

SHARED VISIONS

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Volume Thirteen, Number One

— A publication to assist in the spiritual formation of lay volunteers — presented by the people who bring you *Connections* —

Hey Volunteers:

WHAT'S YOUR LABEL ?

Do any of the labels listed here sound familiar to you? Circle any of them that have been assigned to you at some point in your life. Then go to page 2.

- ◆ The Baby ◆ Hell-raiser ◆ Extrovert ◆ Jock ◆ Sensitive
- ◆ Goody-two Shoes ◆ Slacker ◆ Gifted ◆ Partyer
- ◆ Dreamer ◆ Liberal ◆ Responsible One ◆ Flirt
- ◆ TheBlonde ◆ Hot-headed ◆ Scaredy-Cat ◆ Idealist
- ◆ Rebel ◆ Worry-wort ◆ Perfectionist ◆ Saint
- ◆ Over-achiever ◆ Introvert ◆ Jesus-freak ◆ Granola
- ◆ Leader ◆ Scatter-brain ◆ Peace-maker
- ◆ Conservative ◆ Tree-hugger ◆ Activist ◆ Class clown

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Volunteers... Although your term of service has just begun you've probably already encountered the reality of stereotypes and labels in your community and/or workplace. This issue of Shared Visions hopes to help you develop some useful ways of responding to stereotypes.

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Stereotype sounds like a bad word. Doesn't it? However would it be so bad for us to assume that a uniformed police officer might be able to help us if we were lost in a big city? No, that's not a bad assumption at all. In fact, our brains have a natural tendency to categorize and identify patterns. And this is a helpful skill.

However, negative stereotypes (whether formed through personal experience or assumed) can be damaging to life in community and especially to our work with different ethnic, cultural or religious populations.

What we hope to explore in this issue are the different meanings of stereotypes in that they originate from different sources and serve different purposes within peoples' value systems. Easy solutions to them do not exist. It takes open mindedness, a fair bit of critical thinking and self-analysis in order to face stereotypes (from the personal to the societal) with sincerity.

This is no small task. So let's begin. ✚



WHAT'S YOUR LABEL ?

Community Activity

— Continued from coverage



Objective: To help volunteers identify stereotypes they have experienced in their own lives. **Approximate Time:** 1 hour **Format:** Group sharing

Materials: One piece of paper and something to write with for each person in the group. Straight pins (1 per person) or masking tape.

Refer to the stereotypic labels listed on the frontpage.

Do any of those labels sound familiar to you? Circle any of them or come up with others that have been assigned to you at some point in your life. Are there other labels that you feel that are being attached to you inappropriately? Perhaps there is a bias based on the city, region or campus from which you have come? Perhaps you speak with a southern accent or have a middle eastern appearance. List some of the labels attached to you below.

Review your list and consider how you feel about each label. Which one or two are especially significant for you? In what ways?

Take a piece of paper and by writing or drawing a symbol, make your own "label" that is particularly meaningful for you.

Once everyone has created their "labels" pin them on and allow each person to share his or her label with the group.

Based on your experience, discuss the positive and negative consequences of labels.

Great Fall Recipe: Spinach Stuffed Acorn Squash

Ingredients: 2 large acorn squash, salt and pepper to taste, 4 teaspoons oil, 1 large yellow onion, finely chopped, 1 teaspoon oil, 1 cup cooked spinach, finely chopped, 1/2 cup toasted wheat germ, 1/2 cup dried currants, a dash of nutmeg.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Halve squash length-wise, remove stem, and discard seeds. Sprinkle cavities with salt and pepper. Place a teaspoon of oil and a teaspoon of water in each cavity. Set in deep, oven-proof dish. Surround with 2 inches of water, cover, and bake at 375 degrees for 40 minutes or until squash is soft. While squash bakes, saute onion until clear in 1 teaspoon of oil. Remove squash from pan, cool, spoon pulp into a mixing bowl, making sure to leave some flesh on shell sides. Mix squash pulp, sauteed onions, spinach, wheat germ, and currants. Add seasoning to mixture. Refill squash shells with mixture and set in baking pan. Reheat until piping hot. Serves 4. (Make sure to leave messy pans and utensils for your housemates to clean up. It builds character. 😊)

Speaking Out: Becoming A Voice For the Voiceless



Suggestion:

Gather your community members in a casual and comfortable setting, such as sitting around on volunteers' standard second-hand furniture or frayed carpet. Read the following directions. See photo for details.

Objective: To develop some insights into the meaning and impact of stereotypes which affect the group of clients with which each volunteer works.

Approximate Time: Initially about 30 minutes

Format: Group discussion

1-Take a few minutes for each person to quietly think about the population of clients he or she serves and come up with a category descriptive of that population, e.g. adolescent boys, junior high girls, the elderly, HIV infants, an ethnic minority.

2-One at a time, each volunteer then takes a turn and announces the category of his or her clients' population, e.g. 5th grade children.

3-When the group of volunteers hears the first volunteer's category, they then call out the stereotypes by which society sometimes unfairly labels that group,

e.g. delinquents, lazy, hopeless, etc.

4-The first volunteer then records these stereotypes and begins thinking about which of these or other labels does real harm to their clients.

5-The second volunteer then announces the category of his or her clients' population and invites fellow volunteers to identify unfair labels for his or her group.

6-Repeat this process until each volunteer has a short list of labels for consideration.

7-The first volunteer, followed by others in turn, then begins the second round by answering the question: How did you feel when you heard the list of unfair labels about your clients?

8-In turn, each volunteer identifies the stereotype and how he or she hopes to work against and to alter. Using the *dissonance* strategy, give examples which counter those particular stereotypes. For example, "All immigrants are freeloaders". Well, what about Einstein, Kissinger, Sammy Sosa, Madeleine Albright or Santana? These examples provide *dissonance* and break the stereotype.

9-Regather the group in two weeks and have each volunteer report back on their initial strategy of how she or he intended to counter the stereotype which afflicts the group of clients with which he or she works. Share how each strategy worked or failed. Group members make suggestions as needed.

Reconvene the volunteers in one month and allow each to report on what they have learned about their effort to change stereotypes. Adjust plans or punt as needed. ✚

Role-Play to Get Beneath the Label

Objectives: To assist volunteers in enhancing effectiveness in the workplace by examining what is beneath labels encountered on the job. To assist volunteers in analyzing their own gut reactions to stereotypes and their ability to respond critically to them.

Format: Role-playing and group discussion

Approximate Time: 45 minutes

"Last year's volunteers were SO wonderful. They did everything perfect!"

"Ask the volunteers to do it, they always say yes!"

"Oh, he's just a volunteer here."

"Have the volunteer take over that task. She is smarter than we are and can do it better."

"You are only here for a little while. We are in it for the long-haul."

"The volunteers aren't as professional as real employees"

Do any of these statements sound familiar? What has been your experience thus far regarding being a volunteer in your worksite? Do other statements come to mind? Are they positive? Negative? Both?

To start Choose two group members to perform the following role-plays for the group:

* **Scenario 1:** Act out a work situation in which a stereotype of volunteers is being played out (eg.—you are referred to as "just a volunteer," a client says that she or he wants to speak to a "real" employee, not just a volunteer, etc.) The group member playing the volunteer should act out a *reaction* to the situation, that is a knee-jerk, gut reaction that may reflect the real feelings that surface (anger, sadness, resentment, etc.)

* **Scenario 2:** The two group members replay the same scene, but this time, the group member playing the volunteer will *thoughtfully respond* to the situation instead of just *reacting* to it.

After the role-playing, discuss the following:

- What stereotype about volunteers was depicted?
- What was the *reaction* presented? What gut reactions do you have to the stereotype in this situation?
- What was the *response* to the stereotype depicted in this situation? How might you have responded?



Discuss:

Consider for a moment where these stereotypes may have come from, for example:

History of volunteers in your site—what legacy has been handed down to you by the volunteers who preceded you? (if applicable)



Culture—how is volunteerism viewed in the culture of your worksite?

National reality—what is the larger societal context for understanding volunteering? Does it exist on a large scale? Does it "make sense" to people?



Historical context of location—what is the history of your geographic surroundings that may influence how volunteers are perceived? How are people of your nationality, ethnicity and socio-economic status viewed? What has been their historical presence in your worksite?



Your reactions, actions and attitudes—in what ways through your own reactions and responses do you unknowingly reinforce or undermine both positive and negative stereotypes about volunteers?

What are some other factors that contribute to the building of a particular stereotype in this situation?

-Share any new insights which arise from this reflection and discussion. How do they help inform your response to stereotypes that you may encounter in the workplace? +



Are You Playing the "Volunteer Card??"



Come on, be honest! Do you ever play the "volunteer card?" You know, those times when it is easy to use your volunteer status as justification to act differently from your co-workers. For example, "I can be late to work once in a while or skip that boring staff meeting, because, really, what are they going to do, FIRE ME?? I am only a volunteer after all!"

What is going on when someone, "plays the volunteer card?" Is this a stereotype the volunteer believes? Or fosters?

Community Spirituality Discussion: Faith and Stereotypes



Objective: To foster faith dialogue among community members exploring and dissecting stereotypes related to faith. **Format:** Discussion **Approximate Time:** 1 hour **Materials:** Pen and paper.

⇒⇒⇒**To start:** Choose one person to be the discussion moderator. Gather as a community with pen and paper in hand and have the moderator read out the following questions. Volunteers record their answers next to the number of the question.

1. Young people are more open-minded than older folks especially in their political choices, spiritual expression and life-style.
True or False
2. The deep split among conservative, traditional Catholics and liberal, progressive Catholics cannot ever be totally bridged.
True or False
3. People who choose celibacy are afraid of intimacy.
True or False
4. Religious tolerance is typically advocated by more spiritually progressive people and groups.
True or False
5. The main reason people volunteer is because they are unsure of their own future.
True or False

After answering the questions have everyone put his or her answer sheet in a bowl and mix. Then have volunteers blindly pick an answer sheet from the bowl. The moderator then reads each question and asks for a show of hands of those whose sheet answered "true" and then whose sheet answered "false". So each person will be reading someone's anonymous answer.

Moderator now reads aloud one at a time the following statements, which correspond to statements 1-4 above. Moderator facilitates group discussion and reaction to the following statements and limits each discussion to 10 minutes. For each discussion topic have each person explain how personal experience has either negated or supported each particular stereotype, as well as how the second statements below affected each person.

To the contrary...

- * 1. A lot of research shows that beyond adolescence, age is not a factor in determining open-mindedness. Rather, level of trust, self-esteem, self-acceptance and acceptance of others are.
- * 2. The content of religious beliefs whether they are so-called "liberal" or "conservative" do not determine open mindedness. There are open minded conservatives and close minded liberals.
- * 3. Intimacy is about taking others seriously and not necessarily about sexuality or romance.
- * 4. The Islamic tradition is often not seen as progressive. And yet, for centuries Islam was tolerant of other faiths in its territories. For example, Saladin, a 12th century Muslim general and prince was welcoming of Jerusalem's Christians and Jews.
- * 5. Contrast this with your own personal experience (if you can). †

Dissonance is good. Facing information that challenges our previously held ideas (stereotypes) can cause a range of emotions in us: discomfort, bewilderment or pleasant surprise. This is normal. But this challenge should not be avoided in exchange for parroted politically correct responses for the sake of their "correctness" or the repression of a stereotype because someone tells you it's bad. Research suggests in fact that repression of a stereotype actually leads to its reinforcement. [Pugh, 2000] Facing the challenge helps us grow!

Editors' note: We hope that activities such as these have encouraged all of us to develop our capacity for critically appreciating our social world as well as evaluating what's going on inside of us. Critical appreciation and open-mindedness will help us knock down the walls of prejudice, and help others do the same. †

✦ Biblical Reflection: Challenging LABELS!! ✦

Labels! Even the gospels are full of them: *Jew! Pharisee! Scribe! Tax Collector! Sinner!* What's your gut-level response when you read these words? Many of them are loaded with negative emotional freight because some of the biblical stories portray these people as sub-classes of bad guys (Mark 2:15-17).

Imagine if you were back in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. Your feelings about these labels would likely have been much stronger. A "cripple," for example, or any handicapped person was a social outcast and associated with some nasty sin ("Tell us Lord, was it he or his parents who sinned and caused God to inflict the handicap as a punishment?" John 9:1-3) Similarly, the label "Jew" historically has been

wrongly identified with oppressors of the apostles. Recall John's gospel story when the disciples met behind locked doors "for fear of the Jews" (20:19). People forget that Jesus and the apostles were Jews.

Jesus constantly broke these and other stereotypes. He ate meals with sinners, worked on the Sabbath, praised "bad guys" and spoke with women in public. These actions underscore his awesome personal courage. Check out the impressive stories noted above. By his example, Jesus encourages us to strategically and intelligently confront oppressive stereotyping labels. We can begin by honestly identifying our personal feeling about these labels, evaluating our moral stance and embracing the action we need to take. ✦

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The mission of the Saint Vincent Pallotti Center:

To promote lay volunteer service that challenges laity, clergy, and religious to work together in the mission of the Church. Our goal is to support lay volunteers *before, during* and *after* their term of service. Regional Pallotti Centers are located in Boston; Paterson, NJ; St. Louis; and Sacramento. The National Office is in Washington, DC.

The Centers take their inspiration from Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850) who believed passionately in the laity, in each person as being an image of God and as called to be missionary.

Shared Visions' goal is to explore five building blocks of spiritual development: Intellectual Growth, Emotional and Physical Health, Leadership and Prayer.



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