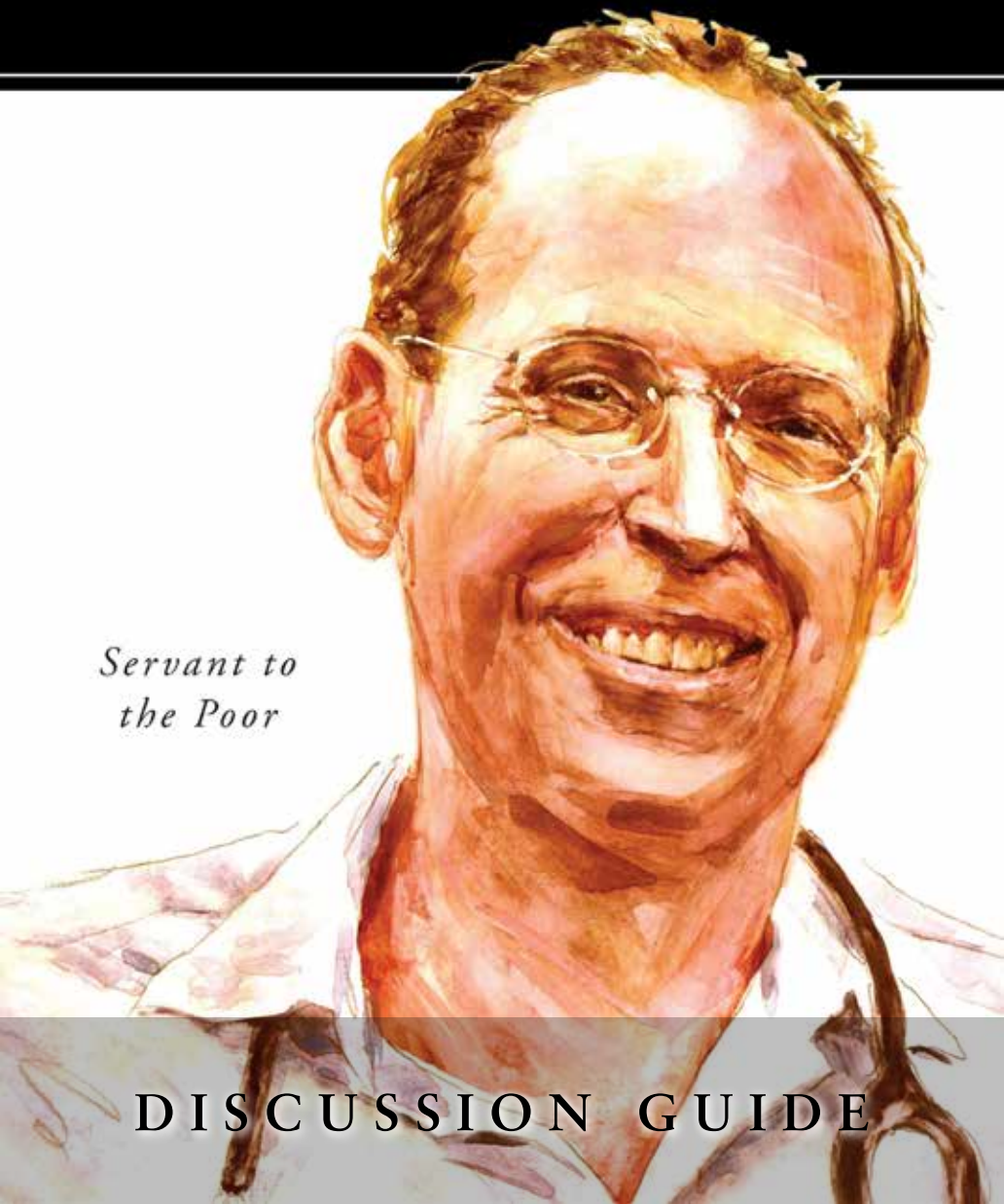


JENNIE WEISS BLOCK

# PAUL FARMER

*Servant to  
the Poor*

DISCUSSION GUIDE



## About the Book

Bill Gates has called Paul Farmer one of the most amazing people he has ever met. CNN medical correspondent Dr. Sanjay Gupta says that “if pure altruism exists in humans, it probably looks a lot like Dr. Paul Farmer.”

In *Paul Farmer: Servant to the Poor*, Jennie Weiss Block introduces readers to this physician and medical anthropologist of international stature whose Catholic faith has driven him to work untiringly to make a preferential option for the poor in health care. Farmer, with his colleagues at Harvard University and Partners In Health, has been instrumental in bringing the fruits of modern medicine to millions of the poorest people in the world, in places like Haiti, Rwanda, Peru, Russia, Malawi, and West Africa during the recent Ebola crisis. Challenging the conventional wisdom of global health experts, Dr. Farmer has shown it is possible to deliver high-quality medical care on a large scale in settings of great poverty and to build communities around the globe where good health and hope prevail.

## About the Author

Jennie Weiss Block, OP, is a Dominican laywoman, a practical theologian, and an author who has taught theology and lectured widely on theological topics. She is coeditor of *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Orbis Books, 2013) and wrote a chapter of *Haiti after the Earthquake* (Public Affairs, 2011). Her book *Copious Hosting: A Theology of Access for People with Disabilities* (Continuum, 2002) is considered a seminal text in disability theology. She has served as chief adviser to Dr. Paul Farmer since 2009 and was his chief of staff in his role as United Nations deputy special envoy under President Bill Clinton.

# Discussion Guide

## Chapter One

1. Jennie Weiss Block details some significant and unusual moves by the Farmer family during Paul's childhood. What do you suppose Paul means when he says these experiences "liberated us from middle-class expectations"? And why might it be good to be "liberated" from such expectations?
2. How might have Paul's experiences of Uncle Jim impacted him? What experiences may you have had with people with special needs, and how might these have impacted you?
3. Understanding the ministry and the murder of Archbishop Romero was a moment of conversion for Paul. Has learning about the life of any prominent Christian inspired you deeply or called you to deeper faith?
4. The personal witness of Sr. Julianna DeWolf also served as a catalyst of Paul's conversion. Is there anyone you have personally encountered, or known well, whose way of life has similarly inspired you?
5. How familiar are you with liberation theology, which had such a big impact on the thinking and the life of Paul Farmer? How did you encounter it, and what elements of it have made the biggest impact on you?

## Chapter Two

1. Consider the (rhetorical?) question posed by Paul Farmer at the end of the quotation from his work at the beginning of the chapter. How would you respond to this question, and why?
2. After having his post-college plans foiled once, then a second time, Paul ended up working at the Eye Care Haiti organization. How might this be recognized as providential today? Has God's providence ever worked in (initially) frustrating ways in your own life?
3. What did the woman at the hospital in Léogâne mean by her repeated lament, "*Tout moun se moun, tout moun se moun*" (in Haitian Creole, "We are all humans, we are all humans")? What circumstances have you experienced or learned about that might have prompted a similar lament in you?
4. Consider Paul's conviction that "poverty is not some accident of nature, but the result of historically given and economically driven forces." How does this correspond with the ways you have thought about or experienced poverty?
5. Paul's story is about what it looks like to "make a preferential option for the poor in health care." But health care is only one area of life and society, and one in which Paul Farmer has specialized training. In what areas or circumstances or situations could you make a more committed preferential option for the poor? How?

## Chapter Three

1. A married couple having the words “preferential option for the poor” engraved inside their wedding bands is a pretty dramatic statement. What does it say to you about Paul and Didi?
2. Has the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez helped you to make sense of poverty? When, how, and in what ways?
3. What do you suppose Paul means when he says that “as science and technology advance, our structural sin deepens”?
4. Block quotes Paul Farmer’s question, “What might it mean to have a government make an option for the poor?” Consider how you might answer that question, but also consider what your answer would be when the word *government* is replaced by *family*, *parish*, or *comfortable American*.
5. Why does Paul believe that making a preferential option for the poor must necessarily include “engaging the political”?

## Chapter Four

1. Reflect on the passage from Isaiah 58 that opens the chapter. Why did the author choose it? What does it call you to today?
2. Block notes Paul Farmer's "willingness to reflect deeply on theodicy—that is, to consider the reality of how evil is active in the world and to dare to ask the painful question of how and why a good God allows the suffering of innocent people." What is your take on this complex question? And, has reading this book helped you to face and think through the question in a deeper way?
3. What effect has "the loss of innocence" through contact with the evils of the world had on your own spirituality?
4. Consider the description of post-genocide Rwanda at the bottom half of page 82 and the top of page 83. Can you imagine the sort of deliberation and commitment (and, some might add, foolhardiness) it would take to choose to pack up and move oneself and one's family into that environment?
5. This chapter tells the story of the successful creation of a world-class hospital in one of the most deeply troubled nations on the planet. What would you say were the keys to such an accomplishment? Why don't we see more accomplishments like this in the midst of dire world situations?

## Chapter Five

1. What is “the long defeat”? What might it mean to you, in your life, to “make common cause with the losers”?
2. Why would Paul believe that the best way to reduce violence and discord is to help create basic social services and jobs?
3. Do you remember when you first heard the news of the devastating January 12, 2010, earthquake in Haiti? What do you recall about the day, the news coverage, and your reaction?
4. What version of what Block calls “‘Have a Nice Day’ theology” have you encountered? Have you ever found yourself tempted to offer it to others? Why or why not? How does it compare to Kathleen O’Connor’s insistence upon acknowledging the “house of sorrow” that people often must dwell in?
5. Reflect on Paul’s words on friendship, quoted on page 127. How are the realities he talks about part of your own experience of friendship?

## Chapter Six

1. Do you recall the 2014 West African Ebola outbreak? What do you remember about the news reports about it, and your own reactions to it?
2. What must it have been like to be a patient with Ebola, or a doctor treating it, in the conditions described on page 143?
3. What do critics mean when they say that Paul's claims about global health systems are "not realistic, not sustainable, not cost-effective"?
4. Consider learning more about Didi Bertrand Farmer's Women and Girls Initiative in Rwanda. (You can find the organization's website at <https://womenandgirlsinitiative.org/>.) What do you find most striking about it?
5. Are you familiar with Mary's title "Our Lady of Sorrows"? What does it say about her, and why do you suppose Paul Farmer would have "great devotion" to her?



## Conclusion

1. After reading this book, what would you say to or ask Paul Farmer if you were able to visit with him?
2. How would you explain the spiritual practice of *accompaniment* to a friend? How have you seen it lived out—even if it was not called by that name—in your own experience? Can you describe a time when someone offered you the gift of accompaniment?
3. How does the idea of accompaniment “directly oppose the modern idea of an autonomous self” and “challenge the narrowness of a life of self-involvement”?
4. What does it mean to say that “God’s coming among us always passes through . . . the banality of the humblest gestures”? How have you seen this to be true?
5. Consider learning even more about the work of Partners In Health. How would you share about the organization to a friend? If you feel so called, consider supporting it financially. The organization’s website is <https://www.pih.org/>.