Cultural Diversity: Towards A Whole Society
adapted from an article by Mara Hurwitt

"In Germany they first came for the communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me - and by that time no one was left to speak up.” - Rev. Martin Niemoller

Celebrating Diversity

Look around and you will see that our society is very diverse…different. Diversity makes our lives more interesting. Cultural diversity brings together the resources and talents of many people for the shared benefit of all. Sadly, throughout history, the differences among us have led to violence. Consider how dull life would be, though, if we all looked alike, thought alike, and acted alike! By learning to recognize our similarities and appreciate our differences, together we can overcome prejudice and intolerance and work towards a more peaceful and productive world.

People may fear diversity simply because they are accustomed to the way things used to be. Change makes some people uncomfortable. If left unaddressed, these fears can lead to resentment and bigotry.

Multiculturalism supports the idea that maintaining our different cultural identities can enrich us and our communities. Multiculturalism celebrates diversity by allowing us to value our individual heritages and beliefs while respecting those of others. Respect for each others’ cultural values and belief systems is an important part of cultural diversity. Lack of respect is often based on ignorance or misinformation. If you do not understand another’s values, lifestyle, or beliefs, it is much easier to belittle them.

People can be categorized in many ways, such as by gender (male/female), race (caucasian, African American, Hispanic, etc..), religion (Protestant, Muslim, Catholic), income (wealthy/poor), or age. Unfortunately, these categories are sometimes used to label people unfairly or to saddle them with stereotypes.

Stereotypes often form the basis of prejudice, a premature judgment about a group or a member of that group made without sufficient knowledge or thought. We can also develop prejudices towards a whole group based on a single emotional experience with one person. Prejudice demonstrates an unfair bias that does not allow for individual differences, good or bad.

Bigots are people who stubbornly cling to their prejudices, displaying an attitude of thinking they are better than others. Various groups have been and continue to be the victims of bigotry, including racial, ethnic and religious groups, women, and persons with disabilities.

We are intolerant if we reject or dislike people because they are different. We are tolerant when we accept and respect peoples’ differences.

Religious tolerance means acknowledging and supporting that individuals have the right to their own beliefs and related legitimate practices, without necessarily accepting those beliefs or practices oneself.
Throughout history and continuing to the present, religious bigotry has led to severe acts of persecution around the world, including:

- The Roman persecution of early Christians
- The Christian persecution and extermination of Jews, from the late 4th century in the Roman Empire
- The Nazi Holocaust which systematically killed about 6 million Jews

**From Hatred To Hate Crimes**

Left unchecked, bigotry and hatred frequently lead to acts of aggression. Powerful, persuasive messages of hate can incite violence against innocent victims. Despite its many positive aspects, the Internet has become a major vehicle for spreading hate.

A hate crime is a criminal offense committed against persons or property that is motivated, in whole or in part, by bias against an individual’s or a group’s race, religion, ethnic/national origin, gender, age, disability or sexual orientation. These include threatening phone calls, hate mail, physical assaults, fire bombings, and cross burning, as well as property crimes such as arson or vandalism, particularly those targeting community centers or houses of worship.

**Embracing Diversity**

"I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

- Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

While it is fine to be proud of your own cultural identity or heritage, it simply doesn't mean that yours is better than someone else’s.

This information is part of the [CCSF Teaching Tolerance](http://www.ccsf.edu/Resources/Tolerance/lessons/div01.html) website. We welcome links, comments, materials, and ideas from one and all.