

Building a beloved community

High school

Objective

Students will spend the session reflecting on and writing about the ideas of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They will make connections between Dr. King's mission and that of organizations such as Habitat for Humanity. To put Dr. King's beliefs into action, they will plan a volunteer project involving a local affiliate of Habitat for Humanity.

■ PREPARE

To begin the session, have students think about the life and ideas of Martin Luther King Jr. and how these ideas relate to their own beliefs of social justice and the ideal community.

- Contact your local Habitat for Humanity affiliate about the project and its needs before introducing the lesson to students. Visit www.habitat.org/local for contact information.
- Ask students to share what they already know about the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- Have students visit the following Web site to gather further information about Dr. King: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html.
- Tell students that one of Dr. King's main ideas was the "beloved community." Have students read the attached essay about this idea and its significance for Dr. King. Ask students to discuss how this idea manifested itself in Dr. King's activities and commitments.
- Explain that many organizations, including Habitat for Humanity, are working hard to fulfill Dr. King's dream of a "beloved community." Tell students that Habitat for Humanity works to ensure that people have access to safe and decent housing. Read the following King quote: "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality." Discuss how this quote relates to Habitat for Humanity's mission. Guide students to the understanding that without providing opportunities for adequate housing to everyone, no one is truly equal. We all must be given the same opportunities if we wish to achieve Dr. King's dream of a beloved community.

- Explain that putting the beliefs of Dr. King into action is a crucial component of societal change. Together, read Coretta Scott King's essay about the meaning of the holiday at <http://www.thekingcenter.org/KingHoliday>. Discuss how working to help others fits in with Dr. King's mission.

■ LEARN

- Talk about how your student group can put Dr. King's beliefs into action in today's world. Tell students that you will be making arrangements to help your local Habitat for Humanity affiliate based on its needs. Point out that while construction is the primary focus of Habitat for Humanity, other types of volunteer work (e.g., fundraising, office work) are also useful for the organization. Depending on the needs of your affiliate, students may be participating in any of these tasks.
- Make a plan to volunteer on a specified day in the future. You can locate your local affiliate by visiting <http://www.habitat.org/local>.

■ REFLECT

Once the students have completed their day of volunteering, ask them to consider the meaning of what they have done.

- Ask students to write a brief essay describing their experience and what they learned from it.
- Collect the essays to make a class document about the volunteer day. Students can also contribute photographs or video to this document.
- Have students discuss whether they plan to make volunteering a regular part of their life after the day's activity. Point out to them that Habitat's Learn and Build Experience offers an opportunity to travel for a weeklong volunteer experience; they can learn more at http://www.habitat.org/youthprograms/ages_14_25/lbe_default.aspx.
- Have a short class discussion about how volunteer work helps to build community, and how the work of Habitat for Humanity helps to create Dr. King's idea of a beloved community.

Dr. King and the beloved community

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. frequently cited the image of the “beloved community” as an animating force in his nonviolent protest against the racist social structures of his times. In King’s words, “noncooperation and boycotts are not ends themselves; they are merely means to awaken a sense of moral shame in the opponent. The end is redemption and reconciliation. The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community.” The members of such a community would be connected by ties of love and committed to the cause of justice. Such a goal demanded the nonviolent means that King pursued, because even the enemies of justice, in King’s view, remained members of the community; ultimately, opponents of racial and other forms of justice would not be excluded, but would come to be reconciled with their fellow human beings in a universal relation of mutual respect.

The idea of a beloved community had its roots early in King’s thought. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his doctorate in part on the theologian Paul Tillich. Although King disagreed with some of the ideas of Tillich, he did find inspiration in the connections that Tillich drew between love and justice. But it was a second figure that convinced King that love could actually have value in bringing about social change. In a period of despair about the possibility of transforming society, King heard a lecture about the life of Mohandas Gandhi, the great Indian reformer. Gandhi led the struggle to free India from colonial rule by advocating a resolutely nonviolent approach. King became fascinated with Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolent resistance. “As I delved deeper into the philosophy of

Gandhi, my skepticism about the power of love gradually diminished,” King later reflected.

We can see, then, that the idea of the “beloved community” joined the theological theory with which King engaged as a doctoral student to the engaged practice that became the focus of his career. Both in his thought and in his action, he remained deeply committed to the vision of a spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood uniting human beings in love and the pursuit of justice.

Sources:

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