

Meeting Summaries and Questions for Growing Faith in the World

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1. Individual Service – We possess God-given talents. For a partial listing, see Isaiah 11:2–3, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 – or see our Meeting Summaries and Questions for Centering God and Self. The question is: how do we use them? For beyond family, work, and religious services is a wider world that could use a little help. We are called to engage in that world and, if possible, to preserve and sustain God's great gift to us. Yet many people are wary of getting involved – citing family and work commitments or a litany of other reasons. Here, it's important to remember that local involvement is not a lifetime commitment. This is not a wedding. Try helping just one day at a soup kitchen or with a clothing drive; or sign up for a simple ministry at church. There is a need for every talent and, if we all step forward, a talent for every need. The only recommendation we would make is to *make your participation personal*. We are called to God through relationships, and through God into service. Only by meeting people who are in need of the gifts we have to share do we come to know and love them, as the life of discipleship requires of us. Don't be shy—your legacy awaits!

Questions – It is said that it's easier to get a social activist to convert to accept God in their life than it is to get many believers to become actively involved in the community. Why is this so? What could be done to make this transition easier? What may have prevented you from individual service in the community? If you have helped out at church or in the community, what has been your experience? Positive or negative? Were your talents appropriately used? What can you learn from your experience to make your next opportunity for involvement more meaningful, both for you and the people you would like to help?

2. Appreciating Other Faiths – As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, a broad range of cultures collide and mingle on a daily basis. Yet if we watch the news, we see a lot more colliding than mingling. If anything, the news emphasizes our differences and very often portrays religion primarily as a vehicle for conflict, even violence. Beliefs are pitted against each other in culture wars all over the globe and the results can bring feelings of hopelessness. Lost in the conflict is the message of harmony and peace that

lies at the heart of the world's great religions. What is lost is God. Instead, we must take the time to seek God in others through their faiths. As we do, we will find some fundamental elements we have in common. For example, a central tenet of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the belief in one God or monotheism. Moreover adherents of these great faiths share a common claim as the children of Abraham. We are, in effect, distant cousins in the same family. And all the world's major religions – including Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism – preach both compassion for the poor and a duty to abide by God's law. By appreciating these similarities, as well as our differences, we will better appreciate our own path to God. Hopefully, we will discover the common bonds we share with others who seek God. As stewards of God's grace on earth, we have an obligation to understand the beliefs of all his children, not just the one's within our own faith community.

Questions – Take a session to research and discuss each of the world's great religions. What, if anything, about these faiths (including the various elements of the Christian church) do you find appealing? What might we learn from these varied approaches to God? What aspects of Christianity do you appreciate even more now that you know, at least a little, about the religion or other Christian church in question?

3. Spiritual Community Leadership – There is no single correct path to becoming a spiritual leader in your community. Everyone has unique traits and needs that will affect how people promote or receive the gift of God. However, a saying commonly attributed to St. Francis of Assisi offers a useful approach: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." What this means is that the most effective way we can share the word of God is to visibly and openly live the word. We are called to share this light with others and to have faith that others will take notice. Yet, with so many things commanding people's attention – from chasing after work to chasing after the kids – it can be hard to ensure that people see and feel the presence of God in their hearts. Here, we take the time to share our personal experiences and discuss what seems to work best in our communities.

Questions – Research suggests that the largest religious group in most every U.S. community is non-practicing Christians. Why do you think this is so? Discuss ways in which your church community could do a better job of reaching out to these people. On a more personal level, do you live your life in such a way as to set an example for others? Do you think you live your life as Jesus would want you to? Finally, how do you feel about sharing your faith with others? How do other religious communities approach this delicate process? What can we learn from them? Discuss different techniques—from knocking on doors to building a strong youth movement to simply serving as role models in the community. What ways do you think are most effective? Is there room for improvement?

4. Wealth and Charity - We all know what Jesus thinks about money—or at least we think we do. In the first three gospels he says, “It is easier for a camel to pass through (the) eye of (a) needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:24, Mk 10:25, Lk 18:25). Yet money itself is not evil. Both Jesus and Paul were the beneficiaries of wealthy believers. Rather, it is our misuse and even obsession with money that causes problems. “For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains” (1Tm 6:10). And as Ecclesiastes states quite clearly, “The covetous man is never satisfied with money, and the lover of wealth reaps no fruit from it; so this too is vanity.” (Ecl 5:9) The power of money draws us away from God, and our own weakness allows wealth to become an idol for worship. Which brings us to the dual power of charity. Charity—the giving of our time and treasure out of love for others—is a single action that helps both the less fortunate and ourselves, by helping to release us from the power of money. We are asked only to give what we can—Jesus recognized the widow who gave only two copper coins as a great benefactor (Mk 12:41–44)—but we are asked to give just the same. When we give sincerely, from our hearts, we will receive our true reward (Mt 6: 1–4).

Questions – Does money have power over you? What are some possessions in your life that you honestly believe it would be hard to do without? Why? When is “enough, enough?” Do feelings of greed, jealousy, ambition or even despair fester inside because you worry that you will never have enough? What steps can you take to avoid these pitfalls and reconnect with the true power of faith? Finally, discuss the groups or

social causes to which you and your family give donations? If you’re inspired, consider taking up a collection for a particular charity that may be made on behalf of your faith group. Discuss local, national or international options appropriate for group giving. Have fun exploring and making your selection.

5. Group Community Service – A man beseeches God that there are too many problems in the world and wonders why the good Lord seems unable or unwilling to fix them. To the man’s complete surprise, God answers: “That’s why I sent you.” This is an old story that reminds us of our role as God’s stewards on earth. We have a limited amount of time in our lives and there are, God knows, too many problems to address. Fortunately, the people in your group are more than capable of doing, solving, fixing or generally sprucing up just about anything. You will reap as many benefits – including a great sense of camaraderie – as those you try to help. Now, having walked together in faith to find balance in life, center with God, nurture a better faith life with family, and find faith in the workplace, it’s time to look around and ask what can be done for the community. The world will truly be a better place because of your efforts.

Questions – Think of community service projects you have admired. What are the qualities of these projects that set them apart from others? Examples might be Scouting projects, church programs, local government activities, neighborhood efforts, non-profit projects, fundraising efforts, etc. What lessons can you apply to a proposed community project? Why is it an essential call of faith to offer ourselves in service? Do you feel good when you are involved in giving back to the community (be honest)? Why or why not? What can be done so that you may give in order to truly receive? Now, take a session or two to plan a group service activity. Designate people in the group to make phone calls, make arrangements and confirm dates. And remember to have fun, for God delights in our good works.

For complete meeting guides – including group exercises, prayer and scripture references, humor and food for thought, see our book “Fuel” available at www.faihbalance.com and at www.avemariapress.com