ecumenical dialogue. A good structure can be critical for facilitating meaningful and sustained engagement. Although the first requirement for successful encounters is the people themselves, good intentions alone rarely suffice. Discussing vital issues of religious faith with others who do not share every element of your faith can be an extremely difficult challenge. This is true even when everyone comes to the meetings with an eagerness not only to share and be understood, but also to listen and understand.

For this reason, Segment One of the Faith Forum program uses two books that are especially suited to getting started with ecumenical dialogue. The first of these, *Confessing One Faith*, is a booklet of around seventy pages that examines the history and meaning of the Nicene Creed. It was designed as a short study guide precisely for the purpose of enabling dialogue. Starting with a focus on the Nicene Creed is a good way to begin the entire program. The use of creeds and the content of creeds stimulate thinking and provide good avenues for ecumenical dialogue. Part of the point is to study not only the content of the creed, but also the fact that some churches use creeds to present what they believe and others do not.

The first point to consider with respect to creeds is their very presence within religious communities:

- ✧ Why have a creed?
- ✧ What does a creed mean to the community and to the individual?

A discussion of creeds directs our attention to Christian history. Some churches stress on-going continuity and connection with the past, and members of these churches find meaning in the idea that they are worshiping in continuity with Christians of earlier times. For other churches, a desire to be faithful to the worship life of the earliest Christians means a break with the worship forms and faith-life of some of the generations that come between. For yet other churches, a connection with past holds little interest.

- ✧ What does it mean to be in communion with those Christians who came before us?
- ✧ Are these approaches mutually exclusive?
- ✧ Is there something valuable to be learned by exploring the perspective of each group?

These questions need to be addressed before there can be a fruitful discussion of the specific aspects of a particular creed.

Using the Nicene Creed as a focal point has particular significance given that one of its historical aims has been to safeguard sound belief.

- ✧ Does it fulfill this mission?
- ✧ If so, does the creed offer a starting place for establishing some essential beliefs that are held by all?
- ✧ Can it be, as the book is subtitled, “grounds for a common witness”? Or is it just one more element on which Christian communities disagree?

The second book, *Twelve Tales Untold*, has twelve case studies that explore how ecumenism can be “received” or incorporated into the faith and life of diverse Christians. The focus is on three main issues: Baptism, the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper, and ministry. The case studies provide stories that illustrate how certain issues can be divisive among Christians. This approach is a powerful way to bring theory and practice together. The book looks at twelve cases, four each that focus on Baptism, the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper, and ministry. Each case is followed by 1) a list of discussion questions, 2) additional commentary, and 3) possible solutions to the dilemma in the story.

Reading these case studies will bring other similar stories to mind for most Faith Forum participants. Discussing matters that are this “close to home” can be both exciting and difficult. There is a great opportunity for an expanded awareness of ourselves and others, but we can also feel pushed to the limits of our abilities to listen and understand.

*Twelve Tales Untold* fits perfectly into the Faith Forum program by seeking to promote ecumenical “reception.” There is a long history of ecumenical pursuits by church officials which result in reports and documents. Efforts at these high levels have been instrumental in moving ecumenism forward, but ultimately there has to be involvement at the local level. Otherwise, the achievements are nothing more than words on paper. Reception is the process of incorporating the results of ecumenical dialogue into the faith and life of the church.

At the end of the book there are three essays that examine various aspects of reception. These essays are an excellent source of material for those who are interested in the theology, history, and challenges of making ecumenism real at the regional and local levels in America.

Participating in Faith Forum is one way of promoting reception. As the results of ecumenical encounters are received locally, Christian communities are enriched, and you are playing a vital role in this work.

## **Segment Two: Confronting the Contemporary and Timeless Issues of Poverty and Racism**

Two books are used for this segment:

- ✧ *Love for the Poor: God’s Love for the Poor and the Church’s Witness to it*—Shaun Casey, et al.
- ✧ *Ending Racism in the Church*—edited by Susan E. Davies and Sister Paul Teresa Hennessee, S.A.

Poverty is an issue that confronts all Christians, so it is fertile ground for exploring the ways different churches respond. Racism is also a valuable topic to study for many reasons. It is a central component of our cultural heritage and the challenges of overcoming racial division offer lessons that can be used to overcome other divisions among Christians. This second segment will allow your Faith Forum group to explore both issues in dialogue.

Poverty is everywhere. The degree of poverty certainly varies from place to place, but all Christians are faced with the issue of responding to the reality that many people suffer from a lack of the basic necessities of life. There are those among us who do not have adequate shelter, enough to eat, decent clothing, or the most fundamental aspects of health care.

Most churches recognize the ample evidence from scripture that Jesus Christ cared for the poor. Christians may debate the best ways to alleviate the suffering that comes from poverty, but there is general consensus that the less fortunate deserve our help. In fact, one of the most commonly accepted indications of genuine Christian faith is concrete practices that

demonstrate love for the poor. Given that poverty is an issue that confronts all Christians, it is fertile ground for exploring the ways different churches respond.

The Faith Forum program is built around the benefits that can come from engaging in dialogue with others throughout the Body of Christ. Of course, living out the Christian faith requires more than words. Within Faith Forum, the Christian response to poverty is an excellent topic for dialogue, but it is more than that because it is also one of the most fundamental ways for churches to find common ground in action, not just words. The booklet used here is *Love for the Poor: God's Love for the Poor and the Church's Witness to It*. Even though this text was created within the context of other ecumenical documents that have addressed the same issue, for the purposes of Faith Forum, it can stand alone.

One of the issues that frequently arises when poverty is examined in depth is racism, which is the second topic for this segment. Racism is a valuable topic for dialogue within Faith Forum for many reasons. It is a central component of our cultural heritage in the U.S., and the challenges of overcoming racial division offer lessons that can be used to overcome other divisions among Christians.

Racism is based on the idea that we are different, but it does not stop with simply observing the points of contrast. For the racist, conclusions are drawn concerning superiority and inferiority. Think about our differences within the Church. Does the urge to assert superiority of one doctrine over another sound familiar? Racial division presents issues that differ from those concerning division within the Body of Christ, but there is also some overlap. What should we conclude from the fact that one of the most segregated institutions within our society is the Church?

At the same time, we must guard against simplistic answers to a complex issue. Segregation can be a choice and it can serve a positive purpose. For example, minority communities may find it valuable to build and maintain institutions of their own, separated in some ways from the broader culture. These institutions can be a place where a familiar language is spoken and cultural traditions are protected and preserved. What does this mean about efforts to make church congregations more diverse and more reflective of the general population? When is separated Christian life a gift and when does it foster greater alienation and discrimination?

*Ending Racism in the Church* provides a stimulating assortment of perspectives on many facets of this topic. The book does not need to be read from beginning to end in order to be a valuable resource. Faith Forum participants may find it most beneficial to look through the entire book and settle on certain sections for study and discussion.

There are a bounty of intriguing questions that can arise, such as:

- ✧ What are the connections between racial division and denominational division? Does Christian disunity support racism? Or vice versa?
- ✧ How do ideas about race affect theological ideas and church practice? What do Baptism and the Eucharist or Lord's Supper mean concerning racial division?



- ✧ What role should the church play in fighting racism?
- ✧ Should we accept that many church congregations will always be composed of only one race?

We can learn a great deal about each other by sharing our thoughts about the Church's response to poverty and racism. We can also learn a great deal about ourselves, and that is part of the goal of Faith Forum.

### **Segment Three: *Examining the Relationship between American Christianity and Ancient Christian Faith***

One book is used for this segment:

- ✧ *Ancient Faith and American-Born Churches: Dialogues between Christian Traditions*—edited by Ted A. Campbell, Ann K. Riggs, and Gilbert W. Stafford

The dialogues in this book provide a blueprint for ecumenical engagement based upon the development of Christianity in America, which has created many new ideas and divergent views.

The following questions only hint at the potential issues that spring forth from this informative book:

- ✧ What happened to Christianity when it became rooted in American soil?
- ✧ Do American-born churches carry deep connections to earlier Christian traditions, or do the new ways of being Christian stand alone and independent?
- ✧ What do the new and the old have to learn from each other?

Eight topics are examined, including the power of holiness to bring Christians together, the role of creeds and confessions, the authority and function of Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church. In each case representatives of two or three different church traditions have written essays about the issue at hand. Then each person also has submitted a response to the others. The result is an extraordinary collection of conversations about those ideas, beliefs, and practices that are held in common, as well as those that remain separate and distinct within each tradition.

The book's structure makes it perfectly suited for the work of Faith Forum. These ecumenical dialogues are valuable both for the substance of the ideas and for the model of the interaction. In most cases, the people involved respond to each other within the context of the an ecumenical methodology presented in an essay by John T. Ford, CSC, near the beginning of the book.

Ford begins his essay by saying, "Participating in ecumenical dialogue is often similar to learning a new language." He then goes on to suggest three fundamental responses that occur when we listen to the ideas of someone from a different tradition. These are resonance, dissonance, and non-sonance. In the following section, "Challenges of Dialogue," (pp. 21-22)

these three ideas are presented in a different form as tools for navigating some of the challenges of your own dialogues. Resonance is represented as *I hear you and I'm with you*; dissonance is represented as *I hear you, but I'm not with you*; and non-sonance is represented as *I don't get; I can't hear you*.

Every group of people who engage in ecumenical dialogue creates a unique path. This book shows how some people have come together to discuss vital church issues and what they have learned from their encounters. Faith Forum seeks to provide this opportunity to people everywhere. This book could have been used as the initial text for Segment One of Faith Forum, but doing so may have inhibited the natural development of dialogue within each group. Individuals may have seen the dialogue format within this book as the only way to pursue discussions, when it should be regarded as simply one of many ways.

At this stage in Faith Forum, groups will have established patterns and habits of interaction which can be enriched and influenced by the models presented in this book. Given that there are eight separate topics, groups may want to concentrate on some more than others. At the same time, there is something valuable to be gained from each one. This is a resource that can be used and reused many times.

**Leader's Tip:** Participants could read the above introductions before they start a new Faith Forum series. You, as leader, would separate the introductions and hand out the introduction that corresponds to the book your group will be beginning.

## PART III: Other Topics, Challenges of Dialogue, and Beyond Dialogue

### Other Topics You Might Want to Explore

*In addition to the three segments, there are other issues which you can examine in depth by using additional texts. Participants can pick and choose from the list below.*

#### **The Vision of Ecumenism**

Book suggestions:

- ✧ *The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has Been Impoverished by Its Friends* by NCC General Secretary, Michael Kinnamon
- ✧ *Councils of Churches and the Ecumenical Vision*, by Diane Kessler & Michael Kinnamon

In the first book, Michael Kinnamon calls on the churches to own the ecumenical movement and to “face the movement’s problems head-on,” while also positively clarifying the ecumenical vision. His appendices provide both helpful background information for those new to the ecumenical movement and include the movement’s most important documents. The second book is an excellent, 80-page introduction to the ecumenical movement, including discussion of ecumenism’s vision, theology, spirituality, physical structures, and membership.

#### **Religious Pluralism**

Book suggestion:

- ✧ *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources for Responses to Religious Pluralism*, edited by S. Mark Heim

Religious pluralism is an inescapable characteristic of Christianity in America, so it is an excellent topic for study. This book is a solid reference for ecumenical efforts.

#### **The Apostolic Tradition**

Book suggestions:

- ✧ *Apostolic Faith in America*, edited by Thaddeus D. Horgan
- ✧ *Black Witness to the Apostolic Faith*, edited by David T. Shannon and Gayraud S. Wilmore
- ✧ *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Affirmation of the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century*, edited by S. Mark Heim

Many people have a deep interest in the lineage that connects our church today with the first apostles. These three books examine aspects of this topic in depth. Looking at the early Church can be a powerful way to find new perspectives on ecumenism today. The study of the Apostolic tradition contained in these volumes provides insight into issues that confront churches today, such as the effort to integrate faith and practice. For many, there are ways that the concerns and experience of our age have a special connection to the concerns and experiences of the earliest generations of Christians. Faith Forum participants should consider how these connections can be best used as a resource for faith and life in all of our churches.

## **The Challenge of Church History**

Book suggestion:

- ✧ *Telling the Churches' Stories: Ecumenical Perspectives on Writing Christian History*, edited by Timothy J. Wengert and Charles W. Brockwell, Jr.

History is always a vital topic and one that engenders intense debate. The way history is written affects matters of unity and division, and for this reason, it is a ripe topic for ecumenical discussion.

## **Divisions between East and West**

Book suggestion:

- ✧ *Christ in East and West*, edited by Paul R. Fries and Tiran Nersoyan

This book looks at the division within Christianity between East and West that dates back many centuries. A close look at the collective beliefs and practices of both Western Christians and Eastern Christians shows that there are important differences as well as significant commonalities. Christians from both sides of this divide can learn more about themselves by learning more about the other.

## **The Holy Spirit**

Book suggestions:

- ✧ *The Church in the Movement of the Spirit*, edited by William R. Barr and Rena M. Yocom
- ✧ *Spirit of Truth: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Holy Spirit*, edited by S. Mark Heim and Theodore Stylianopoulos

The foreword to *The Church in the Movement of the Spirit* has an intriguing thought: "Spirit is understood as 'The One in whose power the church is one.'" There is tremendous potential for constructive dialogue around the ideas put forward in this book.

## **The Pursuit of Peace**

Book suggestions:

- ✧ *The Church's Peace Witness*, edited by Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich
- ✧ *The Fragmentation of the Church and Its Unity in Peacemaking*, edited by Jeffrey Gros and John D. Rempel

The reality of war forces Christians to evaluate and define our beliefs in Jesus, the "Prince of Peace." How do our ideas about peace unite or divide us? Both of these books have a wealth of material to explore on this topic.

## **Women within the Church**

Book suggestion:

- ✧ *Women and Church: The Challenge of Ecumenical Solidarity in an Age of Alienation*, edited by Melanie A. May

Painful schisms have emerged around differing views about the place of women within the church. These matters cannot be avoided if we seek to find unity, and this book is a good resource for looking further into the issues that arise.

## **AIDS**

Book suggestion:

✧ *The Church with AIDS: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis*, edited by Letty M. Russell

The AIDS crisis presents us with many challenges, and in doing so it can also reveal divisions within the Church. The stories presented in this book bring the crisis home and provide many good starting points for deeper engagement.

**Also Check Out the Faith & Order Website**

The website of the Faith & Order Commission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA is: <http://www.nccusa.org/faithandorder/about.html>.

## The Challenges of Dialogue

Engaging in dialogue about your most important religious beliefs can be extremely difficult. This is good reason to follow a structure and to use the books suggested as it is easy to get derailed.

The structure is designed to facilitate constructive dialogue and avoid competitive arguments. Conversations that begin as sincere efforts to expand understanding can drift into passionate efforts to convert. You may be convinced that you are showing compassion when you attempt to enlighten someone else about the ways in which his or her faith is in error, but Faith Forum is not about conversion to another denomination or deciding who is right and who is wrong. This program is much more about personal conversion of the heart and mind: learning to love when you fundamentally disagree with the person sitting across from you. Faith Forum is about yearning for the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” (Eph 4:3).

The more central or vital the idea being discussed, the more difficult it is to maintain a composed dialogue. In many cases, simply being present and listening to others is an invaluable contribution to the overall goal. In the end, everyone must be willing to speak, to listen, and to help protect the process from veering away from understanding and toward conflict.

One hurdle with engagement is that differences exist not only in belief, but also in the very way that belief is defined within groups. For example, there is no way to compare one group’s formal written statements with those of another group, if the second group does not have a tradition of creating such documents and instead relies on oral tradition to maintain the boundaries of what is shared knowledge of the common faith. Another problem that can arise is that the unexpected discovery of common ground can elevate expectations for subsequent encounters. Then, when areas of division are revealed, the feelings of frustration can be heightened.

Complicating matters further is the fact that the same words can hold different meanings for different people. The differences in meaning may be so subtle that at first it seems that everyone has the same understanding of the term. In other cases it may be clear from the start that a certain word means something different for you for someone else.

A tool for navigating all of these difficulties is to recognize three basic responses that may frequently occur in ecumenical dialogue:

### ✧ *I hear you, and I’m with you.*

The first response is a combination of recognition of the idea and agreement with it. You understand what the other person is saying about their belief and you identify with it. This is the easiest and most comfortable of the three responses.

✧ *I hear you, but I'm not with you.*

The second response is a combination of recognition of the idea and disagreement with it. Here again you understand the point being made, but in this case, you do not identify with it. There is often discomfort with the division that has been exposed, but you do have the connection of understanding what the person is saying.

✧ *I don't hear you. I can't get it.*

The third response is the most trying. In this case, you do not even understand the point being made. You cannot conceive of the idea. You are dumbfounded because you are hearing an aspect of someone else's faith that is outside of your comprehension. This is frequently a disturbing experience because it creates a feeling of alienation that is deeper than the feelings of disagreement. There is no easy way to solve this dilemma, but do not give up hope. There is always the possibility that understanding will come from more engagement.

Faith Forum is structured to facilitate dialogue, but the work of fostering Christian unity does not stop with discussions. For that reason, there is one additional focal point that should be considered as part of the encounters:

✧ *How can we take the experiences that we have gained through dialogue and translate them into practice in our lives?*

This question can be addressed only after the dialogue has matured and people feel that they have reached meaningful new insights which allow for greater understanding and acceptance. When that has occurred, engaging in this question can be both extremely challenging and profoundly enriching. Translating ideas into action is essential for truly moving forward.

Dialogue will always be difficult because we do not all have the same beliefs. As long as humans exist, divisions of some sort will exist because human beings are diverse. While each of us believes that our own church offers all that is necessary for salvation and Christian life, there is always more for each of us personally to learn. Although we may be "the very least of all the saints," grace has been given to us to speak with one another "of the boundless riches of Christ," so that through us "the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known." (Cf. Ephesians 3: 8-10, NRSV) 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.

**Leader's Tip:** See pg. 21 of the *Step-by-Step Planning Guide for Leaders and Facilitators of Faith Forum Groups* or pg. 5 of the *Handbook for Participants* for an easy-to-read outline of the above information that should be shared with all Faith Forum participants.

## Moving Beyond Dialogue

Dialogue is indispensable as we try to follow Christ and seek to build up His Body. Dialogue is the entrance to a path of greater understanding and love of our fellow Christians. The work of discussing our differences and what we share can be both difficult and rewarding. The words of Scripture are not easy to fulfill:

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph 4:15-16, NRSV)

It is our belief in Christ's lordship over one body that impels us to pursue Christian unity, and we can begin with these efforts of dialogue to understand each other. Yet there is a danger that we will stop with the consideration of ideas, that we will not move beyond dialogue to the realization of definite change in our lives. People can engage in dialogue very sincerely and enthusiastically, but if the encounters fail to bring about a change to their commitment in the world, the effort falls short.

Faith Forum is offered as an opportunity and a beginning. It is an opportunity to answer the call of the Gospel by working for greater Christian unity. It is also a beginning because the dialogue that Faith Forum facilitates is the first step of a journey. The work of fostering unity may begin by talking, but it does not end there. The personal experiences and insights gained through your encounters with people from other churches need to be communicated to and shared with people in your church. Think about the relationships that your church has with other churches and how those relationships can be supported, broadened, and enriched. Consult the Faith & Order website and work to build connections with your local ecumenical network.

Your participation in Faith Forum means that you have the chance to witness to others concerning your commitment to unity in Christ, and by so doing, you have an opening for initiating steps within your church to push this movement toward unity forward.