A world where we have a loving, genuine concern for the welfare of our neighbor; a society in which we reflect a devout love of God. These ideals may sound like part of the Church’s overall mission to establish Zion here on earth and likewise part of Brigham Young University’s goal to establish a Zion community on campus. But this hallowed goal is also not far from the philosophy of the Beloved Community, popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia, explains:

“Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood.”
King believed his Beloved Community was the prescription for a healthy society, but to realize his ideals, America will need to resolve issues involving class and race. Brigham Young University faculty and students are doing just this by fostering King’s Beloved Community through the Civil Rights Seminar. This program, sponsored by the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, begins in the classroom and ends by giving students an opportunity to visit pivotal sites from the civil rights movement, but its goals reach much further. Students also learn the complex history of race relations in the United States and, most importantly, come to understand how they can build the Beloved Community wherever life leads them.

More Than Just a Class

Though the students admitted into the Civil Rights Seminar have a textbook and teacher like everyone else, this course aims to go further than a classroom understanding of history. The true focus of the class is to help students create the Beloved Community by practicing acceptance and love in the classroom. Teaching the civil rights movement requires an atmosphere of openness, so the class size is small. This gives the students and faculty the chance to create a safe space where students can share and learn from the experiences of others. Dialogue is highly encouraged so that students can welcome vulnerability, experience positive racial dynamics, and learn why the civil rights movement is relevant today. Classes go in depth to discover why there were discrepancies in civil rights and why the goals of the movement were not fully achieved.

Success in this learning environment is not measured only by letter grades. Sociology professor Dr. Ryan Gabriel, who has attended this trip for the past three years, believes true success in the seminar is represented by how the students live outside the classroom. He says, “If students can continue to be and feel safe and vulnerable, that’s a success.” The hope is for the participants of this seminar to be champions for racial justice, peace, love, and understanding in their families, classes, workplaces, and neighborhoods. This is done by helping students forge lasting connections so they know they have a strong community of support—in other words, by teaching about the Beloved Community.

On the Ground Learning

Although the lessons of the Civil Rights Seminar begin in the classroom, they are magnified by a four-day trip to the South to visit some of the iconic sites from the civil rights movement. These sites include the 16th St. Baptist Church, which was bombed as an act of racially motivated terrorism, the Rosa Parks Museum, and the Martin Luther King Jr. home, among many others (see sidebar). Though many of the stops on the tour remain the same year to year, the faculty who run the seminar find that the experience is always changing due to the needs of those participating.

BYU administrator Anthony Bates, who assists with the seminar every year, says, “Each group of students is different because everyone comes on the trip with different needs.” One such need was met for a group traveling with Professor Gabriel, who had been trying to make sense of lynchings for his students when they visited the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, a site created to remember lynching victims across America. The site consists of 800 coffin-shaped monuments made from COR-TEN steel, a material designed to withstand harsh elements, that hang from the ceilings of the outdoor memorial. Recounting the powerful experience of reading all the names of the 4,400 lynching victims to the students, Gabriel sensed a moment of emotional healing for the group and felt that these slain men, women, and children were finally being honored with the funeral they deserved.

This trip is more than sightseeing. Like the movement itself, the most touching experiences are often spiritual in nature. One year, the students were able to sit with Reverend Robert Graetz, the white Lutheran pastor who led an all-black congregation and openly supported the Montgomery bus boycott. During their visit, a faculty member turned to a student and asked her to sing for the reverend. Anthony Bates remembered this moment, saying, “As she sang ‘I Am a Child of God’, the spirit in the room was palpable.”

But these spiritual moments are also challenging. For both students and faculty, visiting these civil rights sites can be utterly heartbreakening. White pain and anger naturally arise while examining such hard history, gratitude for the determination of men, women, and children, black and white alike, that fought for justice and growth through the cracks of broken hearts. During some years, the seminar visits the South in conjunction with the annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee, a commemoration of Bloody Sunday, the first attempted march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, which ended tragically at the hands of law enforcement officers. During the 2019 trip, the class visited Selma a couple of weeks after the jubilee so that they would be able to be the only ones crossing the bridge. Bates said that when the group reached the top of the hill, they were “overcome with emotion” knowing that if they had been walking to that point just 54 years earlier, they would have seen the lines of decades-old citizens with broken bottles, horses, and bats standing next to state troopers with batons and tear gas. Bates continued, “I was overcome with feelings of...
Reconnection
For one student, the seminar was a chance to learn about his disconnected heritage. Jacob Smith, a senior studying global studies, was adopted as an infant into a white family, and as an African American growing up in predominately white Draper, Utah, he found himself in a world that kept him from feeling truly accepted. All he was expecting to gain by participating in the seminar was a little more knowledge about the civil rights movement and what it means to “be a member of the black community.” What he didn’t expect was to create lasting connections—or feel the Spirit on the trip.

Going to Martin Luther King Jr.’s home and Ebenezer Church, where King served as assistant reverend to his father, gave Smith “the very tangible feeling of the spiritual beings that still live there.” For him, standing on those grounds united the worlds he’d learned about and the world he lives in. Looking back on his experience with the seminar, Smith now understands that “there is a difference between intellectual and experiential understanding.” He says, “No matter how well read we are, we will not ever be able to truly understand what those powerful, driven heroes endured during their nonviolent war for rights. However, we can honor their sacrifices by striving to create these sought-after beloved communities wherever we can.”

Creating a Beloved Zion
Brigham Young University’s dedication to educating young people to “go forth to serve” is exemplified through the Civil Rights Seminar. Through their experiences in the program, students are gaining a more complete knowledge of American history, because in a Beloved Community, the story of one of us is the story of all of us. Thus, the final product of the seminar is the creation of a group of students and faculty who are all striving to create King’s Beloved Community, along with Zion communities, throughout their lives. As King said:

“The end is reconciliation; the end is redemp- tion; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”

Moving Past Perfectionism:
Compassion-Focused Group Therapy
BY UDIM OBO

In the gospel of Matthew, Christ commands us to love God first and then our neighbors as ourselves. We tend to focus on one part of the second commandment—loving our neighbors—but are we as committed to loving ourselves? Gary Burlingame, chair of the Department of Psychology, and Kara Cattani, clinical director of BYU Counseling and Psychology Services (CAPS), worked with colleagues to build a compassion-focused group therapy model. This technique helps students and others who are struggling with self-criticism and shame, which can lead to various mental health problems. Using the original compassion-focused therapy (CFT) model developed by Paul Gilbert, Cattani and Burlingame created therapy groups to help individuals both experience compassion and foster compas- sion for themselves and others. The work done in these groups is multifaceted, but below are a few examples of CFT techniques.

1. Imagining a Compassionate Other
We all need someone on our side, and CFT uses imagery to help individuals build a compassionate other who can give emotional and physical support. Therapists ask their patients to imagine an “ideal compassionate other” who can be fictional or a combination of many loving peo- ple like family, close friends, or even divinity. This compassion- ator other does not trigger guilt or shame but rather offers a sense of peace, love, and unconditional acceptance.

Although this can be challenging, with the support of a therapist, most people eventually succeed in creating a compas- sionator other that activates the soothing or parasympathetic ner- vous system. This is the first step in CFT. Burlingame and Cattani have found that using strategies to calm the body invariably works to calm the mind.

2. Shining a Light on Mindfulness
What can a flashlight teach us about focusing thoughts? A lot, according to Burlingame and Cattani. Patients suffering from depression and anxiety often feel like their minds are chaotic and out of control, but CFT teaches them that a wandering mind is normal. Therapists say the chal- lenge is not to control or rid the mind of thoughts but rather to learn to focus (and refocus) our attention. To demonstrate this, a therapist will turn off the lights in a room and give members in a group session a turn at holding a lit flashlight. Members shine the flashlight at different parts of the room—the ceiling, a clock, the floor, a picture on the wall. After everyone has a turn, the thera- pist points out how most mem- bers’ eyes focused on whatever the flashlight illuminated.

This reminds us that we are in control of what we focus on, and it teaches that if we’ve depressed, our attention will invariably wan- der to sad and hopeless parts of our lives. While CFT acknowled- ges that negative thoughts are not the individual’s fault, it also shows group members that it is their responsibility to refocus the flashlight of their attention. At first group members may only be able to refocus for seconds, but with practice they can develop this skill, and refocusing often becomes easier.

3. Defending Yourself Against Your Inner Critic
When you think about a behavior you would like to change, notice what you say to yourself. Notice the tone of your voice and how your critical voice leaves you feeling. Does it motivate you? Does it frighten you? If you had a friend or a child with this same behavioral struggle, how would you talk to them about the prob- lem? You deserve to receive the same patient, positive tone that you would likely share with your loved ones.

Cattani reports that “to date, the data on compassion- focused group therapy is prom- ising.” Burlingame, Cattani, and their colleagues are studying its implementation and outcomes at both BYU CAPS and the Utah State Hospital. Most of their cli- ents report an improved ability to combat stress and anxiety in order to feel calm and relaxed. Many also report that visualization and meditation skills were helpful in creating a sense of safety and self-compassion. One client’s comment nicely reflects the empowering aims of CFT: “It gave me a lot of insight into my own emotional needs, … what makes me feel safe [and] what kind of people I need to spend time with.”

BYU CAPS has created a class to teach students CFT techniques and also offers CFT groups for stu- dents each semester. Students who would like to learn more about participating in these groups can contact CAPS at 801-422-3035 for more information.