

THE LEVEL PLAYING FIELD – AN ACCESSIBILITY EXERCISE

Helpful History

This exercise has been done as part of the ELCA's anti-racism education since 1999. It has also been used by Women of the ELCA since 1999. It is also available as a free downloadable resource from *welca.org*.

The ELCA and Women of the ELCA share a vision to claim and live out an anti-racist identity. Women of the ELCA made an anti-racist identity an organizational principle and thereby part of our constitution.

A Caution

It is best to not use this exercise if your group is all white or the group has fewer than 15% people of color in your group. If the group is all white, the exercise will only show class differences. If the group has fewer than 15% people of color, the exercise can make those few people feel targeted.

If your group falls into either of these categories, please use the Part One Litany, "A Lamentation of Racial Realities," in its place.

Exercise Preparation

Plan ahead: You will need a large open space. This exercise can be done in a large room, but it is likely to be a tight fit. It is best done in a parking lot, tennis court or playing field. The depth of the space chosen is essential, since people will be both moving forward and moving back. If the exercise is to take place outside, the facilitator must be able to project in order to be heard.

Differences in participants' mobility should be considered beforehand by the facilitator, but sometimes this is not known until participants arrive. In any case, our goal is always full inclusion. Always let people using mobility devices define how they will participate.

Participants begin by standing in a line, facing the same direction, side by side, connected to their neighbors by holding hands or by some other means chosen by participants. Whether they move forward or back, the distance covered should be equal.

If you have to do this exercise in a room that is too narrow, here is one way that doubles the width of a space: Have participants create a staggered line with the people in the second row lined up between and behind the people in the front line, as in a movie theater. Participants will then hold the hands of the people either a bit behind or a bit in front of them. Lines should be as close as reasonably possible.

If the room is too shallow, you might ask fewer questions, have participants take smaller steps, or reconsider using this exercise entirely.

Read through the statements ahead of time. Feel free to select the statements that you read; we have placed them so that moving forward and moving back are somewhat equally shared.

How the Exercise Works

Based on their responses to statements you will read, individuals will either stay where they are, take a step forward, or take a step back. At some point, people will be forced to let go of hands and some may become separated from people on both sides. As the activity continues, the level of access people have had to services, opportunities and middle-class affluence will become evident.

This exercise uses people's own experiences to illustrate institutional and systemic white privilege. The statements do not ascertain individuals' choices, nor are they related to personality. The exercise may also reveal the results of classism.

The Level Playing Field

Leader prompt once the line is formed: I ask everyone to hold silence throughout this exercise. This silence is important,

because this exercise provides a variety of experiences for which chuckles or groans or other sounds can be disruptive. I will remind you to hold silence if we forget.

In the story of the laborers (Matthew 20:1-16), the workers may all have started out in the same pool in the early morning, but as the day went on, some were chosen while others were left behind.

Read the parable (Matthew 20:1-16) and then continue:

Listen to the following statements. Based on your response, take one step forward, take one step back, or stay where you are. Keep holding each other's hands as long as you can, but when you must let go to respond to the statement then, you are to let go.

Now read the statements one at a time as participants silently move forward or back, or stay still.

The Level Playing Field statements

- If your parents spoke English as a first language, move one step forward.
- If, as a child, you had your own room with a door, move one step forward.
- If, as a child, you had numerous age-appropriate books, move one step forward.
- If you were raised in a community where the vast majority of police, politicians, and government workers were *not* of your racial group, move one step back.
- If you had a parent who read to you, move one step forward.
- If you have ever been denied a job or promotion because of your race, move one step back.
- If you can get your hair cut in almost any hair salon, move one step forward.
- If you have a family member or friend who is spending time or has spent time

- in prison, please take a step back.
- If you have ever received public aid like welfare or WIC, please take a step back.
 - If you have never been harassed or disrespected by police because of your race, move one step forward.
 - If either or both of your parents never completed high school, move one step back.
 - If either or both of your parents are college educated, please take a step forward.
 - If either or both of your parents have advanced degrees, take another step forward.
 - If you read thoroughly about the history of your race in kindergarten through twelfth-grade schoolbooks, move one step forward.
 - If neither you nor your parents have ever been on public assistance, move one step forward.
 - If teachers or guidance counselors ever discouraged you from pursuing certain activities, careers or schools that you wanted to pursue, move one step back.
 - If you have ever eaten government surplus food, take one step back.
 - If you, as a child, were ever told you were dirty, shouldn't touch someone's food, or shouldn't drink from the same glass because of skin color, move one step back.
 - If you have ever been asked if you were the secretary, maid, housekeeper, janitor or gardener, or a subordinate of some kind, when you were the boss or homeowner, move back one step.
 - If you needed braces as a child but you did not get them, move one step back.
 - If you have ever been stopped or questioned by police or other people about your presence in a particular neighborhood, move one step back.
 - If your relatives of any generation were forced to leave ancestral lands, move one step back.

- If your father was never unemployed, move one step forward.
- If you have ever had to go to a government or privately operated food pantry to make ends meet, move one step back.
- If you have relatives of any generation that have been lynched, move one step back.
- If you have seen the owner of a purse or other valuable close it, move it, or clutch it tighter when you approached, move one step back.
- If you had more than one bathroom in your house growing up, move one step forward.
- If you have never been followed by a security guard in a store, move one step forward.
- If, while you were growing up, you were regularly told you couldn't eat all the milk or food you wanted because there was not enough, move one step back.
- If your parents had an inheritance from their parents of more than personal possessions, move one step forward.
- If you went to private school, move one step forward.
- If you or members of your family have ever lived within 30 miles of a nuclear test site, move one step back.
- If you have ever been homeless, move one step back.
- If you have an immediate family member who is a doctor, lawyer, professor or other professional, move one step forward.
- If you regularly cash checks without showing additional identification, move one step forward.
- If, as a child, you vacationed outside the United States, move one step forward.
- If you commonly see people of your race in positions of leadership in business, the courts and government, move one step forward.
- If most medical models for disease research and understanding are based on your racial group, move one step forward.
- If you have ever been told that your religion or spiritual beliefs were strange,

primitive, heathen or just plain wrong, move one step back.

Closing the Field

Leader Note: At the end of the exercise, ask people to look silently at where they are on the playing field, noting who is near the front and who is near the back.

Ask them how it felt to let go of others' hands. Point out that The Level Playing Field has a generational feature to it and that the things that made people step forward or step back have nothing to do with any personal decisions they made, but with their context—over which they had no control.

Optional: Ask people to run or move forward to the front wall as quickly as they can at the count of three. If outside, ask people to run or move as quickly as they can to some landmark (sidewalk or side of building). Or you may simply say, pointing to the sidewalk or wall everyone is still facing, "If I were to ask everyone to race to this spot, who would win such a race?"