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December 2008

Diversity & Human Rights focus

Religious discrimination comes in many forms

by Jan Saeed, Director Spiritual Life at Westminster College

“Mom, do we have a bad religion?”

“Why are you asking this?”

“Someone at school told me I had a bad religion.”

“Do you think it is bad?”

“No.”

“Well, I think they just don’t know about the Baha’i faith. Sometimes people who don’t know say things that are not true. I’m sorry they said that to you, but we have a very good religion that promotes loving and caring about all people and working together to bring about peace and justice for everyone. Hopefully, little by little, you can share that with your friends and they too will understand.”

This story was my child’s conversation with me after coming home from a day in first grade. It is a story that many children have told their parents, or kept to themselves.

In any location where there is a predominant faith, the “other” can be seen as “less than.” This is

religious discrimination in a mild form, discrimination that most people of faith have felt at some point in their lives—someone judging their faith without knowing much about it.

Many painful forms are those in which people lose a job opportunity, do not get invited to social events in the neighborhood, are left out of conversations, or are the target of unintentional criticism of personal behavior due to religious requirements that are different from a majority, such as the requirements for wearing special clothes or symbols, or observing holy days that are not considered sacred by others at the worksite, school or neighborhood. Unawareness of sacred times, of sacred space, of the need to pray or fast are also forms of faith-based discrimination.


In many countries religious discrimination is manifested in different ways, such as the inability to walk safely down the street without being stoned, not being able to attend school, experiencing the loss of jobs, loss of personal status, property, and loss of life itself.

Religious freedom as outlined in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution is a right and privilege

that our country and citizens have and need to continually work to understand better in order to increase its application for all strata of society.

On December 5, the mayor’s Dialogue on Discrimination will address the topic of faithism. This event will be held at Westminster College, and will give us all the opportunity to hear personal stories, share our own, and learn from others.

In coming together to share and learn, it is hoped that further steps can be taken to help build a community where all people of any faith, or no faith, may feel as equally respected participants in our community, equally valued in the process of creating a local community rooted in the global spiritual community of the 21st Century. I hope you will be able to join me on December 5th for this opportunity.



Mark your calendars! Join Salt Lake City in celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights December 8-31. For more information see page 4.

Let's talk about racism

by *Solomon Aman*

Racism is a form of oppression that must be overcome if we are to have equality and opportunity for everyone in Salt Lake City.

My skin is dark brown: I was born in southern Sudan. Because my skin is dark brown, some people believe things about me and my brothers, the Lost Boys of Sudan, that are not true.

All of us Lost Boys know from our history of genocide in Sudan about people looking at those who are different through a different lens of racism. We know that the result is discrimination which develops into hatred, hatred into violence.

Violence leads to destruction of lives and property. There shall never be a nation without white, black or brown just as there will never be a male society without female. The truth is that we can achieve higher standards of living as we move further away from the racial divide and instead embrace our differences as part of our strength.

As a Lost Boy of Sudan moving halfway across the world into a society so very different from my home life in every way, racism was only one of the challenges we had to face if we were to adapt to life in Salt Lake City. The Lost Boys were the only family that I had, the only link to my past. Our togetherness and how different we looked frightened people. People made the wrong assumptions about us. People thought we were a gang because we would move throughout the streets in groups of up to 10 black young men.

Our neighbors assumed we were gay since we lived paired up as men. We were labeled drug dealers by others. The only way we were able to move beyond the stereotypes was to get to know our neighbors. As people learned who we were as individuals, the racism went away and we became friends.

It is interesting to look at each of the assumptions people made about us Lost Boys. Why do people see us together in a group and think we are a gang that is violent? Gangs kill or rob, but none of these actions have been committed by our community. We move in groups because we are a peaceful people who enjoy being surrounded by others. We like to be together in large groups of friends.

This seems different than what is normal in America, but this doesn't make us bad. Different is not bad, it is simply different. Being a member of a gang would be contrary to our culture and a failure to the people of southern Sudan who see us as their ambassadors to the American people.

Another assumption is that we are gay. Being gay is another form of diversity that is affected by oppression. Neighbors view us this way because we are a cluster of boys doing things together most of the time, with no girls amongst us. Like the gang accusation, this is also false.

We are not gay. In fact, over 20 percent of the Lost Boys community got married in the last three years. Our togetherness is not based on sexual relationship, but instead on maintaining a community we built over 20 years of our lifetime. It is also built on financial need to share the cost of rent. Due to the genocide

in Sudan we have fewer girls in our community. If we want to marry we need to return back to Africa to find a partner. Unfortunately, once we get married we are not joined by our spouses because of the slowness of the immigration process. Until we are able to be joined by our families from Africa, we form families with the boys we traveled to the United States with several years ago. These boys became our brothers, and someday they will be our children's uncles.

Another assumption branded on us is being drug dealers because some of us drive expensive cars. Lost Boys knew nothing about drugs before we came to the United States and still have nothing to do with drugs. The only drug we knew in Africa was tobacco, which is not illegal in the U.S.

However, the majority of Lost Boys still do not smoke tobacco. This assumption of being drug dealers could not be more incorrect. We are proud of how hard we have worked to earn our educations, to provide for ourselves and to still have enough money to send back to our relatives in Africa. We pay our taxes and look for ways to make our community better. If we have an opportunity to drive a nice car, then it is because we are proud of what we have achieved through our hard work.

All three assumptions are major concerns to the Lost Boys community. We try to brush these assumptions off by leaving our doors open to anyone who wants to get to know us. We have been visited by neighbors who come with suspicions and leave as friends. They learn that different is not bad, it is just different.

Dialogue on Discrimination

Series 5



The Salt Lake Human Rights Commission, under the direction of Mayor Ralph Becker and City Council Chair Jill Remington Love, is sponsoring a Dialogue on Discrimination Series.

The purpose of this series is to encourage community involvement and to help inform the development of public policies.

You are invited to attend an upcoming dialogue series. Each meeting will include guest speakers who will talk about discrimination in its many forms. There will then be an open round-table discussion facilitated by local leaders where people can engage in dialogue about discrimination.

We hope you will be able to join us in this open platform to hear and share personal accounts of discrimination. For more information about this series and other events through the Office of Diversity & Human Rights, please visit:

www.slcgov.com/mayor/divHR

You can also submit your story online at the link:

[Tell Us Your Story](#)



Salt Lake City

Series 5

10th East Senior Center
237 S. 1000 East

Topic: Sexual orientation

Speakers:

Will Carlson is licensed attorney and the Manager of Public Policy for Equality Utah, the state's political advocacy group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Utahns and their families. He has worked for Utah Legal Services, the state of Utah, the ACLU, and in private practice as a criminal defense attorney in Washington DC. Will is a native Utahn and resident of the Sugarhouse neighborhood.

Lisa Diamond is Associate Professor of Psychology and Gender Studies at the University of Utah. She recently published a book with Harvard University Press, entitled *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*. Dr. Diamond's research has been supported by grants from the National Institutes of Health, the Templeton Foundation, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, and the William T. Grant Foundation.

Mayor's Office of Diversity
& Human Rights
451 S State Street Rm. 345
Salt Lake City, Utah 84111



Please join us for a celebration to commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In partnership with the SLC Film Center, we will screen two films and discuss current human rights issues. These films are free and open to the public.

7pm Tuesday, December 9

THE TIMES OF HARVEY MILK directed by Rob Epstein - 90 min

This lucid 1984 documentary about the first openly gay elected official in California focusses on Harvey Milk, a grassroots politician who viewed gay rights as just one part of a democratizing movement in San Francisco government. Milk was a member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. On November 27, 1978 both he and San Francisco Mayor George Moscone were assassinated by Supervisor Dan White. Milk's life and the city's reaction to the assassinations are replayed through news footage and recollections from a wide array of friends, his lover, acquaintances and colleagues taking us back in time to relive the shock and disbelief.

7pm Wednesday, December 10

PETE SEEGER: THE POWER OF SONG directed by Jim Brown - 93 min

Pete Seeger is one of our America's icons - the itinerant folk singer and tireless advocate of workers' rights achieved massive celebrity yet remained accessible devoted to land, family and community. The sophisticated performer who delivered the purest essence from Appalachia to the Mississippi Delta, was uncompromising in his controversial beliefs. He is now approaching 90 years old and has energized and inspired generations with his music and remains still busy, still angry, still hopeful and still singing.

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Please join Salt Lake City in celebration of the 60th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

**All events are free and open to the public.*

December 8-12

- Book displays at Ken Sanders Rare Books, Sam Weller's Zion Bookstore, and The City Library
- Exhibit: "Israel – 60 Years"
City & County Building, 451 S. State, 1st Floor

December 9

- Family Finance and Credit class through the Pete Suazo Business Center
6:00 pm, City & County Building, 451 S. State, Rm. 126
- Film and Panel: "The Times of Harvey Milk"
7:00 pm, The City Library Auditorium

December 10

- Press Conference with Mayor Ralph Becker declaring a proclamation and signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Banner
2:00 pm, City & County Building, 451 S. State, 1st Floor
- Reception with speakers Mayor Ralph Becker and Noemi Mattis, J.D., Ph.D.
6:00 pm, City & County Building, 451 S. State, 2nd Floor

**Please bring gloves, mittens, scarves and hats to donate to refugee Families in Salt Lake City*

- Film: "Pete Seeger: The Power of Song"
7:00 pm, The City Library Auditorium

December 11

- Dialogue on Discrimination Series. Topic: Sexual orientation
7:00 pm, 10th East Senior Center, 237 S. 1000 East

December 16-31

- Exhibit: "Faces and Voices of Refugee Youth" by the Center for Documentary Arts
City & County Building, 451 S. State, 1st Floor

For more information visit: www.slcgov.com/diversity or call 801.535.7734

Sponsored by:

*Barbara L. and Norman C. Tanner Center for Nonviolent Human Rights Advocacy
Center for Documentary Arts
Salt Lake City Mayor's Office of Diversity & Human Rights
SLC Film Center
Tanner Center for the Humanities*