

behind the *isms*

Dixon Kinser

MAKING THE CONNECTIONS

“One of the most important yet most difficult parts of ministry is cultivating Christian community. In our culture, we are prone to division and exploitation, so the way faith communities embody Jesus’ call to unity or “oneness” is a demonstration of God’s good news. This lesson is designed to get take a look at the “isms” that divide our communities so that we can discuss them, confess, and repent. I have had great success taking youth groups through the following exercise; my prayer is that you will as well.” —Peace, Dixon

MEET THE WRITER

Dixon Kinser is a husband, father, speaker, author, musician, amateur filmmaker, and Episcopal priest. He works in youth and young-adult ministry, rides his bike when he can, and takes movies and TV way too seriously. His first book, *Exploring Blue Like Jazz* with Donald Miller, will be released November 2011. Dixon lives with his family in Nashville, Tennessee.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- a Bible
- sticky notes or index cards
- pens
- masking tape
- white board or wall space on which to display the sticky notes or index cards

PLUGGED IN

You may want to show these movies or clips from these movies to get the conversation rolling:

+ *The Help* (2011) is about race and class in the deep South during the 1960s. It’s based on a book of the same name and serves as a reminder to us to wake up to the isms all around us, isms we often can’t see until we are made aware of them.

+ *Mean Girls* (2004) is a great movie about high school struggles. Show the scene in which Cady first enters the school lunchroom and encounters all the cliques.

+ “Community 1x06 Racism” is a short clip from the “Football, Feminism, and You” episode of the 2010 TV show *Community*. The whole episode is great, albeit a little off color in parts; but this interchange between Jeff and Troy would provide a way to introduce questions such as these: *What makes something racist? homophobic? How can we tell an “ism” is at work? Is our culture a little too obsessed with these labels? Can calling someone a racist become oppressive in and of itself?* This clip could introduce all kinds of conversations. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UCzrB6lkY18&feature=related>)

CHECKING IN

Invite people to sit in a circle or in several circles. Ask each person in turn to say his or her name and to answer these questions:

Have you felt excluded from a group? Why were you excluded?

Have you excluded another person? Why did you do so?

EXPLORING THE WORD

Scripture: Colossians 3:1–17 [from *The Message*, if possible]

Make available sticky notes or index cards and pens. Invite the group to brainstorm, creating a list of cliques. Ask people to write on each sticky note or card the name of one of the cliques in their school. (Younger youth may need to hear examples: jocks, goths, emo-kids, burnouts.) Whenever someone writes down the name of a clique, ask him or her to say it out loud. Then post the sticky note or card on a white board or on the wall.

Continue to brainstorm for as long as you like. [Be warned: Some cliques are known by derogatory and offensive names. You will want to determine how comfortable you and your group are with using these words and set boundaries accordingly, making it clear that in order to explore the issue of isms, you may use labels in this setting that, in normal conversation, would be considered offensive. In my experience, the more honest and truthful the kids are, the more punch the gospel lesson will have.] Then invite people to discuss these questions:

Was it difficult or easy to come up with the names of cliques in your school?

Where do the names come from?

How did you learn them?

How can you tell who is in which clique?

Are the labels helpful or hurtful?

Why are so many cliques represented at your school?

Read aloud Colossians 3:1–17 from *The Message* or another easy-to-understand translation. Invite group members to listen so that they are ready to answer this question: *What do you think was going on in the church in Colossae that would prompt this kind of letter?*

Explain that epistles were letters written to communities for communities. They were written to be read out loud in the presence of the whole group and then dealt with accordingly. In this sense, reading the epistles is like reading other people’s mail. We have only one side of the

conversation and can sometimes discern from the one-sided conversation what was going on in the church that inspired the letter. Then ask the group to discuss these questions:

After hearing this part of the letter, what do you think was going on in the Colossian church? Why would this part of the letter be written to them?

Colossians 3:11 names several social and cultural groups; what are they? (Explain that these were all groups that fought against one another and whose members had become Jesus followers. When they came into the church, they brought all their old divisions with them.)

Why is it hard to give up the things that divide us?

In what ways do the divisions of our culture make their way into the church?

Read Colossians 3:8–11 again, substituting the names of the cliques listed earlier for the names listed in the text.

How does the letter sound to you now?

What are the challenges in letting go of old divisions and becoming a new people in Jesus Christ?

What are the divisions you see in your church or youth group?

How could you work to let go of those old divisions? What is scary about letting go of divisions? What is freeing about it?

SHARING IN PRAYER

Invite people to approach the board or wall and, in silence, to read the sticky notes or index cards. Invite them to identify the one or two groups that have hurt or excluded them the most. Then ask each person to find a seat and, in the name and spirit of Christ, to write on a blank sticky note or index card a one-word prayer blessing each group that has hurt him or her. This prayer is an act of reconciliation and may become the first steps of forgiveness.

As you conclude the time of prayer, ask these questions:

How did you experience praying for people who persecute you?

Prayer is often both a precursor and a follow-up to forgiveness. How do prayer and forgiveness play into your community's ability to let go of old divisions?

End this session in a way that is meaningful for your group. The “Sharing in Prayer” time could go in a lot of different directions, opening up space for healing and reconciliation. Consider your group and what God is doing in your community as you determine the closing moments of the session. Or close by inviting the group to pray together The Lord’s Prayer.

TAKING IT FURTHER

Consider these questions: How do *you* see the divisions of an upside-down world being brought into the church, God’s right-side-up community? Who are you prejudiced against? What groups, people, cultures drive you crazy and make you want to judge or reject them? Where does the impulse to exclude them come from? Are you reacting out of an old unresolved hurt?

Also consider these questions: In what ways do you unknowingly collude in the oppression of a particular race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation? Pray that God will reveal the ways you participate in oppression and show you ways to change so that you can act in God's love.

I thought I was enlightened and self-aware, but I was not able to see my own racism. God slowly showed me; and though it was unnerving at first, seeing my own prejudice, borne of white privilege, became liberating. As I was able to repent, my heart began to change in ways that were, well, healing.

Often our deepest biases and prejudices are inherited rather than intentional or mean-spirited choices. Because of the families, classes, and cultures in which we were raised, our biases are simply the way we think the world works. Invite God's Spirit to disrupt your thinking so that you can be free, knowing, as Colossians says, that Christ is all and is in all.

—**devozine** In the Habit (September/October 2011) Copyrighted © 2011 by The Upper Room[®]. All rights reserved.