



## Session 4

# Understanding Diversity

### Purpose

The purpose of this session is to create deeper understanding about what we mean by “diversity.” You will become more aware of your own beliefs and feelings associated with different social groups. You will learn to recognize the negative impact of prejudice and injustice. You will also explore ways to build a more inclusive community.

### Learning objectives

- Share respectfully in the group thoughts and feelings about diversity, prejudice and injustice.
- Question our own assumptions about social groups.
- Understand the cyclical process of socialization.
- Make personal commitments to build an inclusive society.
- Gain a more profound understanding about ourselves.

### Agenda

1. Debrief independent learning assignment
2. Activity: *Tip of the Iceberg*
3. Terms associated with diversity
4. Social perpetuation of injustice
5. Activity: *Global Village*
6. *Things I Learned Growing Up . . .*
7. Activity: *Level Playing Field*
8. Taking action
9. Closing reflections
10. Independent learning assignment
11. Participants’ evaluations

*America is not like a blanket – one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt – many patches, many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread.*

*-Rev. Jesse Jackson, civil rights leader and minister; quoted on PBS Frontline*

Diversity means differences. Individuals are unique and different from one another. We come from different families; we have different cultural backgrounds; and we each have a lifetime of different experiences. It is natural, therefore, to have different opinions. *Understanding Diversity* is not necessarily about reaching agreement. It's about valuing each individual for who he or she is. Openness, understanding and respect are the essential ingredients.

## 1. Debrief independent learning assignment

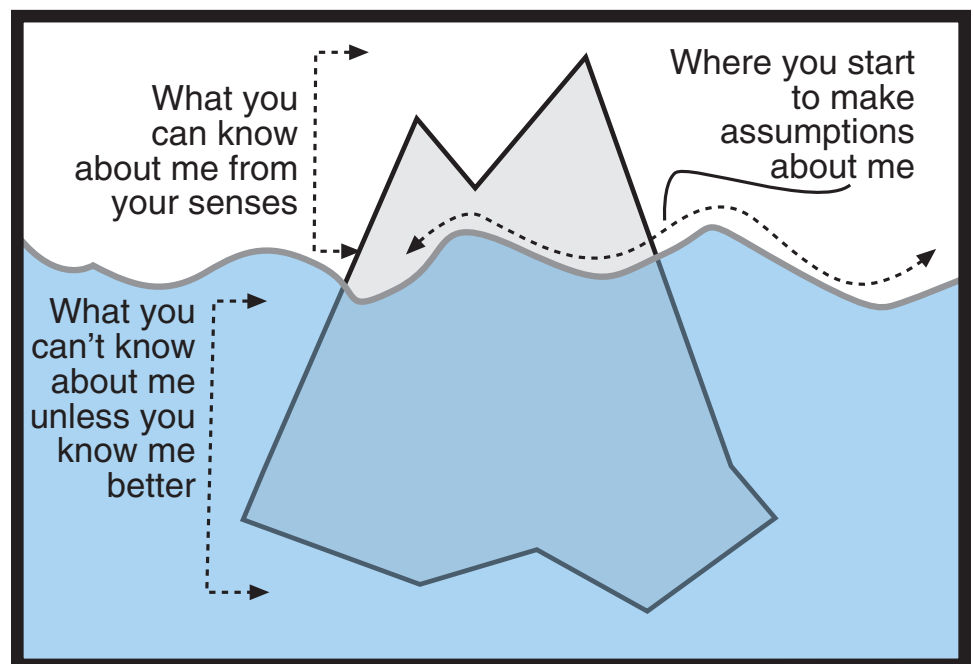
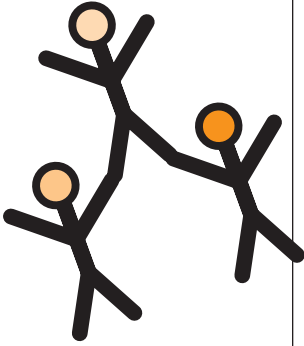
## 2. Activity - Tip of the Iceberg

When you see someone for the first time, what assumptions do you make?

What can you say about that person that you know to be true?

What do you assume to be true about that person?

What are aspects about the person you do not know?



When we make a statement or reach a conclusion without proof or demonstration of proof, we are making an *assumption*. The assumptions we make are based in our experiences, what we have been taught, our values and the emotions we feel.

What do you think?

- Are the assumptions we make about a person generally positive or negative?
- What happens if we make an assumption that turns out to be wrong?

**The paradox of diversity.** We define “diversity” as differences. Does this quote from Ola Joseph, a Nigerian inspirational speaker and author, express a contrary viewpoint?

*Diversity is not how we differ.  
It's about embracing one another's uniqueness.  
-Ola Joseph, Nigerian-born speaker,  
author, trainer, and consultant*

This quote expresses the other side of the diversity story. On one hand, diversity means differences: And, if we believe in the principles of equality and justice, we overlook differences. The principles of justice and equal opportunity require us to *ignore* differences when it comes to making decisions about who we hire, who we rent houses to or who we have as our friends. Yet Mr. Joseph is saying the real essence of diversity is that these differences *do matter*. We must recognize and celebrate our differences. These differences give us our identity – define who we are and make us proud.

### 3. Terms associated with diversity

Defining terms we use when we discuss diversity and related issues isn't as straightforward as you might think. Dictionary definitions fall short when it comes to words that embody hurt, mistrust, guilt and frustration. Democracy is founded on the principle that we can freely discuss differences, yet sometimes it seems as if the divisions between social groups (race, class, gender, religion, culture, generations and sexual orientation) grow deeper. There may be various interpretations of the terms used here. The point is not necessarily to agree about the definitions. What is important is to listen and understand what these terms mean to others.

- Bigotry – intolerant prejudice against anyone different. Example: When a homosexual was nominated for the position of board president, one of the board members discouraged other board members from voting for him because he was “ahh, you know . . . ahh, gay.” *When a homosexual is hired as an elementary school teacher, a parent insists that he is not fit to teach children.*
- Conflict resolution and violence prevention – a nonviolent approach to solving conflict, based on communication and empathy. Example: The board of directors of a neighborhood association was not able to agree on how to allocate funding received for new recreation facilities. Some board members wanted to add basketball courts to the neighborhood park. Others believed the courts would draw undesirable people to the neighborhood. The association's executive director recognized



that the board members were not discussing the issues objectively, and some board members were attacking each other verbally. The executive director arranged for a mediator to work with the board to reach agreement on how to spend the funds. *The Southern Poverty Law Institute publishes lesson plans for teachers to use in teaching students to discuss differences and find solutions to conflict that are acceptable to everyone involved.*

- Culture – socially transmitted human behavior that includes beliefs, language, patterns of activity and products of work. Example: The Community Action Board celebrated the holiday season by asking its members to bring a traditional food dish to a potluck lunch. At the luncheon, each board member shared a story about how his or her family celebrated a favorite holiday. *The celebration of holidays is a typical expression of culture.*

- Cultural sensitivity – being perceptive and responsive to the attitudes, feelings or circumstances of a particular group of people. Example: When a U.S. police officer volunteered to help train officers in Iraq, she tried to learn more about Iraqi culture and the Muslim religion. She learned a few simple words and phrases in Arabic and Farsi and memorized the names (and pronunciation) of major cities, mountains and rivers. She also paid attention to how different the role is for women in Iraq than in the United States.



- Discrimination – the power to see or make fine distinctions; treatment or consideration based on class or category rather than individual merit. This negative treatment of a targeted group gives an advantage to the privileged group. Example: When an opportunity came up to send one board member to the national rally in Washington, D.C., Susan, a single mother who had not graduated from high school, was bypassed in favor of Bob, who served on the board as a CEO (chief executive officer) from the corporate sector. *A freshman in college wanted to join the Kappa Gamma sorority. None of the members asked her to pledge because she was Jewish.* NOTE: “discrimination” is not always negative. The ability to make fine distinctions is sometimes necessary and important.
- Genocide – systematic, planned annihilation of a racial, political or cultural group. Example: From the end of the Civil War in 1865 until the Wounded Knee Massacre in December 1890, the U.S. Army accelerated its campaign against Native American tribes that resisted the westward expansion of white homesteaders. Systematic extermination of American Indians resulted in the disappearance of their aboriginal way of life and their confinement to reservations. This is an example of genocide.
- Harassment – to irritate or torment persistently; to impede or exhaust by repeated attacks. Example: Judy is a new board member. One of the more seasoned board members, Paul, offered to take her to lunch for board orientation. When Judy declined the invitation, Paul suggested a drink after work. Judy told him she needed to get home after work to fix her family dinner, so Paul asked her if she would like to have dessert. Judy said “no” again. The next day Paul called Judy at work and asked

her if she had reconsidered. Judy asked Paul not to call her at work and explained the only time she would be available for board business was at the board meeting. Paul suggested that they “mix business with pleasure” and meet for lunch just to get to know each other better. *Kids are continually mocking and yelling at one of the kids on the block who is overweight.*

- Human rights – basic rights and freedoms to which all human beings are entitled, such as life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law. Example: A young African-American motorist was stopped by the police, and his car was searched. He was questioned about what he was doing and then was told he could go. He broke no traffic laws and there was nothing wrong with his vehicle.
- Inclusive – taking in a great deal of everything; comprehensive. Example: An inclusive society is one that takes in everyone, accepts them as they are, and promotes the expectation that everyone will get along. In an effort to be inclusive, the Human Development Corporation consciously nominated new board members who belonged to the targeted social groups discussed in this session.
- Multicultural awareness – having knowledge about many cultures and ethnic groups. Example: The Kingdom Church held a one-day event featuring clothing, food, music and dance and customs from 20 different countries around the world.
- Oppression – the ongoing unjust mistreatment of a defined group of people by force or authority of the dominant group in society. Example: Recognizing how easy it is to take advantage of people who do not speak English and who have no money or other resources, *Colores del Mundo* recently formed to provide interpreters to Spanish-speaking immigrants so they can find employment, housing and education opportunities.
- Prejudice – a belief or attitude formed without adequate reason or knowledge. Example: When the Community Volunteer Bank, Inc. asked for volunteers to read to youths in the inner city, one of the members stated that she thought it would be too dangerous to go into those schools. *A woman is walking to her car from the store and sees a group of young African-American men wearing baggy pants standing around the car next to hers. She turns back and enters the store, waiting until they are gone.*
- Privileged group – A dominant group that has advantage due to social or physical identity factors alone.
- Racism – a complex system of beliefs and behaviors that acknowledges race as the reason for differences in human character and ability and perpetuates the myth that a particular race is superior to others. Racism oppresses the targeted group(s) and perpetuates advantages for the dominant group. Because of this impact, in simple terms, racism is the end result of “prejudice” plus “power.” Example: A bank loan officer refused to approve the loan application of an African-American couple. They met all the required qualifications, but the home they wanted to purchase was located in a low-income neighborhood.

- Internalized racism – destructive patterns of feelings and behaviors experienced by victims of racism that is turned inward on them and directed at others of the same group. Example: When Julius, who grew up in the projects and never graduated from high school, was asked to serve on the Public Housing Corporation board, he was shocked. He thought, “Why would they want me?” *A young Chinese boy refused to speak Chinese with his family because he wanted to be considered an American.*
- Social perpetuation – the intertwining of culture, institutions and policies that continually reinstate (status quo) or remake (social change) our common understanding and acceptance of social behavior.
- Socialization – the process by which culture is learned; also called enculturation. During socialization, individuals internalize a culture’s social controls, along with values and norms about right and wrong.
- Stereotype – an oversimplified opinion; treating or classifying someone according to a conventional mental image. Stereotyping can be positive as well as negative. Example: Asians are good at math. White people are cold and standoffish.
- Targeted group – A disadvantaged social group experiencing unequal treatment and injustice based solely on belonging to that particular social group.

## 4. Social perpetuation of injustice

Being part of a social group is a source of great pride. It can also be the basis for labeling and stereotyping. Negative characteristics immediately associated with a social group lay the foundation for a destructive pattern described as the social perpetuation of injustice.

A social group is any group of people who share a common social identity. Characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, ethnicity, ability and socioeconomic class are used to set people apart in social groups. Within each of these categories (race, gender, etc.) there is a privileged group and a targeted group, and resulting injustice from being targeted. This injustice is played out through “isms” – classism, racism, sexism, etc. A targeted group receives the message that “You are not as worthy as the privileged members of this classification.” This message is reinforced by both personal experiences and by social institutions. For example, in the United States, when race is the identifying classification, whites or European descendants are referred to as the privileged group; African-Americans, Latinos and Native Americans are considered targeted groups; and the resulting oppression is racism. Racism is perpetuated on an individual level through prejudice and bigotry and through institutions such as underachieving schools, banks that red-line and hospitals that turn away Medicaid patients.

Where does this sense of who is privileged, who has automatic advantages, or who’s “at the top” come from? Social perpetuation of injustice helps explain this perpetual reinforcement of racism and other “isms” in our society.

To better understand the social perpetuation of injustice, discuss these underlying assumptions:

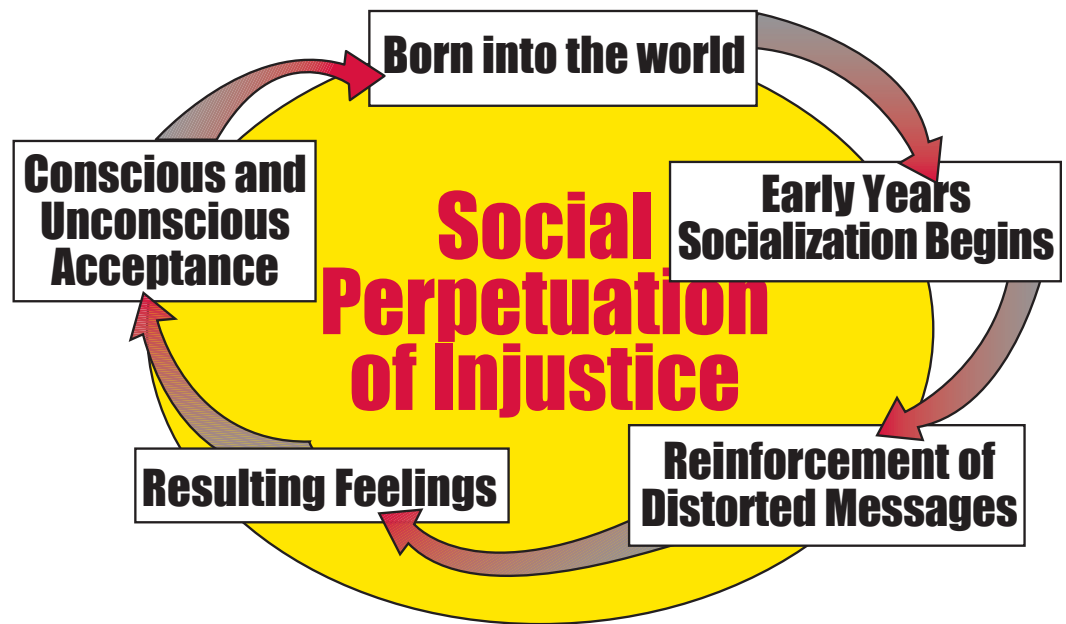
- People aren't born with prejudice.
- Prejudice and bias are learned and can be unlearned.
- To create prejudice, the targeted group is devalued and disempowered.
- Being a member of certain social groups necessarily carries privilege and being a member of other social groups necessarily makes a person targeted.
- Members of privileged groups benefit both socially and economically.
- All people have some prejudices, but all people can't enforce their attitudes through institutions and systems of power.
- Discrimination is a real problem for everyone.
- Guilt immobilizes. The work of valuing diversity is about issues and problems, not about blaming.
- People need a safe place to work on the issues created by the cycle of injustice. This class should be a safe place, and the individuals in the class will help maintain that safety.
- There will always be diversity and difference. Unity is possible only through valuing diversity.

*We must learn to live together as brothers or perish as fools.*

*- Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929 - 1968)*

*U.S. civil rights leader and clergyman*





### Social perpetuation of injustice

#### 1. Birth

- No choice about who we are or what social group we belong to
- No information
- No misinformation
- No biases

#### 2. Early years - socialization begins

- Influenced by parents, teachers and other people we trust - Norms, values, roles and rules to live by are shaped
- Learn stereotypes, myths, misinformation, and biased history

#### 3. Distorted messages reinforced from

- |                                         |                          |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| - Community, family and people we trust | - Religious institutions |
| - Media                                 | - Government/laws        |
| - School                                | - Privileges/punishments |
|                                         | - Discrimination         |

#### 4. Resulting feelings

- |              |                             |
|--------------|-----------------------------|
| - Anger      | - Hurt                      |
| - Guilt      | - Dehumanization            |
| - Confusion  | - Ignorance                 |
| - Alienation | - Out of touch with reality |
| - Stress     | - Disempowerment            |
| - Hate       |                             |

#### 5. Conscious and unconscious acceptance

- Internalization of cycle of injustice
- View misinformation as truth
- Instead of recognizing differences as just different (and equal), view differences as different, wrong, less than and unequal
- Promote status quo
- Pass to next generation
- Inaction is action
- Become part of the problem

## Where and how can we interrupt this cycle?

The cyclical aspect of the social perpetuation of injustice means that racism, classism and other forms of oppression or “isms” are perpetuated from generation to generation.

**Birth** – An individual has no choice about his or her social group membership – he or she is born into it. Whether you are born to wealthy parents or poor parents; privileged parents or parents who have been discriminated against tends to shape your development.

**Systematic training** – We learn from our families, social institutions (school, health care, social services, etc.), friends, role models, popular culture, and society in general misinformation about other groups, stereotypes, biased history and myths. There will be a mix of experience both positive and negative in any child’s life. But the kind of school you attend, the kind of health care you have available, and the people you and your family associate with will have an influence on you and how you view the world.

**Reinforcement** – We see things that appear to fit our training and therefore become less likely to question what we have learned about others who are different from us. In other words, if my family has little income, I have limited opportunities to attend a good school, experience enrichment activities, and find meaningful work. I begin to think of myself as “behind” other people.

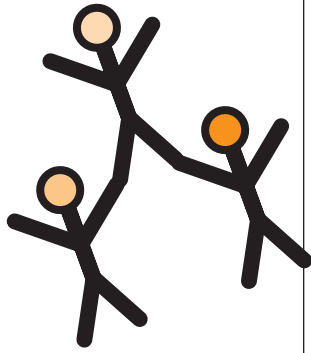
**Result** – We form conscious and unconscious attitudes and beliefs. Changing those attitudes and beliefs is uncomfortable, so we find ways to justify them instead. The way we act, or our behavior, follows from our beliefs. Don’t make waves. Keep the status quo. Someone might even think, “Good things don’t happen to me because I don’t deserve them,” or “because I’m not smart enough,” or “because people don’t like me.”

**Interrupting the cycle** – We need to move out of our comfort zone to relearn personal, professional and social attitudes and behavior. Become a part of the social change. Life circumstances have been reinforced by limited experience, thereby creating a negative or oppressed outlook. It takes a determined effort to break that cycle, change one’s outlook and push hard to get ahead.

*You must be the change you wish to see  
in the world.*

— *Mobandas Gandhi (1869 - 1948)*  
*Indian ascetic and nationalist leader*





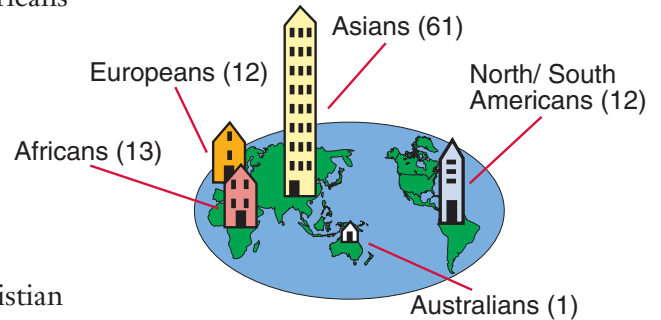
## 5. Activity: Global Village

If we could shrink the world's population to a community of 100 people, keeping the same proportions according to the census taken in the year 2000, our global village would look like this:

There would be . . .

- 61 Asians
- 12 Europeans
- 14 North/South Americans
- 13 Africans
- 1 Australian (Oceania)

- 50 would be female
- 50 would be male
- 70 would be of color
- 30 would be white
- 67 would be non-Christian
- 18 would be Muslim
- 16 would be Hindu
- 33 would be Christian
- 89 would be heterosexual
- 11 would be homosexual



59 percent of the world's wealth would be in the hands of only 6 people. If you have a bank account, you would be one of the 30 wealthiest people in the world.

- 25 people would live on \$1.00 per day and 47 would live on \$2.00 per day
- 13 would be hungry or malnourished
- 14 would be unable to read
- 8 would have a computer (4 with Internet connection)

Source: Miniature Earth [http://www.luccaco.com/miniatureearth/text\\_both.htm](http://www.luccaco.com/miniatureearth/text_both.htm)

**Are you suddenly feeling very fortunate?**

*Work with passion*

*Love without needing to be loved*

*Appreciate what you have*

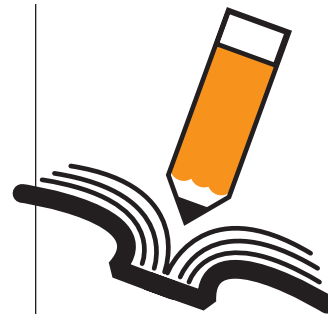
*And do your best for a better world.*

*— Anonymous*



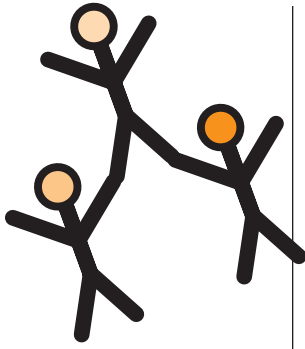
## Workbook Activity: Things I Learned Growing Up . . .

For your own deeper understanding about social groups, stereotypes and the social reproduction of injustice, think about messages you learned in childhood about the following social groups.



Social groups	Messages from family, teachers, friends	Messages from TV, magazines, books, movies
African-Americans		
Asian-Americans		
People living at poverty level		
Gays and lesbians		
People who are Jewish		
Whites		

What other social groups did you form an opinion about without really getting to know personally someone of that group?



## 7. Activity: Level Playing Field

After experiencing and discussing this activity in class, you may want to write down additional reactions and afterthoughts.

What did it feel like to take a step forward? \_\_\_\_\_

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To take a step backward? \_\_\_\_\_

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How did it make you feel when you had to let go of someone's hand? \_\_\_\_\_

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What could you see or think about the other participants? \_\_\_\_\_

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Were there any aspects of this activity that surprised you? \_\_\_\_\_

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What other insights did you gain from this activity? \_\_\_\_\_

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*If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem.*

— Eldridge Cleaver (1935 - 1998)

*American political activist, author and black militant*

*quoted in a speech in San Francisco, 1968*

## 8. Workbook activity: Taking action

At this point, you may be asking, “So, what can I, as an individual, do to combat “isms?” What can I do to interrupt the social perpetuation of injustice?

What needs to change? \_\_\_\_\_

What relationships are necessary? \_\_\_\_\_

What can I do to build these relationships or help make this change? \_\_\_\_\_

### Activity: Commitment to Creating an Inclusive Community

Identify a partner who will contact you about your commitment within the time frame you set. Describe your commitment to your partner and provide that person with your contact information.

#### Commitment to Creating an Inclusive Community

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to do the following:  
(name)

In the short run (by next **Step Up To Leadership** session), I will . . . \_\_\_\_\_

by \_\_\_\_\_.  
(date)

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
(person making commitment)

\* \* \*

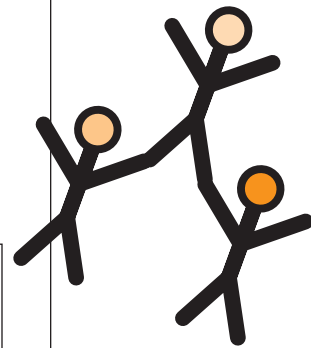
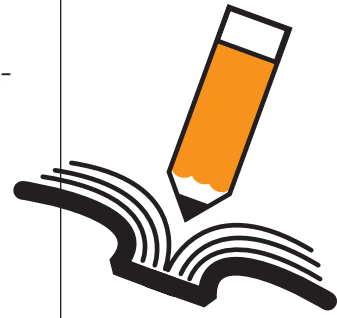
In the long run, I will . . . \_\_\_\_\_

by \_\_\_\_\_.  
(date)

Signatures

\_\_\_\_\_  
(person making commitment)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(supporting partner)



## More ideas for creating an inclusive community

- Look in the mirror. Acknowledge your own biases. Work on becoming “the change you wish to see.” (You can’t help anyone else until you are confident about yourself.)
- Educate yourself. Read a newspaper written for another culture such as the *St. Louis American* or a magazine about women’s issues. Attend a play at the Black Repertory Theater. Read *Savage Inequalities* or *Amazing Grace* by Jonathan Kozol. Learn about other cultures and other religions and what it’s like to live in poverty (*The Other America*, by Michael Harrington or *The New American Poverty*).
- Listen and speak up. Interrupt offensive statements or jokes that make fun of people because of their class or social characteristics. Counter with a positive message. Write the television station manager about stereotyping.
- Venture beyond your comfort zone. Initiate a discussion at work or home about privilege and oppression. Create connections and build relationships with people different from yourself.
- Make a commitment. Contribute to or volunteer for an organization that works against racism. Align with like-minded individuals and organizations.

## 9. Closing reflections

To conclude this session, what one word expresses your impression of what you learned? \_\_\_\_\_

If your word requires explanation, in one or two sentences, describe why you chose that particular word.

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## 10. Independent learning assignment

Take at least one step toward building an inclusive community. Report on what you did at the next class.

## 11. Participants’ evaluations