

**Diversity Seminar Confronts Prejudices**  
**By PATTI CONNORS & LEON JONES**  
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“I was taught to fear black people.”

“I was prejudiced against Catholics.”

“My daddy said not to hate people, no matter what they say.”

Spontaneous confessions and dynamic group dialogue lit up the conference titled “Bridging the Gap of Ethnic Diversity Through Communication,” sponsored by the Los Angeles #3 Joint Territory Culture Department.

“Some people feel that prejudice doesn’t exist or isn’t a problem,” said Master of Ceremonies Rochelle Wilson. “The goal of this conference is to dispel denial and open up dialogue.” Toward that end, the conference offered a comfortable atmosphere for speaking on topics that people often find uncomfortable or would otherwise avoid.

The process of the small group settings acted as a communication tool where by listening, participants learned how best to respond to differences and to speak respectfully on racism and other issues surrounding diversity.

Guest speaker Bonnie Boswell Hamilton, an SGI-USA member and co-host of the public access cable television show *Faith and Values*, challenged conference participants at the World Culture Center to examine issues of racism in themselves and in society. She pointed out that the concept of racial difference has neither scientific basis nor meaning in the biological world of DNA. Rather, race is a political construct.

Racism is, according to Ms. Hamilton, a system that manipulates base human emotions to sustain the unequal division of wealth and power along racial lines and maintain the distinction between the haves and the have nots. For example, many immigrants come to this country and, perceiving the relatively unfavorable position of African Americans, often distance themselves from that minority and seek to be accepted by the white majority. Racism is alive and well in America, Ms. Hamilton warned, citing insurance redlining, police abuse and several other examples.

Ms. Hamilton also said that in terms of wealth and power, only 1 percent of the American population can be considered an elite, privileged class — then there are the rest of us. In most ways, ordinary people of all races are more alike than different.

In a skit, performers representing different backgrounds sat poker-faced on a public bus, not talking with one another. Their private thoughts were piped in from offstage: “Look how fat she is.” “Look at those two guys walking down the street holding hands. It isn’t natural.” “Why don’t you turn down that music and go back to your own country?” The point of the skit was to show the destructive impact of prejudice and demonstrate that respect for others is crucial.

Conference participants broke into small groups and wrestled with stereotypes and myths. “How can we challenge the attitudes and judgments that we silently entertain about others who are not like us?” was the question of the day underlying the group discussions. Participants listened to others talk about their feelings and got in touch with their own.

“A child’s attitude about skin color is not inborn,” one participant said. “It’s learned.” She told the story of an Asian American girl who described an African American girl as “the one with two pigtails and a red shirt.” An adult asked the child, “You mean the little black girl?” The child insisted, “No, the one with two pigtails and a red shirt.”

One participant told of his travels to the Far East and many other countries and concluded that on the most basic level, regardless of nationality, we’re all human beings. To expand awareness of this, participants talked about the importance of meeting people

from other countries and different ethnic groups.

Many participants echoed Ms. Hamilton's point that people are more alike than different. Engaging others in dialogue and recognizing human commonality is the key; no matter what social or political remedies are applied, from the perspective of Buddhism, continuous self-reformation is the way to achieve racial and ethnic harmony, many participants concluded.

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