

8. LOOK LONG RANGE

Promote tolerance and address bias before another hate crime can occur. Expand your community's comfort zones so you can learn and live together.

HATE USUALLY DOESN'T STRIKE communities from some distant place. It often begins at home, brewing silently under the surface. Hate can grow out of divided communities — communities in which residents feel powerless or voiceless, communities in which differences are the cause of fear instead of celebration.

The best cure for hate is a tolerant, united community. As Chris Boucher of Yukon, Pennsylvania, put it after residents there opposed a local meeting of the Ku Klux Klan, "A united coalition is like Teflon. Hate can't stick there."

Hate exists "because the ground in the area is receptive for it," says Steven Johns Boehme, leader of the Michigan Ecumenical Forum. "If you drop the seeds of prejudice in soil that is not receptive, they won't take root."

Experts say the first step in changing hearts is to change behavior. Personal changes are important — the positive statements you make about others, unlearning assumptions about people who are different — but community-wide changes are instrumental, too.

Often, either after a bias incident or as a tool for preventing one, communities want to sponsor multicultural food festivals and other events to celebrate differences. These are important steps in helping community members feel acknowledged and appreciated. We encourage you to sponsor these — and we encourage you to go deeper.

STEPS TO TAKE

Not sure where to start? Consider the following:

> Hold candlelight vigils, religious services, and other activities to bring people of different races, religions, and ethnic groups together. In Boise, Idaho, Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday has become an 11-day Human Rights Celebration.

> Honor history and mark anniversaries. In Selma, Alabama, a multicultural street fair is held on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, when voting rights

activists attempted to cross a bridge in their march to Montgomery and were beaten back by police. And in Denver, Cinco de Mayo has become a major celebration of Mexican culture.

> Break bread together. The Cornbread Club in Lubbock, Texas, brings together people of different ethnicities and income levels. The group has no agenda, no speakers, and only one rule at its monthly dinners at a local cafeteria: Sit next to someone you don't know.

> Move from prayer to action. In California's San Fernando Valley, an interfaith council formed "home dialogues" with people from different faiths and cultures meeting together in their homes. In Covington, Kentucky, churchwomen conducted a letter-writing campaign to support hate crime legislation; they later promoted teacher training in race relations.

> Begin a community conversation on race. Discussion groups, book clubs, chat rooms, and library gatherings can bring people together. Effective community conversations allow individuals to tell their stories, their immigration history, their daily encounters with discrimination, their fear about revealing sexual orientation, and so on.

> Consider building something the community needs, and use it as an organizing tool — from a teen center to a new playground. Make sure residents from different backgrounds are included in the process.

> Create a website or an online community discussion board celebrating diversity and inclusion. Coloradans United Against Hate is an online "paperless organization" with a virtual billboard for posting stories and comments on local hate issues.

TOLERANCE NETWORKS

From regional "human rights coalitions" to local "peace and justice" groups, member organizations can connect likeminded people around issues of tolerance and



social justice. These networks make a powerful force for responding to bias incidents and lobbying for change. The Many and One Coalition, for example, formed after a white supremacist group held a rally in Lewistown, Maine. (See story, page 12.)

Following immediate activities surrounding a hate group rally, the Many and One Coalition has evolved into a large-scale diversity organization, educating and organizing residents, businesses, and community-based organizations to address personal and systemic oppression like racism, sexism, and homophobia.

The coalition sponsors an annual statewide event called, “10 Days of Community, Diversity, and Justice.” The conference celebrates differences with activities like a multicultural food fair. But it also helps residents go further, providing a safe space in which participants can talk about sensitive issues like race, sexual orientation, and religion.

EXPANDING COMFORT ZONES

The Connecticut-based Study Circles Resource Center helps communities look long range by creating dialogue groups in which residents discuss issues of inclusion before tensions can boil over into bias incidents and hate crimes. The group publishes a helpful

handbook, “Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change.”

The idea is simple: Bring together people from different backgrounds and belief systems, and provide them with a safe space to air opinions and get to know each other.

It’s a formula that can be replicated anywhere.

In Montgomery, Alabama, for example, about 30 members of One Montgomery meet once a week over eggs and biscuits. The diverse crowd discusses, among other things, housing, education, and the city’s race relations. They don’t always agree, say the group’s co-chairs, but then, that’s kind of the point.

“Several of us wouldn’t otherwise come in contact with each other,” says Daniel Webster, one of One Montgomery’s two co-chairs, who is black and calls himself conservative. “It’s been good for me because the mindset of a lot of members isn’t like the mindset of the people I’m normally around.”

Webster’s co-chair, Paula Weiss, who is white and calls herself a “tree-hugger,” agrees: “As soon as you meet the so-called ‘enemy’ and hear what they have to say, without it being filtered through someone else or the media, it makes a huge, huge difference.”

For more information about community dialogue groups, visit studycircles.org.