



**FIFTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM ON FAIRNESS & EQUITY  
ISSUES IN CHILD WELFARE TRAINING AND EDUCATION**

***Presentation***

**Safety is Not Comfort—Creating a Liberated Zone**

Reverend Daniel Buford:

**Summary of Presentation**

April 12, 2007

Reverend Buford's presentation concerned how to establish a *liberated zone* during trainings or group facilitations that address controversial subjects. He defined a liberated zone as a setting in which people feel free enough to discuss a conflict or contentious topic, whatever topic that may be, without having the discussion erupt out of control or into a bigger dispute.

As a senior core trainer and organizer at The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, Reverend Buford specifically confronts and addresses the issue of racism on a daily basis. He strives to engage people in productive and meaningful discussions, bringing together persons of diverse ethnic, racial and economic groups. The objectives of these conversations are to participate in true dialogues in "mixed" company, rather than one-sided arguments or debates.

Reverend Buford explained several strategies for achieving meaningful dialogues in a liberated zone. First, he stressed the need to know the community's history, the perspectives and backgrounds represented in the audience, and the cultural norms and relationships that exist within or outside of the community.

He also cited self-awareness and introspection as important characteristics for a facilitator, especially when dealing with difficult topics. If one is not honest about one's own perspectives or biases, it is difficult to be effective when attempting to guide others towards addressing their own issues. The facilitator sets the tone or mood of the group. Being self-confident and self-aware is essential for doing this effectively. It is also necessary to put aside one's personal problems, because the training or meeting should always be for the benefit of the group, not for the benefit of the facilitator.

Learning to read the room or the audience is equally important for a facilitator, such as sensing the mood of the crowd, as well as observing who is engaged and who is not. Many times, one is asked to work with a group as a facilitator or trainer because of a currently existing conflict. However, a common tendency for people is to avoid conflict and "make nice," when what is really needed in the situation is creativity or versatility in resolving the conflict.

Reverend Buford invited the audience to ponder thought-provoking questions and participate in a role play. He asked audience members how they would approach creating a liberated zone. Several participants offered tactics they use in settling conflicts or dealing with controversial subjects. One member suggested setting guidelines before beginning any sort of dialogue or work with a group. This person explained that it is ideal to have the group members themselves decide on the guidelines and hold each other accountable to them. Other suggestions included clarifying the reason why one was asked to work with the group, and sharing in advance the topics that would be discussed. Also, the facilitator may bring new perspectives to an already existing discussion in the group. By providing a new perspective in the discussion, new answers or options can be explored.

Reverend Buford concluded by sharing the ground rules used by The People’s Institute to facilitate groups and sessions on the controversial topic of racism. He referred to the rules as “The Contract.” The rules are as follows:

- Everyone must respect each other. All persons in the group must speak and listen to each other respectfully. This includes turning off all electronic devices while in the meeting and being silent long enough to listen to and consider all that is being said by all members of the group.
- It is also important for the group to realize that everyone in the room may be at a different level of understanding of the topic at hand. For instance, a young person could be at a deeper understanding of the influence of racism in her/his life than an older person who has not given much thought to the effects of racism.
- One of the reasons the group members are there is to reach their *growing edge*, meaning they may be pushed out of their comfort zones. At times, one must experience pain in order to grow.
- The facilitator is not there as a person of authority, but as an equal.
- All group members are required to stay for the whole session, and are not allowed to leave early or for individual breaks.
- Anyone is welcome to bring up any kind of “ism” they would like to discuss, as long as it is in the context of racism.
- Everyone must participate in the meeting or training, willingly or not.
- People are welcome to add rules to the ones outlined in The Contract, as long as the whole group agrees.

After describing The Contract, the facilitator then asks all present to introduce themselves by answering three questions:

1. Who are you?
2. What do you do?
3. Why is it important for you and your organization to deal with racism?

Reverend Buford stated that after discussing the guidelines of The Contract, the introductory questions often provide a stimulating foundation for group dialogue.