

Teaching Tolerance

As I sit writing this article in the library of the Yakima Nation, I am surrounded

by items relating to this Native American culture—portraits of tribal elders, a wall of mounted and preserved salmon, and a picture of See Ya Wa Lee dressed in deerskin and beads. Virtually everything, including the books and magazines, are native-oriented. If I hadn't spent time in places like this before, I might feel out of place and awkward because everything seemed unfamiliar. What we don't understand, we tend to fear.

Prejudice is an attitude of aversion and hostility toward certain people simply because of their membership in a particular group. Merely by being so classified, they are presumed to have the negative qualities ascribed to that group. Let me illustrate this aversion.

In the college courses I teach in counseling and psychology, I sometimes ask students to name groups with which they would have difficulty interacting at varying levels of social intensity, from casual contact to inviting them home to dinner or having their child contemplate marriage with a member of this group. Students' responses include a broad spectrum of people, such as those with religious differences, teenagers, police, African-Americans, the elderly, the disabled, homosexuals, tall people, and drug pushers. Inevitably, homosexuals

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and drug pushers gather the highest number of negative votes. When I ask why, students respond: "Look at the bad things they do," and "Their behavior is so totally immoral."

If you reacted the same way, think for a moment why you have these feelings. Are they based on who the person is or what he or she does?

Interestingly enough, each one of us is a member of one or more minorities. These include religious, cultural, and political groups; classifications based on physical attributes (height, weight, facial features, skin or hair color, speech patterns, disabilities), age, socioeconomic status, career or profession, etc. Think for a moment about your affiliations. Have you been insulted or discriminated against because you are tall, overweight, female, speak with an accent, belong to a particular racial or ethnic group, or because of your religion? How did this make you feel? How did you react? This article will discuss characteristics of minority groups, then offer some activities to help teachers discuss prejudice and discrimination with students within a Christian context.

Minority Group Characteristics

What are the characteristics of a minority group? The following list is adapted from information posted on a World Wide Web site by

Monika Ardel, a sociology professor at the University of Florida.¹

1. *The minority group member suffers prejudice and oppression*

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at the hands of another group. Throughout history, this has been true in almost every civilization where one group feels superior and sees a minority group as different and alien. The majority claim a proprietary claim to power, privilege, and status, and fear that the minority group will take away what is “rightfully theirs.” A dramatic example of this concept is seen in how white supremacists view Jews. Just recently, I talked to a self-declared “Skinhead” who vehemently condemned the “world dominance of Jewish bankers” and stressed the need for the white race to guard against the loss of their power, privilege, status, and influence. He firmly asserted that violence might be required to prevent this calamity.

The book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, by Viktor Frankl² tells of his experiences in the death camps of Auschwitz and Dachau during World War II. His descriptions of keepers' behavior toward prisoners vividly demonstrate the consequences of a majority group's acting on its feelings of superiority in order to devalue and oppress specific minorities.

Identification by Certain Traits

2. *The minority group is symbolically identified by certain traits possessing high social visibility,*³ such as skin color, employment or marital status, speech patterns, weight, membership in a high-profile organization such as the American Civil Liberties Union or a militant anti-abortion group, particular mental or physical handicaps, or clothing. People may become members of such groups either voluntarily (i.e., joining a religious or political group) or involuntarily (i.e., being born into a Tutsi or Serbian family, losing a job, being in a disabling accident).

Adventists, for example, traditionally have been known for certain traits with high social visibility, such as vegetarianism, abstinence from smoking and drinking, observing Saturday as a rest day, believing in the non-immortality of the soul, and adhering to other beliefs that set them apart. How often as an Adventist educator have you had to explain your rationale for being different?

Groups With Strong Affinities

3. *Minorities are self-conscious social*

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*groups that form intense social and psychological affinity with others who are similar to them,*⁴ such as gangs and cults, people who join Alcoholics Anonymous, members of radical political parties, or any other group that feels isolated because of its fundamental differences with the majority group. This may lead them to withdraw from society or to live in tightly knit communities that become known as “Little Italy” or “Chinatown.” Adventists, too, have their enclaves—Loma Linda, Collegedale, Berrien Springs—where they congregate around one or more church institutions, feeling comfortable to live around those with similar beliefs and not needing to constantly “defend” their views.

Objections to Classifications

4. *For the most part, people do not voluntarily become a member of a minority. They are considered to belong to that group because of birth or appearance.*⁵ Because of the discrimination against them, some members may try to camouflage their identity or “pass” as members of the majority culture. Perhaps this explains the aversion that youth seem to have for the religion of their parents. They may be uncomfortable explaining themselves in religious and spiritual terms to a world that doesn't understand or value the traditions of their religion. Think for a moment how difficult it would be, as you were growing up, to have a lifestyle that is significantly different from everyone else's.

Intermarriage With Majority Culture

5. *Minorities may have a high rate of intermarriage with members of the majority culture.*⁶ When this occurs, it indicates

that its ethnic identities and allegiances are weakening. Intermarriage occurs more often in multicultural societies where the groups come into frequent social contact and where there are no strong cultural prohibitions against such relationships. Over time, this tends to produce a more homogeneous society. However, such relationships often face formidable challenges due to disapproval by society and family members.

Attitudes, Not Numbers

6. *Minority is a social, not a numerical concept.*⁷ Certain groups of people may be disenfranchised and denied basic human rights, even though they represent a sizable proportion of a society. For example, although women and children often statistically constitute a majority, their treatment often depends on the policies of the men who hold

The World in Microcosm

The Oklahoma State College of Education has summarized the world in this way:

If we could shrink the Earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people, with all existing human ratios remaining the same, it would look like this:

There would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western Hemisphere (North and South), and 8 Africans.

51 would be female; 49 would be male.

70 would be non-white; 30 white.

70 would be non-Christian; 30 Christian.

50 percent of the entire world's wealth would be in the hands of only six people, and all six would be citizens of the United States.

80 would live in substandard housing.

70 would be unable to read.

50 would suffer from malnutrition.

1 would be near death; 1 would be near birth.

Only 1 would have a college education.

No one would own a computer.

political and social power. Before the American Civil War, in some parts of the South, slaves constituted more than 50 percent of the population, but numbers alone did not win them equal rights.

Persistence of Prejudice

Prejudiced individuals cling to “evidence” that confirms their negative attitudes about certain people or groups, despite conflicting facts and experiences.* For example, students in a course on multicultural issues were asked to list cultural characteristics of Native Americans. One response was “drunken Indian,” the assumption being that all Native Americans drink and therefore, one distinctive behavior of this group would be drunkenness. This is certainly not true, as anthropologists have nowhere found a culture that is constantly inebriated and non-functional.

Prejudiced people may “make exceptions” for certain members of a minority group while clinging to their opinions about the group as a whole. However, as they get to know more people in a particular group, their attitudes may have to undergo adjustment as it becomes clear that many members of the group do not fit the negative stereotypes. Therefore, it is helpful for young people to be exposed to people of other cultural, ethnic, and religious groups to help them see that all human beings share many of the same characteristics.

Our attitudes about minorities are to a large extent the product of parental and peer coaching and media influence. We tend to draw conclusions based on what we see and experience and then behave toward others in accordance with these beliefs.

The socialization of children by significant others often reinforces prejudice and intolerance. I grew up on my grandfather's farm where inmates from “The Bughouse” (a mental institution) were quite responsibly employed. I believed that because they were mentally defective, they were therefore socially beneath us. The adult family members' attitudes made it clear that these persons' lot in life was to do things for the people “above” them, including us grandchildren. Thus, I was

introduced to the grouping and labeling of people.



Years later, while I was away at school, some of the inmates who had been so good to me as a child were integrated into the community and began to live on their own. While I was at home for the summer, they sometimes dropped by my parents' place to visit. When we saw them com-

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ing, our whole family would hurry outside to visit them on the front lawn, rather than inviting them into the house. Though welcomed and treated kindly, they still were kept "in their place." At some point, I began to question why they were being treated so unequally. My newly gained maturity and experiences allowed me to rethink my attitude toward them and to change how I thought about others who were different from me.

Since prejudice is characterized by feelings of superiority and fear, it can lead to authoritarianism—"rigid, conventional thinking, an obsession with power, submission to authority, highly judgmental values, and a cynical outlook."⁹ Authoritarianism is a highly controlling and defensive/protective parenting style. It is important for students to understand the value of diversity so that they can reduce their hostility and fear toward people who are different from themselves and apply these principles in their future parenting behavior.

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Exercise 1: What Do You Think?¹⁰

Instructions: Please complete each phrase to form a sentence. Try not to spend a lot of time rationalizing or thinking—simply complete the items as quickly as possible.

Teenagers. . .

People who work in factories. . .

A person who can't walk. . .

People who don't speak English. . .

Catholics [or Moslems or Jews]. . .

Men who do women's jobs probably. . .

(Note to teachers: You may enlarge the list to encompass your local area and its diversities, as well as adjust the wording to fit the ability level and maturity of your group. It is important to discuss each item non-judgmentally and/or review student responses to gather information for further instruction in specific areas. The list I use in my classes has about 26 items, and we spend much time deliberating issues relating to "Why?")

Exercise 2: Being Different, Feeling Different¹¹

Think of a situation in which you felt "dif-

Exercise 3: Find Someone Who. . .¹²

Speaks a different language than you do.
Has been excluded from something because of age.

Has ever wished he or she was from a different background.

Knows his or her heritage.

Has ever "discriminated" against another person because of appearance.

Is male and has been called a sissy.

Has, in jest or anger, called someone a "retard."

Has ever sat on the lap of a crippled person.

Celebrates Kwanzaa.

(Note to teachers: Adapt your list creatively. The directions suggest that students find candidates for the exercise from their

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ferent." Describe it in the space below. How old were you? What were you doing? Who else was there? List words that describe your feelings relating to that situation. How do you think that experience has affected you and the way you see others?

(Note to teachers: This is a transitional exercise from personal experience to generalized attitudes about others. But more important, it raises the very personal issue of "How did it feel to be treated in a certain way because of who you were and the group to which you belonged?")

peers, but some adults could share their experiences as invited guests. This would be an excellent opportunity for students to see adults in action [role models] as they share their struggles with various issues.)

Exercise 4: Discrimination¹³

Scenario 1

Being left-handed is really hard for me. People sometimes make fun of me for the way I write. I feel really different, and sometimes, people make me feel dumb. . .

To be tolerant in a multicultural society means to face stereotypical attitudes, to be willing to examine our beliefs even when we think they are right, and to accept others at face value as children of God.

Scenario II

I once saw a person in a wheelchair who was having a hard time pushing it up a ramp to a door. Someone waiting to enter the building shouted at the handicapped person because he couldn't get by. I think I should have . . .

(Note to teachers: In a short period of time, several situational scenarios can be created based on the statements from Exercise 3. The answers propel students to consider their behaviors toward others, not just attitudes. If people are convinced that they should behave in a certain way, they are more likely to act on those beliefs.)

Barbara Bontempo, an associate professor of English at SUNY College in Buffalo, New York, offers activities that explore prejudice in young adult literature through drama and role-playing. She suggests that the adolescent years are a good time for exploring issues relating to discrimination, prejudice, and cultural differences since adolescents often perceive themselves as a "culture" apart from the mainstream. She believes that youth can achieve an empathetic understanding of human feelings through dramatization and role playing.

Bontempo invites students to become actively involved in scenes from Mildred Taylor's book, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, through role-playing, improvisation, "hot seating," (having students role play to experience intolerance or prejudice firsthand), and tableau (freeze frame). She invites students to become actively involved in scenes from the book.¹⁴

(Note: Adventist teachers can use Bontempo's system to discuss our religious heritage. Certainly our early pioneers must have felt distressed as an emergent minority religious group. Materials on Adventist history provide rich resource material for this technique.)

Two other wonderful online sources are The Teaching Tolerance Center (<http://www.splcenter.org>),* and the Simon Wiesenthal Center Museum of Tolerance (<http://tst.wiesenthal.com>).*

One warning: Discussion of these issues is risky. People may get angry, and feelings may be hurt. Teachers will need to assess the maturity of their students and structure the discussion carefully after outlining Christian principles that can be applied to real life. Oklahoma State University has produced a Full Value, No Discount Contract, in which students agree to:

- Fully value, not discount self,
- Honor your feelings,
- Give open and honest feedback,
- Fully value and not discount others,
- Respect time with the group,
- Respect the integrity of the group,
- Respect the feelings of others,
- Be open to receiving feedback,
- Fully value and not discount the learning process and activities,
- Assume responsibility for your own participation,
- Assume responsibility for your own learning, and
- Assume responsibility for addressing your own limits.¹⁵

To be tolerant in a multicultural society means to face stereotypical attitudes, to be willing to examine our beliefs even when we think they are right, and to accept others at face value as children of God. Frankel says: "There are two races of men in this world, but only these two—the 'race' of the decent man and the 'race' of the indecent man."¹⁶ He must certainly mean that those who are decent show love and tolerance, do good deeds for others, and show compassion for all, while the indecent act upon their fears, prejudice, and misunderstandings of others.

Each of us must choose how we will treat the person who is "different" from us. Jesus said: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you,

that ye also love one another" (John 13:34, NEB).¹⁷

* Because World Wide Web addresses change frequently, one of the best ways to find information is to use a search engine and type in key words such as *intolerance*, *prejudice*, *multiculturalism*, and *teaching tolerance*. These will produce a wealth of sites that include lesson plans, workshops, online dialogue, etc.

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Psychology at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee, where he teaches courses on multiculturalism and diversity.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Monika Ardelit's World Web site, http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/ardelit/V_prejudice. (Note: The easiest way to access this site is to type the Yahoo search box, "prejudice and racism," then go to the Web pages.)
2. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1959).
3. Ardelit.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. See <http://home.okstate.edu/homepages.nsf/toc/chpc16/>. (Note: The easiest way to access this site is to go to the Yahoo search engine and type in "multiculturalism page 1)."
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Mildred D. Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989); B. Bontempo and R. Jerome, "Experiencing Diversity in Adolescent Literature." Workshop presentation at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Baltimore, Maryland, November 19, 1989. You can view a lesson plan for this exercise at: <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring95/Bontempo.html>.
16. Frankl, p. 137.
17. Quoted from the New English Bible. ©The Delegates of the Oxford University Press and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press 1961, 1970. Reprinted by permission.