

## Friends in Faith, an Ecumenical Dialogue

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We are conducting a series of Ecumenical dialogue meetings in Aiken. We are holding dialogue meetings about twice a year. Three dialogue meeting have been held. They were well attended, and received much favorable reaction. We are now planning the fourth dialogue meeting.

The idea for the dialogue series came from a group of talks held at First Baptist Church of Aiken during the Fall of 2003. On four Wednesdays in succession, a clergyman from a different church gave a talk about his church. Fr. James LeBlanc, pastor of St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church, was one of the speakers. He thought it was an excellent idea, and asked me to help develop something similar for St. Mary's. I took this up with the Ecumenical Committee of the Parish. After some discussion we thought it would be good to take a somewhat different approach. We decided to convene a series of dialogue meetings, each meeting devoted to a particular topic, with clergy from different churches addressing the topic from their point of view. We also came to believe that it would be desirable to engage members of other churches in planning this dialogue series. We decided to limit the dialogue for now to the Christian household, while recognizing that dialogue with others outside the Christian family can be beneficial. Fr. LeBlanc wholeheartedly supported this overall approach.

We explained the idea to the pastors of about a dozen area churches, and invited them to ask someone from their congregation to take part. Response was favorable, and people from several churches joined the planning group.

The planning group discussed and agreed on the purpose and overall approach for a series of dialogue meetings. At first, the planning group met every couple of weeks, to come to a good understanding of the purpose of dialogue, to develop a plan and framework for the dialogue sessions, to come up with topics, and to develop an approach to publicity. Planning for the first dialogue meeting involved considerable effort. The approach we settled on has proven to be very effective, and so it has required somewhat less work to plan subsequent dialogue meetings.

We selected a name for the dialogue series. We chose "Friends in Faith." We believe this name evokes the best of of what ecumenical dialogue can be, a discussion among friends who share faith in God.

Dialogue is emphatically not debate, not an attempt to proselytize or "convert" the other person. Dialogue has no place for slogans and stereotypes. Dialogue is simply a way for friends to explain and understand each other's beliefs. By so doing, each comes to better recognize the great body of truth that unites us. We clear up misunderstandings. We more clearly understand those points on which we differ, and we come to respect each other's opinions even if we do not fully agree.

The planning group members have indeed become friends in the course of our work. We came to understand, respect and admire each other. We enjoy and look forward to our planning meetings. In each meeting, we pray together, seeking the guidance and support of the Lord. We have had some turnover of planning group members, and have been able to work with new members so that they quickly become effective contributors.

The plan for the first dialogue meeting served as a template for later meetings, modified based on lessons learned.

For the first dialogue meeting, actions included:

- Make a list of dialogue topics;
- Develop a general format for dialogue meeting;
- Select the topic;
- Select the day, time and place for the dialogue meeting;
- Select and invite speakers;
- Develop and distribute publicity material;
- Set up the meeting place;
- Conduct the dialogue meeting.

Publicity was very important. We needed to make people aware of the idea of ecumenical dialogue, describe the overall concept of the dialogue series, and give details about the first meeting. We used several kinds of publicity, including the following:

- Letters to pastors of some 75 churches, announcing the dialogue;
- Telephone calls and additional letters to the church pastors;
- Contact with individuals and small groups in the churches;
- Brochures and flyers, which we produced and sent to the churches and distributed around town;
- Newspaper notices;
- Radio and TV announcements.

Some of the pastors we contacted were enthusiastic about the idea. They supported publicity in their churches, encouraged their congregations to come, and themselves attended the meeting. We are grateful to them.

Some other pastors told us explicitly that they were not interested in ecumenical dialogue, would not support publicity among their congregations, and did not wish to receive any more publicity material. We honored their requests, and did not try to force ourselves upon them.

The first dialogue meeting was held on Saturday morning, November 6, 2004, from 9 AM to Noon, at Cumberland A. M. E. Church in Aiken. The topic was Baptism. Principal speakers were Dr. Fred Andrea, pastor of First Baptist Church; Dr. David Cozad, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church; and Fr. James LeBlanc, Pastor of St. Mary Help of

Christians Catholic Church. Rev. Moses Miller, pastor of the host church, served as moderator.

The meeting opened with a short worship service, consisting of scripture readings, hymns and prayers. This was followed by a brief introduction to the idea of ecumenical dialogue.

Each of the three main speakers then talked on the topic for 10 to 15 minutes.

This was followed by a moderated question and answer session.

The meeting closed with a prayer service.

Participants then enjoyed food and drink prepared by people from the host church, Cumberland A. M. E.

During the dialogue, the pastors interacted openly and amicably with each other. Each had enough time to explain his beliefs and practices in some detail. Myths and misunderstandings were dispelled. Some were surprised by what they discovered about each other. For example, Baptists, and probably some Catholics, were surprised to discover that the preferred method of Baptism in the Catholic Church is by immersion!

About 70 people attended the first dialogue meeting. About 50 completed registration forms and turned in evaluation forms. We used the results to help plan the next dialogue meeting. Response of the people who attended was highly favorable; they found the dialogue to be very informative and interesting.

The later dialogue meetings followed a similar pattern. For each, we selected a topic, picked a date and place, and invited speakers. We encouraged the speakers to limit their talks to 10 to 15 minutes, in order to leave time for questions. The questions have served to bring out issues of general interest, often in a pointed way.

As with the first session, each dialogue meeting opened and closed with short worship services.

We have held each of the dialogue meetings in a different church. The host church provides the space, and gets it set up, provides a clergy person as Moderator, and provides some light refreshment.

We have been able to obtain three clergy of different Christian traditions as main speakers for each dialogue.

The second dialogue was on the topic of Holy Communion. It was held at First Baptist Church of Aiken. The Moderator was the Associate Pastor of First Baptist, Rev. Sheree Jones. The three speakers were a Catholic Deacon, Rev. Bob Pierce; the Pastor of

Trinity United Methodist Church, Rev. Rodney Powell; and an ordained theologian of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Rev. Ann Freeland.

The third dialogue meeting was on the topic of Salvation: What does it take to be saved. It was held at First Presbyterian Church of Aiken. The Moderator was the Associate Pastor of that church, Rev. Martha Ebel. Speakers were Rev. Bob Byrne, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church; Rev. Marty Conner, Vicar of St. Thaddeus Episcopal Church; and Rev. Robert Fuller, pastor of Fairview Presbyterian Church.

The planning group is now planning the fourth dialogue meeting. We have selected the morning of Saturday, April 29, 2006 for the dialogue meeting. We are in the process of selecting the topic and the host church, and will then invite speakers.

We incur some costs for printing and mailing. We have asked the churches of the Planning Group to contribute money, and we ask those who attended the dialogue meeting to make an offering. By these means we are taking in enough money to cover our costs.

We think that two dialogue meetings a year, one in the fall and one in the spring, are appropriate. We think this will be frequent enough to maintain interest and momentum. It takes significant effort to plan and organize each meeting, so it would be difficult for a small volunteer planning group to do more than two a year. Saturday mornings seem to be a good time for the dialogue meetings.

Publicity is key. People are busy, and it is difficult to get their attention. We use all the means of publicity we can think of. These include publicity mailings to the churches, with flyers and bulletin inserts; pulpit announcements; mailings to individuals who have come to previous dialogue meetings; newspaper articles; radio and TV spots; signs and posters around town; and of course word of mouth.

The notice we get within the churches is highly variable. Members of the planning group are generally able to get good notice in their churches. The notice in other churches is less certain.

We are pleased with the way this dialogue series, a dialogue among Friends in Faith, is going. We are truly coming to see more and more the great body of truth we Christians hold in common, and to more sharply identify those areas in which we differ. We look forward to continuing this fruitful process.