

## Reflection Beginning With an Issue or Paradox

### Recommended for Common Lesson Two Year D

Like the Microscope Method, the Issue Method begins from life, from something that has happened which involves someone in the group and which that person is willing to share. But the Issue Method tends to be more analytical. Because it does not rely on developing an image or a metaphor, an issue is something we think about, a concept or idea which expresses a tension in our lives.

The Issue Method is especially useful in clarifying values. It focuses on a key factor of the human condition. Salvation by works does not succeed because, no matter how hard we try, we still find ourselves caught in paradoxical quandaries and coming up short, causing harm even as we do our best to produce something good.

Every event in our lives sufficiently significant for us to recall, and from which we wish to learn, can be expressed in terms of a metaphor or an issue. Thus an issue statement is at once personal and universal.

The word “issue” is a technical term when working with the Issue Method of Reflection. For some, an issue is something to be debated, with some taking one side and others opposing it. For instance, someone might speak of the issue of war versus peace in this way. In EFM’s theological reflection, however, the concept of “issue” is somewhat different.

An issue is a balanced statement that has two contrasting (not necessarily opposed) options. The two statements are joined by the conjunction “and.” For instance, an issue for someone may be:

(On the one hand) I love to meet people and do my work  
**AND**  
(on the other hand) I love to be home with my family.

**Process Note:** When should we use the Issue Method? Every event in life may be examined in a multitude of ways. Discerning the issue in an event is one useful way to examine something that has happened. An issue statement can identify the crucial aspects or tensions in an event and thus avoid getting sidetracked on paths which may not be productive. A decision to use an Issue Method is best taken by considering the results wanted. If you are looking for creative insights, another method may be more productive. If you are looking for clarification of what is at stake, then the Issue Method may be the most productive one for your group to use.



This is an issue for anyone whose work involves travel. We can benefit from one or the other, but not both at the same time, yet both are attractive, even necessary. Both aspects of the issue hold Promise, and both hold Cost.

To express fully an issue one must look at the cost and the promise. Then the theological categories of creation, sin, judgment, repentance, and redemption take on new meaning as we begin to perceive the complexities of the world, the inevitability of sin, the call of judgment, a change of heart, and the goodness of God's redemption on our behalf, all within the reality of God's constant transforming purpose.

An issue can be described in the following ways. It refers to the conflicting forces within a person in response to a given situation. "I" is always the subject of an issue, and the issue is always stated in terms that describe the two or more conflicting sides of the tension within "me." An issue is internal—it delineates what is going on inside.

An issue is universal; it delineates not only how I feel but also how all people feel at one time or another. An issue is not true for everyone at every moment, but it is always true for everyone at some moments in life. (If the issue you write for your group is not one you have personally known, throw it out. This provides one good test of its universality.)

An issue always involves tension, the pull caused by conflicting forces within me. (This obviously does not mean that everyone is always caught in tension, but whenever one has an issue to face, one is in tension.) An issue delineates forces which are simultaneous—the forces are active within me at the same time.

An issue is actual, not moralistic. It refers to the way things are within me, not the way they should or might be. A statement like "I feel all sorts of hostility toward demanding people, but I know I should love all people" is a moral judgment, not a statement of an issue.

An example of a correctly written issue which would meet the above standards is, "I am challenged by the possibilities of new opportunities, and I enjoy the old comfortable ways that provide the stability I need." Another example of an issue statement is, "I enjoy my work which requires much of me, and I need my free time to be a support to my family."



## Identifying

### 1. PRESENT AN INCIDENT FOR REFLECTION

**The Presenter** offers a succinct account from which the group may be prepared to learn. The event should be personal and it should be concluded. This is not a time to relate an ongoing problem. Preferably the event should be compact. Often we learn better from less dramatic events because events that are extremely powerful overwhelm our ability to reflect. We can easily be caught up in the power of the story.

The presenter should tell a personal story in a “here and now” manner rather than tell about the story or interpret it. The best questions to answer are those that begin with who did what, when, and where. The presenter should not be especially concerned at this point with why something happened or how the circumstances came to be.

**Mentor’s Note:** The mentor facilitates the telling of the story by providing a relaxed climate and perhaps helping the presenter start with a question such as: “Tell us what happened.”

### 2. OUTLINE THE INCIDENT AND DECIDE ON THE PLACES OF TENSION OR TURNING POINTS AND SELECT ONE

**The Presenter** assists by pointing out what he or she believes are the crucial turning points of the account. These are points of tension or focal points from which the presenter is willing to learn. Feelings are a useful guide to identify the crucial moments.

**The Group** helps the Presenter identify the “heart” or crucial turning points in the account. With the presenter’s agreement, select one to explore further.

**Mentor’s Note:** Help the presenter and group members identify moments of action or turning points when there was a choice to be made. Help the presenter identify the feelings that were manifest.

### 3. STATE THE ISSUE

**The group** develops an issue statement and the presenter should be content with the issue statement before the group proceeds. This may be done by identifying various pressures that bear on the focal point selected by the group. It may be possible to mix and match various aspects of the issue. For instance, an issue such as:

**Mentor’s Note:** An issue is a balanced statement articulated as two positive phrases connected by “*and*” or “*but*.” One statement should not be the contrary of the other. Both should be distinct choices.



(On the one hand) I love to meet people and do my work  
**AND**  
(on the other hand) I love being home with my family.

could have been developed from a series of declarations such as:

I love meeting people  
I love to travel  
I love my work

I love my family  
I love to be at home  
I want to fulfill my responsibilities

To develop the issue statement we can mix and match these declarations. One way to be clearer is to add a phrase such as, “on the one hand. . .on the other hand” or “I want. . .and I want. . .” Thus the group can also phrase the issue as:

I want to meet people and do my work  
**and**  
I want to be home with my family.

**Note: Do not use negative statements to form an issue.**

#### 4. IDENTIFY AS INDIVIDUALS WITH THE ISSUE

Does the issue echo in the lives of other group members? An issue is a universal statement but it must also echo in the lives of everyone participating in the reflection. It is most helpful at this point if everyone can provide a personal example.

### Exploring

#### 5. EXPLORE THE DIMENSIONS OF THE ISSUE

Now is the time to complete the picture which the issue suggests. Bring out its dimensions by analyzing the **Cost** and the **Promise** of the opportunities the issue offers.

**Process Note:** An issue is a universal statement which is true to everyone’s life, but is also personal. While we do not experience the same things in life, we do experience the same issues, each in our own way. The key to the reflection is to find that issue which will provide energy so that the group can proceed with the reflection.

**Process Note:** It will be difficult to proceed with enthusiasm unless the group can buy into the issue as one that speaks to all.

**Process Note:** A way to learn arises by examining the space between the dimensions of the issue. To chart this on newsprint, leave a space in the center and fill it with an exploration of theological questions. This reminds us that we are not outside but in the midst of the issue.



I want to meet people and do my work	I want to be with my family
<b>Cost</b>	<b>Promise</b>
<b>Promise</b>	<b>Cost</b>
<b>Cost</b>	<b>Promise</b>

List all that each aspect of the issue promises or costs. When you have completed this step, decide how to proceed. One way is to continue using the Issue Method as a way of clarifying values and gaining insights. The other is to use the issue and its dimensions as a verbal picture to examine from a theological perspective.

### Option A

*Emphasizes Moral Theology*

#### Connecting

##### 6. EXAMINE THE TRADITION

**The group** brainstorms for stories or accounts from the Christian Tradition which echo the issue statement. Select a text and examine it carefully. Have someone read it aloud. A second reading from another translation may be helpful.

##### 7. EXPLORE THE TRADITION

**The group** prepares an issue statement that emerges from the text and examines the Cost and the Promise dimensions of the statement which emerged from the Tradition source.

### Option B

*Emphasizes Systematic Theology*

#### Connecting

##### 6. EXPLORE THE WORLD OF THE ISSUE

**The group** examines: What is it like living in the world of the issue in all its dimensions? This describes the world of life in the “gap” between the two sides of the issue.

If there is time, now is the moment to ask questions from a theological perspective. What is negative or destructive? What happens that gets our attention or calls us up short? What signifies a change of heart and minds? What brings healing, reconciliation, hope, promise, and cause for celebration?

**Process Note:** Option A moves the reflection to a consideration of ethical and moral questions.

Option B introduces the theological questions (creation, sin, judgment, and redemption) as a way to explore the issue.



## 7. EXPLORE THE TRADITION

**The group** brainstorms for items from the tradition that echo the issue selected. Select one and ask the perspective questions.

**Process Note:** This step often happens spontaneously. If it does, just let it flow and, if questions arise, clarify for the group what is going on. Remember, a theological reflection is best done as an extended conversation.

## 8. BEGIN THE DIALOGUE AMONG THE SOURCES BY COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE PERSPECTIVES FROM STEPS 6-7(A) or 6-7(B)

Compare and contrast your conclusions in the two previous steps. How do they match? How are they different? What does the Tradition say that informs and provides a new perspective on the issue? What feelings have emerged for you?

**Process Note:** We often learn when we state our positions to others, so this step is important as a transition to a point when we can glean insights.

## 9. HEAR FROM THE CULTURE SOURCE

We live in a universe that contains diverse cultures. How do these challenge, affirm, or ignore what you have examined thus far? You may decide to select one item from Culture on which to focus.

## 10. BRING IN THE POSITION SOURCE

What do you believe? What is your position? Do you find yourself in agreement with one side or the other, or are you torn between equally attractive but different positions? Does this lead you to reconsider what you believe? What are you willing to defend?

**Process Note:** Insights may occur along the way, and it is good to notice them and mark them down for future examination. The fruit of reflection is in what we learn so it is important to take sufficient time to gather these fruits, to identify our insights.



## Applying

### 11. IDENTIFY INSIGHTS AND QUESTIONS

What have you learned, or what have you affirmed that you already knew, about which you now feel even more strongly? What insights have you gained? What questions remain for you?

### 12. DECIDE ON IMPLICATIONS

You have discovered something new or affirmed something old. What are the implications of these conclusions? What will you do with these conclusions? What help may you need to pursue a particular course of action?

---

**Process Note:** Reflection does not stop with the end of a seminar. Participants may share what they have learned and decided long after the reflection is over. It may be good to check in from one week to another and identify what may have been learned in the interim.





