

How Can Violence Be Stopped at a Moment of Intense Crisis?

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An outstanding group of professional actors approached this topic on Anti-Violence Awareness Day by presenting several scenes from the play *I Am a Man*, which depicts African American union workers in dispute with their city's mayor. The first scene opened in the union hall, with union president Mr. Jones (played by young men's division member Gordon Skinner) speaking to the union — plus several church leaders and a representative from the mayor's office — about asbestos health hazards. Since the hazards often resulted in death and continued to be ignored by the city, the workers decide to strike.

The mayor finally agrees to meet with the workers. At first the mayor tries to bribe Mr. Jones with a director's position for much more money. This infuriates the union members, including Mr. Jones, who refuses. He says he cannot be bought and that the union is prepared to strike. After a verbal outburst by the mayor, Mr. Jones becomes uncontrollably angry, knocks the mayor to the ground and screams: "I am a man! You hear what I say? I AM A MAN!"

At this moment in the presentation, Gordon Skinner stopped the scene and asked the audience to separate into two groups and discuss possible solutions.

Group A members observed that the workers had not pinpointed their specific goals, agendas or needs. The workers should have been less emotional and come to the bargaining table with a more solid foundation. Group A also felt that the mayor had no negotiating skills and was way out of line in attempting to bribe Mr. Jones.

Group A's resolution called for a mediator to aid communication. The group decided that Mr. Jones needed to apologize for his angry physical and verbal outburst toward the mayor and that he also needed to take that energy and put it into making sure his fellow workers had a solid agenda, educational program and health benefits.

Group B members also believed that the two parties needed to close the gap. They noticed the obvious conflict between the mayor's interests and the people's power. They viewed the union as a group of humanists who needed to make a humanistic connection with the mayor.

Group B's resolution included creating more of a joint coalition of issues and ideas. They thought the mayor and Mr. Jones should both exercise some restraint. The rest of the group's ideas included educational programs for the workers, each side listening to the needs of the other, and the mayor understanding the seriousness of the asbestos problem.

Groups A and B came together and shared their ideas with the actors, whereupon the actors left the room for a few minutes and went to work. When they returned to the stage, they replayed the scene, starting from the heated exchange between the mayor and Mr. Jones.

In the new scene, a minister from the community intervenes. She pleads for peace and proposes that the two gentlemen collect themselves. She then tells them of the ideas she has for the creation of an educational program for the workers and the mayor. She also informs everyone that the mayor just happens to be an old friend of the president of the NAACP.

The mayor realizes he would be in trouble if the union turns against him. Mr. Jones then extends his hand to the mayor and apologizes for his outburst. The mayor promises to set up an educational program for workers and management and asks Mr. Jones what else he and the union desire.

At that point, the audience applauded not only the more positive outcome of the scene but also the fine efforts of the actors — and themselves.

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