

## IS IT DISCRIMINATION?

**Will Penner**

**“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for July 1–6, 2014.**

### MAKING THE CONNECTION

“As a high school student, I loved pep rallies. We were in the gym instead of the classroom, we were told to stand up instead of being told to sit down, and we were encouraged to yell instead of being asked to be quiet. What could be better?”

“After a couple of decades of church-based youth ministry, I went back into a public high school as a teacher. I found that my views on pep rallies had changed. First of all, I’m older and don’t particularly like a room full of top-of-the-lungs screaming as much as I used to. Aside from the fact that pep rallies are basically an institutionally-driven promotion of mass hysteria, I am not particularly fond of their overall message.

“We bring out the mascot of the other team, mock it, ridicule it, and actively engender an us-versus-them mentality. We play up all the stereotypes, using battle imagery and violence metaphors; and we give prizes to people who make the most noise or dress up in the most outlandish ways because they are demonstrating ‘school spirit.’ On the other hand, we ask kids to respect diversity, to avoid bullying behavior, and to demonstrate sportsmanship.

“In what other ways do we promote discrimination in our Sunday school classes, youth groups, denominational rallies, and other Christian events? I wonder.” —Will

### MEET THE WRITER

**Will Penner** has been in ministry with young people for more than two decades in Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches, in public and private schools, and as a popular speaker at youth retreats, camps, and conferences. He has served as the editor of both leading professional journals of youth ministry and has authored or edited a number of youth ministry curricula and books, the latest of which is *It Happens: True Tales from the Trenches of Youth Ministry* (<http://www.amazon.com/It-Happens-Tales-Trenches-Ministry/dp/1937734048>). Most important, he is the husband of his amazing wife, Christine, and the father of five children ranging in age from five to twenty-two.

## STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint
- markers

## PLUGGED IN

- + “The Effects of Prejudice and Discrimination” is a great introductory video.  
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0AtRk4tx13k>)

## CHECKING IN

Ask the youth to identify groups of people that don't tend to like each other and groups of people that are not accepted. Record their answers on newsprint. Encourage them to think both locally and globally. Some groups of people may be rivals; others may be negatively stereotyped. If people have trouble getting started, toss out some of these ideas:

- Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia
- Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland
- Bloods and Crips in American cities
- Hatfields and McCoys in Kentucky and West Virginia
- Capulets and Montagues from *Romeo and Juliet*
- Whites and Blacks in the pre-Civil War South
- The United States and Al-Qaeda
- Axis and Allies during World War II
- capitalists and communists
- jocks and geeks
- preppies and goths
- pregnant teenagers
- drunk drivers
- drug dealers
- prostitutes
- gang leaders
- illegal immigrants
- people from other schools
- people from other Christian denominations
- people from other world faiths
- people from other countries
- people of other races
- girls
- boys

## EXPLORING THE WORD

**Scripture: Luke 10:25–37**

The story of the good Samaritan is one of the most well-known parables, not only of the parables Jesus told, but of those anyone has ever told. It is such a common story that the term *Samaritan*

has come to represent those who do good to other people. Most of Jesus' original audience would have been repulsed by the thought of Samaritans. Understanding a little of the Jewish-Samaritan animosity is helpful to a fuller interpretation of the parable.

The original tribes of Jacob separated into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. As different people invaded cities in the regions, some Jews were taken into captivity or exiled from their homeland. Others were allowed to stay, and many married new Syrian and Mesopotamian settlers. As the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile, many of them hated their former neighbors, particularly those who had married people from other lands. The returning Jews considered them traitors to their faith and culture. All of this happened several hundred years before Jesus told the parable, during which time the hatred between Israel and Samaria solidified and grew stronger.

Invite group members to consider the context in which Jesus told the parable. While Jesus was trying to teach people how to live a godly life, a lawyer decided to test Jesus, to ask him which commandment was most important. Jesus responded not as he was expected to—not with one commandment, but with two. The lawyer continued the cross-examination by trying to pin him down: What does he mean by neighbor? Jesus again responded not as expected—not with an answer, but with a story. His story cast as the bad guys two people who were normally well thought of in the Jewish faith and community; he cast as the good guy a Samaritan, who would have been on the culture's most despised list.

Ask the group to think of some of the groups of people they identified earlier, people who hate each other with that kind of passion. Then invite them to imagine Jesus telling the same story to an audience consisting of mostly one side and using someone from the hated side as the story's hero. Take a few moments to let the idea sink in and to allow the youth to reflect on how the audience would feel. Then ask volunteers to talk about their reflections.

**Why would the story be awkward for Jesus' audience?**

**How would people in the audience respond to the story?**

Invite the youth to take a moment to think about the people toward whom they react most negatively. Ask them to imagine that they are lying on the side of the road hurt and needing help.

**What would happen if one of "those people" came by and treated you like a neighbor?**

**How would that change your perception of them?**

**In what ways do you perpetuate negative stereotypes about the groups of people you are a part of because you choose to walk by on the other side of the road?**

## **SHARING IN PRAYER**

Invite the youth to pray in silence as you say a closing prayer:

*"Gracious Creator, thank you for fashioning all of us in your image. (Read aloud some of the names of people the youth listed earlier, and then speak the name of every person in the group.) Help us to remember that we are all your precious children and that you want us to get along. Give us strength to treat one another as brothers and sisters, neighbors, all people who bear your image. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*

### **TAKING IT FURTHER**

- Consider coming up with an advertising campaign for the church, the school, or the youth room that would include messages to help people to look beyond their initial gut reactions and to see other people as they really are. Invite the youth to come up with catchy phrases and to include images or photographs that illustrate the text.
- Some of the more tech-savvy youth could work on a video-driven campaign that could be emailed to the church or shown during worship as a reminder to the adults in the congregation. The YouTube video “Anti-Discrimination Advert” is an example (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wr3ujTt89A>).

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