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Creating an Atmosphere for Tolerance and Understanding

By Bob Egbert

W

oman driver!” he spat as he jerked the steering wheel and gunned around the car ahead. “You idiot!” he growled a few moments later when someone else pulled into the lane ahead of him.

Chawinist, know-it-all, welfare mother, nerd, liberal; there are hundreds of idiosyncratic “names” used to express attitudes. Have you ever been guilty of labeling—even if only in your mind?

Since time began, human beings have been intolerant of or unwilling to accept other peoples’ beliefs and opinions. Bigoted. Prejudiced. Recent examples include massacres in Rwanda and Zaire, constant battles between different religious factions in the Middle East, and reactions to the O. J. Simpson murder trial.

Discrimination and intolerance are not just racial or political issues. Their ugliness surfaces in attitudes ranging from stereotypes to pathological feelings of hatred that ultimately result in prejudicial treatment of others or even violence. Intolerance is more than a matter of political correctness. It can lead to a hurtful behavior toward a wide spectrum of people: the elderly, the mentally ill, welfare recipients, the handicapped, homosexuals, those diagnosed as HIV positive, small children, or anyone perceived as “different” or as a threat.

Intolerance and *prejudice* are often used interchangeably, each denoting a negative attitude toward a group of people. Stereo-

types, a related concept, occur when people draw sweeping conclusions about the personal attributes of a specific group. *Stereotypes* are usually overgeneralized, inaccurate, and resistant to modification.

Understanding the social reasons why people behave as they do is an important step toward empathy with individuals and groups that have been targeted for prejudice and intolerance. Schools and teachers can play a crucial role in helping students develop attitudes of tolerance. This can produce a richness of understanding and cooperation.

Christian schools, especially, have an obligation to develop the moral and mental abilities of young people. For a variety of reasons, ranging from family dysfunction to the general decline in moral values within society, schools are having

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to pick up the moral and social training that used to be done by homes and churches. So if Christian schools do not embrace this task, perhaps no one will.

“Character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human be-

ings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now. Never was any previous generation called to meet issues so momentous; never before were young men and young women confronted by perils so great as confront them today.”¹

But some may ask, Should Adventist schools meddle in highly charged matters such as intolerance? One look at the *Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White*² indicates that the issue is very important. Citations such as “a bigoted spirit excites,” it “blinds men’s eyes,” and “avenues to the soul are closed by” it hold us responsible to do everything possible to overcome, minimize, remove, and guard against prejudice and intolerance in our schools and churches.

Ellen White, in her counsel to Brother A, said,

How to Make It Work

How can a teacher or educational administrator diminish prejudice and increase tolerance? Here are some suggestions:

1. *Don’t blame students or back them into a corner about their feelings toward those who are different.* This invariably puts them on the defensive.

Objective: To allow students to recognize their own feelings about individuals and groups, and encourage them to react in positive and insightful ways to incidents of prejudice and discrimination that they encounter.

2. *Allow students to express their feelings toward other individuals or groups, while being constantly aware of your own feelings that might show prejudice and intolerance.*

Objective: To encourage students and teachers to discover their feelings in an open and serious discussion, and allow students to react to opinions. Facts and fairness are criteria to be applied in an atmosphere of trust.

But what if students discover that they *do* have prejudiced feelings? What if they blurt out hurtful stereotypes or epithets about people because of their color or culture or looks? Respond immediately in a gentle, positive, and instructive way. Many times children say

hurtful things about other people without being completely aware of the meanings attached to such words. While showing sensitivity, kindly but firmly challenge the use of cultural stereotypes and racial epithets.

Teacher education and in-service programs should include mandatory courses in diversity education to aid in understanding other cultures, in generating sensitivity, and in recommending ways to deal with these issues in the classroom.

3. *Campaign for the acceptance of people who are singled out for intolerance and prejudice.*

Objective: To encourage tolerance of different values and behaviors. This does not mean anyone should necessarily abandon his or her own cultural habits and traits, but simply strive to understand different points of view.

This does not imply, of course, that all cultural practices conform to Christian values. So how do we decide which aspects of various cultures ought to come in for “judging”? Assessing the morality of a cultural practice is not the same as passing judgment on people from that culture. However, judging is something that most people do very successfully. Christ taught that all human beings are

truly equal through His example of mingling with people about whom others had passed judgment. He desires that we understand that people are at different points in their religious experience. The greatest wrongs in history have been perpetrated because of the blinders worn by people who rated other people, cultures, and religions as deficient, even in cases where the accusers were not living by their own standards!

4. *Don’t assume that everyone is prejudiced or intolerant.*

Objective: To understand that intolerance can often become a self-fulfilling prophecy in influencing attitudes and behaviors. Look for and encourage the best in everyone.

5. *Recognize and acknowledge the presence of minority students in your class.* It has been said that worldwide, every race is a minority.

Objective: To forthrightly address hostility or discrimination within the classroom rather than to avoid the issue for fear of embarrassing someone. Use tact and common sense when discussing these issues, with the Golden Rule as your guide.

6. *Emphasize similarities between cultures or groups.*

Objective: To focus on commonali-

“You need to work with the utmost diligence to control self and develop a character in harmony with the principles of the word of God . . . You should overcome a morose, bigoted, narrow, fault-finding, overbearing spirit.”³

Good character development and good moral development are both based upon universal principles applicable to all humankind. One example is that of justice, with its demands of liberty, equality, and reciprocity. Teaching these values is one reason why Adventist education was established as a moral alternative to other forms of education.

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Stereotyping

Many of our feelings about people are based on misconceptions, misinformation, or just plain lack of exposure to other

ties because research has demonstrated that this encourages mutual acceptance. Practices common to every culture and group that might be emphasized are sports, body adornment, approaches to cleanliness, cooking, work, courtship, art, religion, education, family values, folklore, government, language, marriage, and music. In large part, it is difference and status that provoke prejudice and intolerance.

7. *Invite a member from a minority group to visit your classroom.*

Objective: To create an atmosphere that allows direct contributions from different cultures. Pay particular attention to the choice of a speaker, so that the person will appeal to your students as representative of his or her group.

8. *Don't deal with the abstract; be specific in dealing with cultural traditions and stereotypes.*

Objective: To encourage your students to explore their own community, school, and family milieu rather than relying solely on the media or history books. The Internet and library loan programs offer a variety of primary sources for investigation.

9. *Incorporate tolerance into the curriculum.*

Objective: To integrate this study into your regular classes. If the students are graded on this, there is a better chance that they will treat the topic se-

riously. Issues of intolerance, prejudice, stereotypes, justice, principle, moral and character development are a necessary component of education. If they aren't included in the curriculum, two questions must be asked: "Why not?" "When will this be developed?"

10. *Maintain the style of teaching with which you feel comfortable.*

Objective: To integrate tolerance and multiculturalism naturally into the curriculum. Many teachers think that it is impossible for them to address these emotionally charged issues using the methods they employ for other content areas and may find themselves approaching it artificially. Relax and try the following approaches with your class:

A. Say, "I'm not sure how this will go, but it looks as if it could be interesting and fun. Shall we give it a try?" This puts the responsibility for success or failure on the group.

B. Practice using affective techniques, as described by Bloom's taxonomy. Many of us are fearful of feelings; therefore, we avoid them. This may be a real opportunity for you to grow in personal ways, along with your students.

11. *Deal with both the cognitive and the affective domain.*

Objective: To understand that even though schools must deal with data and facts, this topic is about feelings, and

feelings must be experienced. Experiment with new techniques such as role playing or simulation games to help the students experience others' feelings about prejudice and discrimination. Such experiences effectively change behavior.

12. *Use humor.*

Objective: To realize that even though these are serious issues, doom and gloom turn students off. Humor and laughter often become the glue that binds cultures and people. We all have funny incidents to relate that can broaden human perspectives. Take care that the humor does not demean any group or culture.

13. *Challenge your own thinking about intolerance and prejudice.*

Objective: To challenge assumptions even when the topic is not as sensitive as intolerance or prejudice. Often while training counselors, we check for tolerance levels around certain issues. Two issues that often spark anger are child abuse in any form and violence toward women. We often ask graduate students to take two surveys that check attitudes: a dogmatism test that helps identify students or teachers who hold strong prejudices; and a social distance scale, with representation from religious, sexual, political, handicapped, and ethnic groups, which asks how the respondent feels about such people as his or her involvement with them increases.⁴

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Schools and teachers can play a crucial role in helping students develop attitudes of tolerance.

lifestyles and cultures. Stereotyping, a factor in all forms of communication, can create short cuts to assumptions about different individuals or groups. It is easy to say, "I like Chinese food," and then generalize that all Chinese people are good cooks. Upon seeing the files of a low IQ student transferring into his or her school, it is easy for a teacher to conclude that the student will have difficulty learning when, in fact, the child may be successful in many ways.

Stereotyping limits one's understanding of a person by assuming that certain characteristics fit regardless of experience or information. The same is true with intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry, even if we believe that we are free of such thinking.

To avoid stereotyping persons from

any specific population subgroup, we may need to dig deep to find the precious qualities of empathy, respect, genuineness, and understanding—basic Christian characteristics that are fundamental to communicating and establishing relationships.⁵

A required course for elementary education majors at Santa Clara University in California is entitled "Introduction to Teaching in a Multicultural Society." Over the years, the emphasis has changed from promoting equity, tolerance, and improved human relations through the mediums of curriculum and instructional strategies, to one that encourages a critical examination of racism and other forms of oppression in order to develop student empathy and advocacy. Films and videos provide views of a world some may not have experienced before—or have even known existed. Students read articles and discuss various points of view. Teaching methods have changed from lecture to discussion and other student-interactive processes. Students are required to donate 10 hours of community service and to keep a reflective journal. This kind of program would also work well in other classes from elementary through college level.⁶

Not only must teachers be flexible in their thinking, but they must also allow that same adaptability to their students. Flexibility in teaching methods and freedom to experiment are essential to provide experiential situations that will inform students about differences.

Absolutes and Pilgrimages

We are often caught up in what Wentz describes as the Demon of Absolutes. Many times, rigid thinking forms around principles and moral behavior based on individual belief systems, rather than universal moral principles. To become more tolerant and understanding does not mean abandoning biblical counsel on how to behave and what is essential to eternal life, but we do need to treat other people with respect and be willing to accept new information and incorporate it into our behavior.

As we study the examples that Christ has given us in the New Testament, we will become more tolerant and accepting of others. Think of the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the lepers, and the fishermen whom He worked with daily, without a hint of prejudice or intolerance. He even shared His gospel of the kingdom with Samaritans and Gentiles, foreigners despised by the Jewish people, who thought they had an exclusive claim to salvation.

We must, of course, find a balance between our commitment to truth on the one hand and, on the other, seeking to promote tolerance on issues that do not have eternal significance. We find this through prayerful study and in developing a close relationship with Christ. We must honor the "11th commandment" with the same fervor as the other 10—"Do unto others" as Christ would have treated them—not as we think they should be treated.

Although Wentz' discussion about the Demon of Absolutes speaks particularly about religion and why people do bad things in its name, the concept may be generalized to different kinds of attitudes. Wentz suggests that one absolute is that no one understanding of truth is the whole truth. All of us have limited perceptions of reality. Absolutes prevent us from using our minds in enlightened and transformed ways.⁷

We need to become what Wentz de-

finishes as pilgrims: "At the heart of the pilgrim's way is the knowledge that he is free. He is bound to no system . . . His only loyalty is to those who are in need and to the discipline (teaching) that has taught him the art of caring."⁸ "The pilgrim is free to be where he is needed . . . he must be free to exist for others . . . The pilgrim knows that life is a matter of 'we,' not 'I'; it is a pilgrimage with neighbors, seen and unseen."⁹ It is important for us to open our eyes to a world that the church has always seen as interrelated, and to reflect on our attitudes toward people who are not exactly like us—even those who sit next to us on the pew or in the desks that fill our classrooms. ✍

Resources

One way to teach social studies and geography is through exposure to other cultures' customs, food, myths, stories, dress, climate, topography, families, and values. Reviewing attitudes and putting into practice some principles of tolerance and good communication are also necessary.

The Social Studies School Service has a rich supply of reasonably priced simulations, videos, and interactive learning activities for teaching about prejudice and tolerance. Social Studies School Service, 10200 Jefferson Boulevard, Room 1211, P.O. Box 802, Culver City, CA 90232-0802 (1-800-421-4246).

Another excellent resource is *Teaching Tolerance*, a journal published by the Southern Poverty Law Center, 400 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 35104 (Fax 205-264-3121). They also have two video series available free of charge with students and teacher manuals: *The Shadow of Hate*, a 40-minute video, 128-page illustrated text and complete lesson plans; and the *Civil Rights Teaching Kit*, video and publications.

Look in your local area for rich resources—you are only bound by your imagination and creativity.

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