

Studying the Bible Together: A Resource Packet for Ecumenical Bible Study

**prepared by the Massachusetts Council of Churches and the
Massachusetts Bible Society**

1998

Introduction

This study guide grew out of the 1998 Ecumenical Bible Study Project of the Massachusetts Council of Churches and the Massachusetts Bible Society. This Project sent interdenominational pairs of theology and/or Bible professors to lead onetime ecumenical Bible studies in local communities. Each of these study groups included individuals, lay and clergy, from the many churches in the community.

The Project began as a means to relate our Massachusetts churches to the World Council of Churches 8th Assembly in December 1998. Thus the theme of the Bible studies was the theme of the Assembly, *Turn to God — Rejoice in Hope*. While the leader teams had wide latitude in preparing their Bible study, they used as their starting point the Bible studies published by the WCC in preparation for the Assembly.

What we found, however, was that there is a great hunger for ecumenical Bible study beyond any interest in the WCC Assembly. Professors are eager to bring the Scriptural message of unity to a local group of congregations (even though they were asked to volunteer their time). Local churches are searching for ways to bring Christians together and to make ecumenism tangible. Church members are craving opportunities to meet Christians from other churches and to delve with them into matters of substance. Our Project exceeded all our goals. Clearly we had touched a need.

This study guide, therefore, is an attempt to provide resources and support for the continuing upswell of ecumenical Bible study in Massachusetts and beyond. We thank Eden Grace for her work in preparing this guide, and offer it to the churches of Massachusetts with blessings for our journey together.

Rev. Diane Kessler, Executive Director
Massachusetts Council of Churches

Rev. Donald Wells, Executive Director
Massachusetts Bible Study

Why do Ecumenical Bible Study

“The biblical story of God’s reconciling love beckons Christians to embrace the story and make it their own, and to find new ways to walk together as God’s people.” (*Study Guide for Odyssey Toward Unity*, Mass Council of Churches 1995, p. 5)

Ecumenism is grounded in the unity of the triune God and our being children of God. As we are brought into relationship with God through Christ, we are called to a reconciling ministry among the people of the world. This vision of the universal creation of God, brought into community through the reconciliation of Jesus Christ, is rooted in Scripture. Therefore, as we seek unity together in order to minister to the world, we must continually renew our grounding in the Scriptural message of unity.

All Christians, despite our differences, hold the Bible as our heritage and identity-point. The Bible points to both our common *source* — Jesus Christ — and our common *hope* — the final reconciliation of all creation through the realization of the reign of God. Rather than beginning at the edges (our differences in polity, form of worship, etc.) and trying to move toward unity, ecumenical Bible study begins at the center, with the Bible we hold in common, and moves forward from that shared basis. Studying the Bible together is therefore the clear place to start any ecumenical endeavor.

What is Ecumenical Bible Study

Ecumenical Bible Study is reading the Bible together. Simply coming together, from different churches, to study the Bible as our common text, is an ecumenical gesture.

Ecumenical Bible Study is reading the Bible for messages of unity. Often an ecumenical Bible study group will choose to focus on particular scriptural passages and themes which address the content of Christian unity — what is the Biblical mandate for Christian unity? what does that unity look like? what difference does it make in the churches and in the world?

Ecumenical Bible Study is reading the Bible from the perspective of another. To be ecumenical is to be open to the other. Different Christian churches read the Bible differently. Our reading is also informed by differences of race, class, gender, nationality, health, education, age, etc. Unity is comprised of a multiplicity of particularities, each of which can be honored and upheld in its own integrity.

Ecumenical Bible Study is reading the Bible for the universal reconciling task of the church. We are called to unity for a reason. God's purpose for the church and our role in the magnificent plan of salvation give meaning and identity to the united body of Christ. Ecumenical Bible study involves discovering God's purpose for the church and committing ourselves to it.

How to do Ecumenical Bible Study

Remember that Christian unity does not equal sameness. God's creation is teeming with diversity of all kinds, and the Christian task is neither to reduce this to the lowest common denominator, nor to draw boundaries so tightly as to require strict uniformity. Rather we are called to perceive and participate in God's great purpose. Our unity as Christians rests in the unity of God's will, rather than the uniformity of our ideas. With this in mind, we enter into ecumenical Bible study with an open mind and a loving heart, prepared to find difference while praying to find unity.

In studying Scripture together, we find that different churches read Scripture differently. For some, Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the Apostolic Tradition. For others, Scripture is to be interpreted in light of our experience as Christians in a particular context. For still others, Scripture is to be interpreted by Scripture itself, through identifying certain passages which function as “keys”. Every reading of the Bible involves the choice of some hermeneutical (interpretive) lens. Coming together ecumenically does not require agreement on the lens. It does require the commitment to listen sympathetically to interpretations which might seem unfamiliar.

On a more practical level, there are several different ways of organizing a Bible study group. The choice of a method should reflect the style and purpose of the Bible study group. Some methods begin from scholarship while others rely on personal experience. The right choice for you depends on the kind of group you are gathering.

A traditional Bible study method would call for a facilitator to give introductory exegetical comments, placing the passage in context within history, elucidating the particular vocabulary used, and introducing current historical-critical theories of the text, book and author. This would be followed by group discussion on several predetermined questions.

A method influenced by liberation-theology would be to read the Scripture passage aloud, then go around the circle and share what that passage means for each individual in his/her social location. A second time around the circle allows participants to respond to each other’s comments.

A method which places emphasis on personal spiritual experience asks participants to reflect on and discuss five questions: what is the author’s main point in this passage? what new light do I find in this particular reading of this passage of the text? is this passage true to my experience? what are the implications of this passage for my life? what problems do I have with this passage?

Creative approaches to scripture could include: a dramatic reenactment of the story; artistic expressions inspired by the text; the writing of contemporary narratives or telling of real-life stories which echo the Biblical story; the creation of new prayers, liturgies and rituals; exploring allegorical interpretations of the passage; and rewriting the text in our own words.

Bible studies should begin and end with prayer. Examples of ecumenical prayers are included in this brochure, but you should feel free to write your own, invite study group members to pray extemporaneously, or hold a few minutes of silent prayer. You might also consult the booklet entitled “Together We Pray: Christian Prayers for Unity” (see bibliography).

Prayers for Ecumenical Bible Study

Opening prayer

from the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, August 1993

O God,
All life and grace are coming from you.
Open our hearts and minds

To the insights and experiences of our
Brothers and Sisters in other Christian traditions
So that we become enriched and renewed
By sharing of your gifts among us
Being already now in communion with all who believe in you,
Perfect union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit
We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Closing Prayer

by Norman Young, Professor of Systematic Theology, United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne, Australia. Printed in *Encounters for Unity: Sharing Faith, Prayer and Life*. 1995 Canterbury Press.

Almighty God, who in Jesus Christ has given us gifts
of unity, reconciliation and peace, we pray that those
gifts may increasingly be known in the Church;
that divisions of culture, tradition, denomination, confession
should no more count in our dealing with each other than they
do in your dealing with us;
We acknowledge with shame our failure to distinguish the peripheral from the central,
preserving our identity as separate churches by stressing our differences,
refusing to see that the only identity of final worth
is what we share in common, our new creation in
Jesus Christ.
Grant us to manifest our oneness even in our diversity
that we may become light to the world,
dispelling rather than reflecting the darkness of its strife.
So may your unity of being-in-community,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be echoed in the life of
the Church. Amen.

Biblical texts of ecumenical interest

All of Scripture can be studied ecumenically, but some passages have a particular bearing on the call to Christian unity and the reconciling work of the church. The following list is by no means exhaustive, but could provide a place to start.

Psalm 133
Matthew 28:19, 20
John 17:20–23
Acts 17:26–28
Romans 12
1 Corinthians 12
2 Corinthians 5:16–17
Galatians 3:27, 29
Ephesians 1:9–10
Ephesians 2:14–22
Ephesians 4:1–16
Colossians 1:19–20
Colossians 3:10–15

There are many Scripture passages which describe the essential oneness of the body of Christians, most notably the “baptismal formula” passages (i.e. Galatians 3:27 and Colossians 3:11). John 17 holds a special place among ecumenical texts, however, because it goes beyond a statement of being one, to describe the operational purpose of Christian unity. God calls us to be “one” because by being

“one” we participate in God’s purpose for all creation, “that the world may believe” (John 17:21).

Bibliography

Basic resources for group Bible Study

Probably the most useful resource for any Bible study is a good Study Bible, such as the HarperCollins Study Bible or the Oxford Study Bible. In addition to the text, these Bibles offer extremely helpful footnotes, comments and cross-references which can help unlock a passage. Study Bibles are available in several translations, but one which includes the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical books, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), is most appropriate for ecumenical Bible study.

Another useful resource for Bible Study is a one-volume commentary, such as the New Jerome Biblical Commentary (1990), or the Harper’s Bible Commentary (1988).

The following guides are recommended by the Massachusetts Bible Society for use in group Bible study. They are not specifically ecumenical in content, but could certainly be used by an ecumenical Bible study group.

Aaseng, Rolf E., *A Beginners Guide to Studying the Bible*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991.

Provides the helpful basics which could serve as the format for a group Bible study. Appendices in the back are particularly useful, outlining different methods for studying the Bible and tips for using study resources.

Collegetown Bible Commentary Series. Collegetown MN: Liturgical Press

Provides a concise distillation of current scholarship in accessible, lay language, with textual commentary, review aids and discussion topics. Very good for a detailed study of one passage or book of the Bible.

Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible For All It’s Worth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993

Combines scholarly insights with a faithful approach to the text. Gives the how-to’s of interpretation and how to choose and use a translation. Discusses how to approach particular genres of texts: epistles, gospels, parables, psalms, wisdom, and revelation.

Wink, Walter, *Transforming Bible Study: a leader’s guide*. second ed. Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1989.

Encourages the merger of biblical information and personal transformation. Includes provocative questions for studying sample texts.

Resources for use in Ecumenical Bible Study

The following is a collection of resources which are explicitly ecumenical in their approach to the Bible, either because they address the question of Christian unity directly, or because they help the reader look at the Bible from a new point of view. These books have not been endorsed by the Massachusetts Bible Society or the Massachusetts Council of Churches, but we recommend consulting them in your search for ecumenical Bible study materials.

Articles

Meeks, Blair Gilmer. "Shaping Study Sessions around John 17" in *Liturgy: Practicing Ecumenism, Journal of the Liturgical Conference* vol. 10 no. 1, Spring 1992, p. 57–61.

Gives a detailed four-session plan for leading an ecumenical study group on John 17, intended to be used in conjunction with the commentary by Gerard Sloyan.

Sloyan, Gerard. "What is John 17 Saying to the Churches" in *Liturgy: Practicing Ecumenism, Journal of the Liturgical Conference* vol. 10 no. 1, Spring 1992, p. 53–55.

A verse-by-verse commentary of John 17, paying particular attention to the ecumenical implications of that key text.

Resources from the World Council of Churches Publications Catalog

Carr, Dhyanchand. *Sword of the Spirit: an activists understanding of the Bible*. WCC, 1992.

Come Holy Spirit — Renew the Whole Creation: Six Bible studies on the theme of the WCC's 7th assembly. WCC, 1990.

Robins, Wendy S. and Musimbi Kanyoro, eds. *Speaking for Ourselves: Bible studies and discussion starters by women*. WCC, 1991.

Robins, Wendy S., ed. *Through the Eyes of a Woman: Bible studies on the experience of women*. WCC 1996.

Takenaka, Masao and Ron O'Grady, eds. *The Bible through Asian Eyes*. WCC, 1991.

Turn to God — Rejoice in Hope: Bible studies, meditations, liturgical aids on the theme of the WCC's eighth assembly. WCC, 1996.

Weber, Hans-Ruedi, *The Bible Comes Alive: new approaches for Bible Study groups*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996.

We particularly recommend this handbook, as it speaks directly to how to lead ecumenical Bible studies.

Ecumenical prayers

Together We Pray: Christian Prayers for Unity, Mass. Committee on Ecumenical Observance of the Millennium, expected publication date Jan 1999.

This booklet will contain approx. 31 prayers for Christian unity, a litany suitable for corporate worship, and a newly-commissioned hymn, all commemorating the upcoming millennium and exploring its ecumenical significance.

On-line resources

We also recommend using the resources available on the World Wide Web. The on-line bookstores offer a convenient way to search for print materials using a set of key words. The World Council of Churches web site (www.wcc-coe.org) contains news, information, Bible studies, and links to other Christian sites. There are also guides to Christian materials on the Web, one of the best being the Institute for Christian Leadership's web site (www.iclnet.org).

How to obtain resources for Ecumenical Bible Study

All of the print materials mentioned in this booklet are available (either in stock or through special order) from the Massachusetts Bible Society Bookstore, 41 Bromfield Street, Boston MA 02108 (617) 542-2224. For more copies of this booklet, contact the Massachusetts Council of Churches, 14 Beacon Street, Boston MA 02108 (617) 523-2771.

Acknowledgments

This booklet was prepared by Eden Grace with help from Jan Gough and April Peters.

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The artwork is by a Franciscan, Fr. P. Philippus, who lives in Indonesia, and who shares his drawings freely, as he received his talent as a free gift from God. To view his entire collection, go to <http://listserv.american.edu/catholic/franciscan/clipart/clipart.html>.