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**Faith Forum:
A Guide for Local Ecumenical Dialogue**

That All May Be One

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the United States of America
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Introduction to the Faith Forum Program

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. **St. Paul's message to the Corinthians in I Cor 8 is one that surely applies to Christians in the 21st century: the Body of Christ, though One, has many members, and as Christians we are called to fellowship in love with all those members.** 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).* The targeted audience is everyone. Ecumenical dialogue takes place among church leaders and theologians in many formats, but

112 there are not enough structures in place that provide the framework and the resources to facilitate
113 the same encounters among everyone else. Faith Forum fills that gap.

114
115 The people who choose to participate must be those who take their religious and spiritual lives
116 seriously, because engaging in the work of moving toward greater unity is difficult. It requires
117 courage, patience, and a willingness to bring a sense of humility to encounters with others. You
118 may feel like you are swimming against the current, both within yourself and within your
119 church's culture. After all, throughout the history of Christianity, division and alienation have
120 come much more easily than healing and understanding.

121
122 For most people, several questions arise when they contemplate the pursuit of Christian unity:

123
124 • *To begin with, why pursue unity? Why is this effort important?*
125 Because on the night before his death, Jesus prayed that all who believe in him might be one
126 (John 17:21). **Because when we place Christ at the center of our lives, unity and love**
127 **proceed.** Because when you engage in dialogue with another person about what each of you
128 believes, your religious and spiritual life is deepened and enriched. Because it is all too evident
129 that our divisions can cause serious harm and that greater understanding helps heal our wounds.

130
131 This means that when we answer the **Scriptural call for unity—Jesus Christ in Jn 17:21 and**
132 **St. Paul in I Cor 8, 11:17-22**—we are engaged on two levels: one that affects the spiritual lives
133 we develop internally and one that affects our involvement in the world. The personal dimension
134 is too easily overlooked, because the overarching goal of Christian unity can get tied up in the
135 high realms of abstract thought. When this happens, the personal component is lost. This is a
136 mistake, because there is a great opportunity at hand. Any time you faithfully enter into
137 ecumenical dialogue with another person, you walk away enriched. The encounter opens up new
138 questions, and you discover gaps in your own understanding. You learn to see things in new
139 ways. You see yourself through someone else's eyes, and the experience broadens and deepens
140 your self-awareness and understanding. Many individuals find that their faith is strengthened
141 and nurtured by the exchange of ideas with people who have different ways of talking about
142 living their Christian faith. That exchange can be profound and moving.

143
144 A movement toward unity can have an affect on the community that is every bit as valuable. We
145 live in a culture that suffers from a high degree of polarization around certain issues. The depth
146 of feeling and alienation can be severe. Many Christian communities are rife with division and
147 schism, and if we remain largely ignorant of what others believe, we find it easier to view them
148 in a negative light and to dismiss their point of view. Fostering **oneness in Christ** helps to heal
149 divisions within the Church, and it has a broader impact culturally. A more unified Christian
150 community promotes the work of healing rifts within the larger culture. For example, when
151 there is greater understanding of each other, we are less vulnerable to those who use divisive
152 issues unscrupulously for political or personal gain.

153
154 There are also prominent aspects of the Church's mission within a community and around the
155 world that are too big for small groups to undertake alone. A bigger community is required.
156 This means that division undercuts the Church's ability to fulfill its mission. We need to find
157 ways to work together. Through efforts to find our common ground and to gain a better

158 understanding and acceptance of those ways in which we truly differ, we make it possible to live
159 out our faith in the world more powerfully. It turns out that seeking unity is a vital way to bear
160 witness to Christ's love in the world

161

162 • *What does "fostering unity" actually mean?*

163 This is a vital question. It may be best to start with what "fostering unity" does not mean. It
164 does *not* mean trying to persuade everyone to alter their beliefs so that no differences exist. It is
165 *not* an effort to use compromise to create a "one-size-fits-all" form of Christianity. Unity does
166 *not* require uniformity. The goal is *not* to dilute or abbreviate the message of the gospels.

167

168 Instead the goal is to find, identify, and embrace the common ground that already exists, and also
169 to seek ways to acknowledge and accept those areas where division is present. All too often, the
170 beliefs we hold in common are lost from sight, because our attention is entirely captivated by our
171 differences. "Fostering unity" means making a conscious effort to resist this human tendency to
172 notice only points of contention and conflict. It means taking concrete steps towards a greater
173 awareness of our commonly held beliefs and practices.

174

175 • *How is the goal of fostering unity achieved?*

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

180

181 • *Why does dialogue work?*

182 One of the reasons that we benefit from dialogue is that none of us can know everything. We
183 always can learn more. People participate in Bible Study groups year after year, because new
184 facets of meaning keep appearing in Scripture. Each Christmas there is a possibility that you
185 will gain some new insight into the Christmas story.

186

187 We also gain from diversity. If we were all the same, how would we ever learn anything new?
188 Other people sometimes have a better grip on some aspect of the truth than we do. Truth cannot
189 be contained within walls or limited to our familiar attempts to express it. Many religious
190 figures have touched the lives of people far beyond their respective groups. St. Francis of Assisi
191 was Catholic, but many Protestants and Orthodox revere his message and the example of his life.
192 Although Saint Nicholas was a Greek Orthodox bishop, his impact on Christians worldwide is
193 beyond dispute. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered speeches that were actually sermons, and
194 while he was a Baptist pastor, his ideas have dramatically inspired people of all faiths. If we
195 limit our exposure to our own church tradition, or worse yet, to a specific segment within our
196 community, are we not creating spiritual poverty and atrophy?

197

198 If you are engaged in a dialogue with someone, you have common ground by the very fact of
199 your mutual participation in the exploration. One experience that is repeated over and over again
200 when people engage in dialogue is that they discover that they have more in common than they
201 anticipated. Our perceptions of others are often inaccurate, but these inaccuracies are never
202 corrected without engagement. When we change our perceptions, we change our relationships,

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

205
206 Of course, people who participate in ecumenical dialogue also encounter differences. In
207 particular, people frequently learn that there are more differences than they had expected in how
208 various Christian groups speak about and celebrate the love of Christ and the new life of faith.
209 When this happens, many people find it to be thrilling, not alienating, because their spiritual and
210 religious life is expanded by the encounter. Learning from others can lead to new ways of
211 praying and new ways of viewing the world. Knowing more of the faith heritage of other
212 Christians deepens and enriches their own faith life in ways they could never have anticipated.

213
214 • *Is the ecumenical movement concerned only with the pursuit of dialogue?*
215 No! **Firstly, the desire to engage each other comes from our common belief in the**
216 **centrality of Christ and our dialogue with those who are different from us should lead to a**
217 **strengthening of our belief in Christ and a renewed vigor in our witness to Him.**
218 Additionally, if all we do is talk, then we fall short of the goal. The ideas we discover need to
219 have an impact on our lives. Thought should be married to action. A focus on one without the
220 other produces either ideas that change nothing or acts that are superficial. Dialogue is an
221 entrance, an opportunity, a beginning. In the end, it is our actions that reveal what truly guides
222 our spirit. If dialogue brings new avenues of understanding and a new depth of acceptance, then
223 we need to harvest these fruits by finding ways to make greater Christian unity real in our lives.

224
225 Ultimately, efforts to foster unity must operate on many different levels. They must take place
226 on the institutional, the theoretical, and the personal levels, and they must include the work of
227 moving beyond dialogue. The new insights gained through encounters with others must translate
228 into concrete changes in the ways we live out our faith. The idea behind the Faith Forum
229 program is to give everyone the opportunity to participate in this vital movement and shape its
230 development. Your input is needed. Unity will never be achieved without your contributions.

231
232
233 **A Brief History of Faith and Order**

234
235 Faith Forum is a product of the Faith and Order Commission, one of the five commissions of the
236 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUSA). Although the commission
237 is housed in the NCCCUSA, Faith and Order is an institution with its own identity and its own
238 tasks. It is a movement that works within and extends beyond the councils of churches on the
239 local, regional, national, and global levels.

240
241 As a movement, Faith and Order began in the early part of the twentieth century. Missionaries
242 and students who were engaged in practical ministries were the pioneers of a push for Christians
243 to work more collaboratively in witnessing the Gospel to the world. One motto from that era
244 reflects the eagerness of that time: “doctrine divides and service unites.” It soon became clear
245 however that the details of what we believe affect everything we try to do together. Out of this
246 realization came the idea to convene a world conference which would focus on the matters of
247 “faith” and “order.”

248

249 “Faith” pertains to the elemental aspects of Christian creed and belief. Describing your faith is
250 describing those ideas that hold a central place in your conception of being a Christian. “Order”
251 pertains to the practical application of beliefs in the life of a church and its members. Some of
252 the areas that are most commonly brought into focus when discussing “order” are the spiritual
253 and sacramental life, as well as mission and ministry. Although there is a tendency to rely on the
254 simple characterization of “faith” as belief and “order” as action, this is a mistake, because
255 beliefs and actions do not exist as entirely separate realms. For many churches, belief includes
256 specific ideas about the order of church life. Thus the distinction between faith and order is not
257 absolute, but it is still valuable for ecumenical dialogue. From the beginning of the modern
258 ecumenical movement, it has been clearly evident that Christians could find more common
259 ground in their various beliefs about Jesus than in their ideas about the way the Christian church
260 should live. By using faith and order as focal points for encounters, Christians can learn a great
261 deal about each other.

262

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

269

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

273

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. 7) 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 that a program is designed that best fits the needs of those individuals who are taking part in it.

Initial Considerations

- *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.

At the beginning, it may also be the steering committee's job to decide how many meetings should be part of a initial Faith Forum dialogue series; to choose a series topic based on the content of *Faith Forum: A Guide for Local Ecumenical Dialogue*; to schedule the meetings; to choose the specific sub-topic for each meeting; 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. 15 "Challenges of Dialogue"); and 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.

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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.) 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 look at art.

Additionally, groups should feel free to spend as many meetings as necessary on each segment or even on each book. 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 and plan 6 meetings, working through the Segment One materials, but never moving on to Segment Two.

Perhaps most importantly, 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 dialogue. Thus, the basic idea is that participants will read a book or selected chapters before coming to the Faith Forum meeting, so that discussion can remain focused and be informed by the literature. Faith Forum participants should not necessarily feel the need to read an entire book before each meeting. For example, the steering committee could choose 1-3 chapters to cover at one meeting, but this decision will vary from group to group, keeping practical considerations in mind.

364 The segment topics and their corresponding reading materials for dialogue are outlined below.
365 For each segment an explanation of the topic and summaries of the books are provided, along
366 with questions that can be used to direct reading and discussion.
367

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

370
371 Two books are used for this segment:

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

377
378 One of the benefits of using the Faith Forum program is that it provides a structure for
379 ecumenical dialogue. A good structure can be critical for facilitating meaningful and sustained
380 engagement. Although the first requirement for successful encounters is the people themselves,
381 good intentions alone rarely suffice. Discussing vital issues of religious faith with others who do
382 not share every element of your faith can be an extremely difficult challenge. This is true even
383 when everyone comes to the meetings with an eagerness not only to share and be understood, but
384 also to listen and understand.
385

386 For this reason, Segment One of the Faith Forum program uses two books that are especially
387 suited to getting started with ecumenical dialogue. The first of these, *Confessing One Faith*, is a
388 booklet of around seventy pages that examines the history and meaning of the Nicene Creed. It
389 was designed as a short study guide precisely for the purpose of enabling dialogue.
390 Starting with a focus on the Nicene Creed is a good way to begin the entire program. The use of
391 creeds and the content of creeds stimulate thinking and provide good avenues for ecumenical
392 dialogue. Part of the point is to study not only the content of the creed, but also the fact that
393 some churches use creeds to present what they believe and others do not.
394

395 The first point to consider with respect to creeds is their very presence within religious
396 communities. Why have a creed? What does a creed mean to the community and to the
397 individual? A discussion of creeds directs our attention to Christian history. What does it mean
398 to be in communion with those Christians who came before us? Some churches stress on-going
399 continuity and connection with the past, and members of these churches find meaning in the idea
400 that they are worshiping in continuity with Christians of earlier times. For other churches, a
401 desire to be faithful to the worship life of the earliest Christians means a break with the worship
402 forms and faith-life of some of the generations that come between. For yet other churches, a
403 connection with past holds little interest. Are these approaches mutually exclusive? Is there
404 something valuable to be learned by exploring the perspective of each group? These questions
405 have to be addressed before there can be a fruitful discussion of the specific aspects of a
406 particular creed.
407

408 Using the Nicene creed as a focal point has particular significance, given that one of its historical
409 aims has been to safeguard sound belief. Does it fulfill this mission? If so, does the creed offer a

410 starting place for establishing some essential beliefs that are held by all? Can it be, as the book is
411 subtitled, “grounds for a common witness”? Or does it function as a point of departure? Is it one
412 more element on which Christian communities disagree?

413
414 The second book, *Twelve Tales Untold*, has twelve case studies that explore how ecumenism can
415 be “received” or incorporated into the faith and life of diverse Christians. The focus is on three
416 main issues: baptism, the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper, and ministry. The case studies provide
417 specific contexts for issues that can be extremely divisive for Christians. This approach is a
418 powerful way to bring theory and practice together. The book looks at twelve cases, four each
419 that focus on baptism, the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper, and ministry. Each case is followed by a
420 list of discussion questions, and often there is additional commentary as well as possible
421 outcomes to the dilemma that has been presented.

422
423 Reading these case studies will bring other similar stories to mind for most Faith Forum
424 participants. Theoretical points of conflict are brought home and made real. Discussing matters
425 that are this “close to home” can be both exciting and difficult. There is a great opportunity for
426 an expanded awareness of ourselves and others, but we can also feel pushed to the limits of our
427 abilities to listen and understand.

428
429 *Twelve Tales Untold* fits perfectly into the Faith Forum program in that it seeks to promote
430 ecumenical “reception.” There is a long history of ecumenical pursuits by church officials which
431 result in reports and documents. Efforts at these high levels have been instrumental in moving
432 ecumenism forward, but ultimately, there has to be involvement at the local level. Otherwise,
433 the achievements are nothing more than words on paper. Reception is the process of
434 incorporating the results of ecumenical dialogue into the faith and life of the church.

435
436 At the end of the book there are three essays that examine various aspects of reception. These
437 essays are an excellent source of material for those who are interested in the theology, history,
438 and challenges of making ecumenism real at the regional and local levels in America.
439 Participating in Faith Forum is one way of promoting reception. As the results of ecumenical
440 encounters are received locally, Christian communities are enriched, and you are playing a vital
441 role in this work.

442
443
444 **Segment Two: *Confronting the Contemporary and Timeless Issues of Poverty and Racism***
445

446 Two books are used for this segment:

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

451
452 Poverty is an issue that confronts all Christians, so it is fertile ground for exploring the ways
453 different churches respond. Racism is also a valuable topic to study for many reasons. It is a
454 central component of our cultural heritage and the challenges of overcoming racial division offer

455 lessons that can be used to overcome other divisions among Christians. This second segment
456 will allow your Faith Forum group to explore both issues in dialogue.

457
458 Poverty is everywhere. The degree of poverty certainly varies from place to place, but all
459 Christians are faced with the issue of responding to the reality that many people suffer from a
460 lack of the basic necessities of life. There are those among us who do not have adequate shelter,
461 enough to eat, decent clothing, or the most fundamental aspects of health care.

462
463 Most churches recognize the ample evidence from scripture that Jesus Christ cared for the poor.
464 Christians may debate the best ways to alleviate the suffering that comes from poverty, but there
465 is general consensus that the less fortunate deserve our help. In fact, one of the most commonly
466 accepted indications of genuine Christian faith is concrete practices that demonstrate love for the
467 poor. Given that poverty is an issue that confronts all Christians, it is fertile ground for exploring
468 the ways different churches respond.

469
470 The Faith Forum program is built around the benefits that can come from engaging in dialogue
471 with others throughout the Body of Christ. Of course, living out the Christian faith requires
472 more than words. Within Faith Forum, the Christian response to poverty is an excellent topic for
473 dialogue, but it is more than that because it is also one of the most fundamental ways for
474 churches to find common ground in action, not just words. The booklet used here is *Love for the*
475 *Poor: God's Love for the Poor and the Church's Witness to It*. Even though this text was
476 created within the context of other ecumenical documents that have addressed the same issue, for
477 the purposes of Faith Forum, it can stand alone.

478
479 One of the issues that frequently arises when poverty is examined in depth is racism, which is the
480 second topic for this segment. Racism is a valuable topic for dialogue within Faith Forum for
481 many reasons. It is a central component of our cultural heritage in the U.S., and the challenges
482 of overcoming racial division offer lessons that can be used to overcome other divisions among
483 Christians.

484
485 Racism is based on the idea that we are different, but it does not stop with simply observing the
486 points of contrast. For the racist, conclusions are drawn concerning superiority and inferiority.
487 Think about our differences within the Church. Does the urge to assert superiority of one
488 doctrine over another sound familiar? Racial division presents issues that differ from those
489 concerning division within the Body of Christ, but there is also some overlap. What should we
490 conclude from the fact that one of the most segregated institutions within our society is the
491 Church?

492
493 At the same time, we must guard against simplistic answers to a complex issue. Segregation can
494 be a choice and it can serve a positive purpose. For example, minority communities may find it
495 valuable to build and maintain institutions of their own, separated in some ways from the broader
496 culture. These institutions can be a place where a familiar language is spoken and cultural
497 traditions are protected and preserved. What does this mean about efforts to make church
498 congregations more diverse and more reflective of the general population? When is separated
499 Christian life a gift and when does it foster greater alienation and discrimination?

500

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

505
506 There are a bounty of intriguing questions that can arise, such as:
507 • What are the connections between racial division and denominational division? Does
508 Christian disunity support racism? Or vice versa?
509 • How do ideas about race affect theological ideas and church practice? What do baptism and
510 the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper mean concerning racial division?
511 • What role should the church play in fighting racism?
512 • Should we accept that many church congregations will always be composed of only one
513 race?

514
515 We can learn a great deal about each other by sharing our thoughts about the Church’s response
516 to poverty and racism. We can also learn a great deal about ourselves, and that is part of the goal
517 of Faith Forum.

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

522
523 One book is used for this segment:
524 — *Ancient Faith and American-Born Churches: Dialogues between Christian*
525 *Traditions*—Edited by Ted A. Campbell, Ann K. Riggs, and Gilbert W. Stafford

526
527 The development of Christianity in America has created many new ideas and divergent views.
528 The dialogues in this book provide a blueprint for ecumenical engagement.

529
530 *What happened to Christianity when it became rooted in American soil? Do American-born*
531 *churches carry deep connections to earlier Christian traditions, or do the new ways of being*
532 *Christian stand alone and independent? What do the new and the old have to learn from each*
533 *other?* These questions provide only a hint at the potential issues that spring forth when
534 examining this informative book.

535
536 Eight topics are examined, including the power of holiness to bring Christians together, the role
537 of creeds and confessions, the authority and function of scripture, and the teaching authority of
538 the Church. In each case, representatives of two or three different church traditions have written
539 essays about the issue at hand. Then each person also has submitted a response to each of the
540 others. The result is an extraordinary collection of conversations about those ideas, beliefs, and
541 practices that are held in common, as well as those that remain separate and distinct within each
542 tradition.

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544 The book’s structure makes it perfectly suited for the work of Faith Forum. These ecumenical
545 dialogues are valuable both for the substance of the ideas and for the model of the interaction. In

546 most cases, the people involved respond to each other within the context of the an ecumenical
547 methodology presented in an essay by John T. Ford, CSC, near the beginning of the book.

548
549 Ford begins his essay by saying, “Participating in ecumenical dialogue is often similar to
550 learning a new language.” He then goes on to suggest three fundamental responses that occur
551 when we listen to the ideas of someone from a different tradition. These are resonance,
552 dissonance, and non-sonance. In the following section, “Challenges of Dialogue,” (pg. 14) these
553 three ideas are presented in a different form as tools for navigating some of the challenges of
554 your own dialogues. Resonance is represented as *I hear you and I’m with you*; dissonance is
555 represented as *I hear you, but I’m not with you*; and non-sonance is represented as *I don’t get; I*
556 *can’t hear you*.

557
558 Every group of people who engages in ecumenical dialogue creates a unique path. This book
559 shows how some people have come together to discuss vital church issues and what they have
560 learned from their encounters. Faith Forum seeks to provide this opportunity to people
561 everywhere. This book could have been used as the initial text for Segment One of Faith Forum,
562 but doing so may have inhibited the natural development of dialogue within each group.
563 Individuals may have seen the dialogues within this book as the only way to pursue discussions,
564 when it should be regarded as simply one of many ways.

565
566 At this stage in Faith Forum, groups will have established patterns and habits of interaction
567 which can be enriched and influenced by the models presented in this book. Given that there are
568 eight separate topics, groups may want to concentrate on some more than others. At the same
569 time, there is something valuable to be gained from each one. This is a resource that can be used
570 and reused many times.

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Supplemental Literature

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576 The Faith Forum program is designed to provide structure, guidance, and support for ecumenical
577 dialogue. In addition to the three segments, there is the opportunity to examine several other
578 issues in depth by using additional texts. Participants can pick and choose from the list below.

579

- 580 • **The Vision of Ecumenism**—*The Vision of the Ecumenical Movement and How It Has*
581 *Been Impoverished by Its Friends*, by NCC General Secretary, Michael Kinnamon, and
582 *Councils of Churches and the Ecumenical Vision*, by Diane Kessler & Michael
583 Kinnamon

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

- 590 • **Religious pluralism**—The text is *Grounds for Understanding: Ecumenical Resources*
591 *for Responses to Religious Pluralism*, edited by S. Mark Heim.

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

- 594 • **The Apostolic tradition**—The texts are *Apostolic Faith in America*, edited by Thaddeus
595 D. Horgan; *Black Witness to the Apostolic Faith*, edited by David T. Shannon and
596 Gayraud S. Wilmore; and *Faith to Creed: Ecumenical Perspectives on the Affirmation of*
597 *the Apostolic Faith in the Fourth Century*, edited by S. Mark Heim.

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

- 606 • **The challenge of church history**—The text is *Telling the Churches' Stories:*
607 *Ecumenical Perspectives on Writing Christian History*, edited by Timothy J. Wengert
608 and Charles W. Brockwell, Jr.

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

- 612 • **Divisions between East and West**—The text is *Christ in East and West*, edited by Paul
613 R. Fries and Tiran Nersoyan.

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

- 619 • **The Holy Spirit**—The text are *The Church in the Movement of the Spirit*, edited by
620 William R. Barr and Rena M Yocom, and *Spirit of Truth: Ecumenical Perspectives on*
621 *the Holy Spirit*, edited by S. Mark Heim and Theodore Stylianopoulos.

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

- 625 • **The pursuit of peace**—The texts are *The Church's Peace Witness*, edited by Marlin E.
626 Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, and *The Fragmentation of the Church and Its*
627 *Unity in Peacemaking*, edited by Jeffrey Gros and John D. Rempel.

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

- 631 • **Women within the church**—The text is *Women and Church: The Challenge of*
632 *Ecumenical Solidarity in an Age of Alienation*, edited by Melanie A. May.

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

- 636 • **AIDS**—The text is *The Church with AIDS: Renewal in the Midst of Crisis*, edited by
637 Letty M. Russell.

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

641
642 The goal of Faith Forum is to foster greater unity within the Body of Christ. Examine these
643 topics and see which might fit the needs and interests of the group. Each group is unique, and
644 this supplemental literature is offered as a way to accommodate the personality of many different
645 ecumenical dialogues.

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648 **Additional Resources**

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- 650 • **Faith and Order web site:** The web site for the Faith and Order Commission of the National
651 Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUSA) is
652 <http://www.ncccusa.org/faithandorder/about.html>.
- 653 • **DVDs:** “Opening Doors to Unity” is a twelve-minute video that reviews recent work by the
654 Faith and Order Commission. “On Being Christian Together” is a video about the 2007
655 Oberlin conference that commemorated 50 years of Faith & Order in the USA. A third
656 DVD, “The Oberlin Meeting 2007,” is an in-depth look at the meeting and the history of
657 F&O. All of these videos show people engaged in dialogue, and the first two DVDs could be
658 especially useful for beginning a Faith Forum program. (See the Faith Forum website at
659 www.ncccusa.org/faithforum for ordering information.)

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664 **The Challenges of Dialogue**

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665 Engaging in dialogue about your most important religious beliefs can be extremely difficult.
666 There is good reason to follow a structure and to use the books suggested. It is easy to get
667 derailed. The structure is designed to facilitate constructive dialogue and avoid competitive
668 arguments. Conversations that begin as sincere efforts to expand understanding can drift into
669 passionate efforts to convert. You may be convinced that you are showing compassion when
670 you attempt to enlighten someone else about the ways in which his or her faith is in error, but
671 this program is not about deciding who is right and who is wrong.

672

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

677

678 One hurdle with engagement is that differences exist not only in belief, but also in the very way
679 that belief is defined within groups. For example, there is no way to compare one group’s formal
680 written statements with those of another group, if the second group does not have a tradition of
681 creating such documents and instead relies on oral tradition to maintain the boundaries of what is
682 shared knowledge of the common faith. Another problem that can arise is that the unexpected

683 discovery of common ground can elevate expectations for subsequent encounters. Then when
684 areas of division are revealed, the feelings of frustration can be heightened.

685
686 Complicating matters further is the fact that the same words can hold different meanings for
687 different people. The differences in meaning may be so subtle that at first it seems that everyone
688 has the same understanding of the term. In other cases, it is clear from the start that the word
689 means something different to the other person than it does to you.

690
691 A tool for navigating all of these difficulties is to recognize three basic responses that frequently
692 occur in ecumenical dialogue:

693
694 • *I hear you and I'm with you.*

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

698
699 • *I hear you, but I'm not with you.*

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

704
705 • *I don't hear you. I can't get it.*

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

712
713 Faith Forum is structured to facilitate dialogue, but the work of fostering Christian unity does not
714 stop with discussions. For that reason, there is one additional focal point that should be
715 considered as part of the encounters:

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

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

722
723 Dialogue will always be difficult because we do not all have the same beliefs. As long as
724 humans exist, divisions of some sort will exist, because human beings are diverse. While each of
725 us believes that our own church offers all that is necessary for salvation and Christian life, there
726 is always more for each of us personally to learn. Although we may be "the very least of all the
727 saints," grace has been given to us to speak with one another "of the boundless riches of Christ,"
728 so that through us "the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known." (Cf.

729 Ephesians 3: 8-10 NRSV) We all have something to offer, and when we seek to learn from each
730 other, we all are enriched. In this way we move a little closer to the creation of a Body of Christ
731 here on earth that is one, as it is in heaven.
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Moving Beyond Dialogue

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Dialogue is indispensable as the entrance to a path of greater understanding and acceptance. The work of discussing our differences and what we share can be both difficult and rewarding. It is critical to the pursuit of Christian unity that we begin with these efforts 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 participating in the movement toward 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 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 and Order web site 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 involvement in the ecumenical movement, and by so doing, you have an opening for initiating steps within your church to push the movement forward.