

## Canadian Centre for Diversity

### **Introduction**

The **Canadian Centre for Diversity (CCD)** is a leading provider of programs and strategies that educate about the dangers of prejudice, discrimination and intolerance in all its forms, and promote the value of a diverse and inclusive society. Our vision: to foster a new generation of young leaders and mentors who advance the strengths of a society that celebrates difference, diversity and inclusion.

Founded in 1947 as CCCJ – the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews – our roots as a national non-sectarian organization dedicated to promoting cultural, racial and religious equality have served us well as we broadened our focus to better reflect Canadian demographics. The organization has a long history of challenging antisemitism, and creating opportunities for dialogue between faith and cultural communities. Since 2002, our programming has expanded to encompass all categories of difference recognized under the Canadian Charter and human rights codes, including race, faith, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and ability.

CCD's efforts are focused on breaking down barriers, building bridges of understanding and respect, and creating opportunities for young Canadians to have courageous conversations about issues that matter. Our educational programs are designed to bring people together – people who are sometimes very different from one another and who might otherwise never have met. We teach them how to listen, how to connect, and how to lead.

Commenting on the establishment of CCCJ, in 1948 The Globe and Mail wrote:

"Racial and religious prejudices and misunderstandings are the cancer of society. Few of the many problems besetting community life are so destructive of the finer values of human nature, or of the harmonious relationships which are the essence of social living. For that reason, there is much to commend in the formation of the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, an organization devoted to the amelioration of racial and religious tensions through the promotion of the ideals of brotherhood and co-operation among all classes and groups."

While the language of 2009 may differ, the threat to Canadian society posed by antisemitism, and the fundamental importance of continued, uncompromising efforts to combat prejudice of any kind, remain the same.

The Canadian Centre for Diversity welcomes the creation of the Parliamentary Coalition and supports the critical work that has been undertaken by its members.

## **Background**

Antisemitism in Canada has a long and regrettable history. Dating back to pre-Confederation, there have been forces that have sought to undermine the Jewish presence in Canada. With the current rise of what has been called “the new antisemitism”, we are faced with an urgent need to understand the dangers that threaten our democratic society, and to establish safeguards that will protect not only the Jewish community, but all communities who may be labeled as “different”.

The three terms of reference that guide the Inquiry are:

- To identify and define the nature of Antisemitism in Canada today.
- To analyze, as far as evidence allows, the extent of the problem.
- To make practical recommendations as to how the problem can be addressed.

The Canadian Centre for Diversity respectfully acknowledges that the Inquiry will receive submissions from organizations better equipped than CCD to discuss the first two terms of reference. From our experience in school and community-based outreach and co-curricular programming, we recognize that the nature of antisemitism in Canada today has changed, and that the new antisemitism (often disguised as anti-Israel sentiment, but ultimately representing in a general negative opinion of Jews) has grown in recent years in a disturbing way. Antisemitism has become, in many circles, acceptable and even expected. In this submission, CCD will address the third term of reference.

## **Observations and Practical Recommendations**

*“Prejudice is a great time saver. You can form opinions without having to get the facts.”*

*E.B. White*

Over the last year alone, over 15,000 students, teachers, parents, community groups and business professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds participated in Canadian Centre for Diversity programs in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta. In addition, program support was provided to students on 20 university campuses across the country. Motivated and inspired by the transformation we see take place when an environment of trust, mutual respect, open dialogue, and learning is intentionally and strategically developed, we believe that the most significant recommendation the Inquiry should make is related to education.

If we are to function as a truly pluralistic country, then we must come to understand and respect each other, not as one broad group to another, not as stereotypes portrayed by the Internet, the media and or the entertainment industry, but as one person to another. Only when we can do that seemingly simple thing will every Canadian be free to live remarkable lives based on their gifts and dreams. For the scourge of antisemitism to be finally and properly addressed, it is imperative that children from the earliest grades on are exposed to the history, cultural and religious values and traditions, and personal narratives of the Jewish community. The most powerful way to accomplish that goal is through face-to-face conversations, through meaningful shared experiences, and through stepping into history to grasp in a personal and visceral way the long, painful history of antisemitism.

### ***Programs that change hearts and minds***

We respectfully describe for the Inquiry examples of several programs designed and delivered by CCD that lead specifically to the outcomes we believe are so necessary. All programs begin with the end in mind: the outcome we seek is one in which particular behavioural norms are learned and followed in order to create safe and open environments where judgment, assumptions and bias can be gently set aside in favour of a much more productive and positive way of thinking and interacting.

The norms that, when discussed and agreed upon by all participants, are:

- Mutual respect
- Attentive Listening
- Speak only for yourself
- Confidentiality
- Right to participate or pass
- Appreciation

These norms are continually repeated and revisited throughout each program or workshop.

They enable the work to be authentic, respectful and intentional. Adhering to the norms makes it possible to go deeply into dialogue without fear.

***Discover Diversity*** is the Canadian Centre for Diversity's largest program, accommodating thousands of participants annually across the country. Two distinct components of the program – Discover Diversity faith and cultural outings, and Discover Diversity workshops – offer elementary through high school students, teachers, parents and community representatives an opportunity to learn about each other's backgrounds, traditions and values, and about the different identities that make up their communities. Through hands-on learning and meaningful dialogue, participants overcome fear, misconceptions and ignorance. On most of the faith and cultural outings, students from a wide variety of backgrounds find themselves for the first time in a synagogue, sitting in the sanctuary before an open ark of Torah scrolls, hearing from the Rabbi about the sacred texts, the tenets of the faith, and most importantly, engaging in dialogue, asking questions, taking advantage of this opportunity to make "the other" real, individual and human.

***QUEST – Question Understand Explore Support Trust*** is a full year workshop program that brings together grade 11 students from Catholic, Islamic and Jewish day schools. They begin with an intensive 5 hour workshop, taking the first steps toward introduction and inclusion, defining the 6 norms and agreeing to abide by them throughout their interactions over the course of the year.

The first time we ran a QUEST, the Jewish and Muslim students in particular approached one another with fear, suspicion and trepidation. How would they feel sitting in a circle with others whose backgrounds and belief systems were so radically different? How could they trust one another?

Beginning with their own courage and willingness to try, they took small and then large steps to cross the boundaries that existed between them. As one student said after the first workshop: “I learned today that we are so much alike. How can we be so similar, and yet so far apart”.

It is a question that troubles many of our students and staff, and one we attempt to answer over and over again by demonstrating that we can be similar and still far apart on certain issues, and that when we move away from seeing collective communities and learn how to appreciate the uniqueness of each individual, we find commonalities that help us to care about one another, even in the face of political differences.

An offshoot of QUEST has now been created, for grade 7/8 students from a Jewish day school and a Muslim day school. After several intense sessions that combined, learning and play, they took time at the end of the school year to celebrate their ongoing relationship with a night of bowling. The question was asked, “How can you hate someone who cheered you on when you got your first strike?”

***The Young Leaders Forum (YLF)*** explores the theme "A World Without Stigma". Senior high school students engage in lively and intense discussions of the complex social issues that face us as citizens in our very diverse country. The Forum's goal is to empower students by demonstrating the destructive impact of stigma, and to provide the tools to identify and to speak out against it. Emphasis is placed on developing leadership and facilitation skills that participants can use to encourage mutual respect, dialogue and acceptance among their peers.

In organizing YLF (this year in the Greater Toronto Region, Calgary, AB, and Halifax, NS) we are always mindful of specific issues that are present in the schools, which come from many different neighbourhoods representing very diverse populations. The stories shared by the youth panellists begin a day of discovery, self-knowledge and transformation, and offer an opportunity for the participants to hear voices that are often silenced: if antisemitism has become an acceptable form of discrimination, and the Jewish experience of discrimination considered to be invisible or normalized, it becomes even more important to include in the program a person able to express the pain of that stigma, the discomfort of walking, as a Jew, into a hostile environment, and the community hardship that results from systemic and widespread antisemitism.

In small group dialogue sessions during YLF, students are taken through the challenging and critical questions around their own identities, their own personal narratives, fears and assumptions, so that labels can give way to truth. With Jewish day schools participating (including orthodox schools), as well as Jewish students from public schools, it becomes finally possible for a distinct shift in attitude to take place. As one student commented, she had come not wanting to like others who were different – but after meeting everyone, she could no longer feel this way.

At a recent YLF in Toronto, students were asked at the end of the day to describe in a word how they had felt on arrival in the morning, and how they felt leaving at the end of the program. Here were some of the words we heard:

*I arrived feeling naïve. I didn't realize how much I don't know. I leave feeling knowledgeable and more sensitive.*

*I arrived feeling anticipation. I leave feeling empowered by all these new things I've learned.*

*I arrived feeling curious. I leave feeling confident, knowing one person can make change.*

*I arrived feeling unsure. I leave feeling excited for change, but disappointed that I can't take all of you with me to make that change together! (thunderous applause!)*

*I arrived feeling nervous and scared. What kind of people would I met here? I leave feeling not invisible anymore.*

*I arrived feeling unsure. I leave feeling not ashamed to be who I am, and not afraid to stand up for other people.*

And finally, more than any other statement we hear at every program, we hear this one: *I know now how much I do not know, how much I need to learn.*

It is our observation that there is a hunger among young people to do the important work of building bridges and healing communities. CCD believes this is the time to create a national initiative that will allow people to realize the work that needs to be done around inclusion and

respect. Antisemitism will only be dealt a lethal blow if the ignorant, the misinformed and the hateful are given an opportunity to have their own “aha” moment; their own powerful encounter with “the other” that helps them to see that the other, ultimately, shares a common humanity with them. They need to peel back the layers of what family, friends and society has taught them, and to be given permission to learn about, understand and respect a group that has for so long been misunderstood, mistreated and too often reviled.

***The March of Remembrance and Hope (MRH)*** is arguably our most important program in terms of providing a strong response to antisemitism. It is a dynamic Holocaust and genocide study mission in Germany and Poland designed for university and college students. The program provides campus student leaders with the education and understanding they need to stand up and speak out against antisemitism, Holocaust denial, genocide, racism and other forms of discrimination. MRH forms the basis for ongoing campus engagement with CCD’s programs and students continue to be involved with other CCD programs, such as the Young Leaders Forum, where they can speak with passion and authenticity about the horrors wrought by antisemitism unchecked.

With 60 students from a wide variety of backgrounds – including students who identify as Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, Baha’i, Gay, Lesbian, Asian, Rwandan, Black, Hispanic, Aboriginal, Anglophone and Francophone – and 10 staff (including 2 co-leaders per bus, survivors, a Scholar in Residence, Holocaust educators and a social worker) we create an environment of deep learning, respect, trust, and safety.

Last year, a memory ceremony in Birkenau included 2 Muslim students chanting from the Quran, who also spoke about their love and respect for their religion and all religions, and about how important it was to them to add their voices of solidarity and empathy for the suffering that took place in Auschwitz and during the Holocaust. Acknowledging that there is not enough dialogue and understanding between Muslims and Jews, they expressed the hope that their generation would change this, and that by coming on the program they were adding one small ripple of change to this movement of love and peace in the world.

Each time we do this program, the relationships between the survivors and students is powerful and unique. In many cases, the students have never before met a Jew. In most cases, they have not met a survivor. They are intimidated at first, but that quickly changes to a feeling of love, respect and a desire to protect them from any further pain. We are awed by the

commitment and courage of both the survivors, and the students. They come with their heads crammed full of facts, figures, dates – all the book learning they needed – and leave with their hearts full of understanding, grief and above all, hope and determination to make a difference. The moments of truth that each of them finds, the instant when awareness turns to comprehension, and knowledge becomes transformed by experience, are like some kind of modern day alchemy.

The great diversity of MRH participants adds a rich complexity of personal experience, and a wide variety of beliefs, suppositions and assumptions. Participants are encouraged to leave behind those assumptions and come to the program with an open heart and open mind. In grappling with the most difficult, painful questions we face as human beings, they help each other through often traumatic and painful encounters with history, and with themselves.

They understand that we forget history at our peril. They experience standing before the Mausoleum at the former death camp of Majdanek, with tons of human ash and bone and hair in a giant pit, and look around the circle at one another and know in their own bones: we cannot let this happen again. When they hear from their survivor, Pinchas Gutter, what it was like for him to arrive at that place – that hell on earth, as an 11 year old boy, to lose in one day his whole family, to catch one last glance of his twin sister as she went to the gas chambers with their mother, and never again to be able to recall her face, only her long, blond braid – they are changed, transformed and enriched. Their desire to be the leaders of change transforms into an intense passion. They will be the ones to stand up as friends and allies when Jews are in danger, when antisemitism is present, and say, “*NO. It’s not OK. ‘Never again’ must be more than a slogan.*”

What good is studying history if it does not lead to change? Not only *can* we make a difference – we *must* make a difference. CCD works with the students after the study mission to bring the message forward in schools, on campuses and in the community. We know that hate is taught. It is our mission to counter that, to stand up strong and united, to teach love.

Education is the key. It is our responsibility in Canada to do better about developing and implementing intelligent, creative and engaging curriculum materials. We must also support the development of co-curricular learning models, such as those offered by CCD, in order to effectively address the problem of antisemitism.