

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

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## **Marching to the Beat of a Different Drummer**

*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed*

*by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. - Romans 12:1-8*

One day, an audience of parents, family and friends gathered to watch a parade of newly minted soldiers, who had just finished their basic training. The soldiers were an impressive sight, as they marched, several hundred strong, in perfectly straight rows, across the parade ground. Looking down on the soldiers from the bleachers, the parents were bursting with pride. One mother was trying to point out her son to the person next to her. “My Johnny is right over there,” she said. “He’s easy to see. He’s the only one marching in step.”

Marching in perfect formation is one of the means by which the armed forces trains all the non-conformity out of recruits, so that they will follow orders without hesitation and without question, even when it may cost them their lives. Without such conformity, no officer could issue an order with any hope that it might be followed. Conformity is absolutely essential to the functioning of an army.

And conformity is not only a feature of military life, but of many different aspects of modern life from sports teams to consumer behaviour. There are even some religious communities which stress conformity to such an extent that they make the army look like a ragtag bunch of misfits.

But in contrast, the apostle Paul tells us that non-conformity is absolutely essential to the way God wants us to live together. But it is a very unique kind of non-conformity. The non-conformity of a spiritual life is not simply rebellion against any form of authority or conformity. It isn’t like the non-conformity of a teenager who is rebelling against parental authority. It isn’t like the non-conformity of those who label any inconvenient truth as fake news because it challenges their preconceptions. It isn’t like the non-conformity of those who insist on being political incorrect because of their racist, sexist, bigoted or simply ignorant views. It isn’t like the non-conformity of those who drive cars into crowds because of some twisted conviction or other. It is, instead, a non-conformity

which emerges out of the transformation which comes when we devote ourselves as living sacrifices to God and the renewal of our minds. It is a refusal to conform to anything that violates God's will for us, but even more important, it is seeking the creative presence of God in our lives and our world, and dedicating ourselves to strengthening that creative force.

The New Testament refers to this creative process by the metaphor of waking up. Most people, the New Testament suggests, are asleep, a deep hypnotic sleep, entranced by conformity to conventional wisdom, which is what most people believe life is about. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg writes that conventional wisdom focuses on judgement and comparisons in which we are constantly comparing ourselves and judging ourselves for how we measure up, and therefore a world of deep anxiety. Everything depends on how well we perform. "We try to be outstanding—to stand out—by conforming to the standards that our culture values most highly." [Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again*, pp. 77-8]

This kind of conforming life, is indeed like a kind of sleep, a hypnotic sleep entranced by conformity to conventional wisdom. Jesus is constantly telling his followers to wake up, and to stay awake, because the stupefying effects of conformity are constantly lulling us back to sleep.

This week hate has been in the news a lot. From the violence sparked by the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia to the terrorist attacks in Barcelona, hate gets a lot of attention. So it is worth asking the question: "how do we respond to that?" It isn't just far away that hate gets news: One of my colleagues, who is black has regularly had his church defaced by racist graffiti. I see confederate flags in many cars and trucks on Alberta highways. And it isn't just other people. I remember in high school hearing a racist joke about one of my teachers, thinking it was funny and retelling it, even though the teacher against whom it was directed was one of my teachers. I am not proud of that; in fact I am deeply ashamed. But jokes, comments and actions that are racist, anti-semitic, anti-Muslim, homophobic, or hateful in some other way are common. How can we be transformed by the renewal of our minds and our communities so that love, even of those who are very different from us, is supplanting this kind of hate.

Recently I came across a website from a widely respected organization in the southern U.S. [the Southern Poverty Law Centre], entitled "10 Ways to Fight Hate"<sup>1</sup> so I thought I would take you briefly through their recommendations. So here are ten ways not to conform to hate:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/20170814/ten-ways-fight-hate-community-response-guide>

[1. Act](#) - Do something rather than nothing. In the face of hatred, silence might be will be interpreted as acceptance by the perpetrators, the public and — worse — the victims. Even a comment should be challenged, because hate has a tendency to escalate: Slurs often escalate to harassment, harassment to threats, and threats to physical violence. So act: say something, write a letter, post a message, hold up a sign, attend a vigil. Take some concrete creative action that makes it clear you don't accept hateful words or speech.

[2. Join Forces](#) - Reach out to allies from churches, schools, clubs, and other civic groups. Others share your desire to stand against hate. There is power in numbers. Asking for help and organizing a group reduces personal fear and vulnerability, spreads the workload, and increases creativity and impact.

[3. Support the Victims](#) – Victims of hate crimes often feel very vulnerable. If you witness a hateful incident, reach out to the victim, ask how you can be supportive, imagine creative ways to let them know they are not alone.

[4. Speak Up](#) - Hate must be exposed and denounced, but don't get caught into simply opposing something. Be positive in your message. Use traditional and social media. Call on media and news outlets to look past stereotypes and conflict to provide balance and depth.

[5. Educate Yourself](#) – 95% of hateful incidents are committed by young males acting alone or in small groups, often for thrills. Only 5% are committed by organized groups. But the young men may be influenced by a hate group or a website, so do your research and challenge the misinformation and fear that breeds hate.

[6. Create An Alternative](#) - **Every act of hatred should be met with an act of love and unity.** Many communities facing a hate group rally have held alternative events at the same hour, some distance away, emphasizing strength in community and diversity. They have included forums, parades, and unity fairs featuring speakers, food, music, exhibits, and entertainment. In Calgary this afternoon, a community potluck is being held to focus on bringing people together rather than pushing people apart.

[7. Pressure Leaders](#) - Elected officials and other community leaders can be important allies. But some must overcome reluctance — and others, their own biases — before they're able to take a stand.

8. [Stay Engaged](#) - Promote acceptance and address bias before another hate crime can occur. Expand your comfort zone by reaching out to people outside your own groups. A united community is like Teflon. Hate can't stick there.

9. [Teach Acceptance](#) - Bias is learned early, often at home. Schools and children's programmes can offer lessons of tolerance and acceptance and involve children in positive relationships across tension filled boundaries between groups.

10. [Dig Deeper](#) - We all grow up with prejudices. Acknowledging them — and working through them — can be difficult, but we need to be open to learning about our biases and stereotypes, confessing them and accepting forgiveness and transformation. At the same time, we need to learn about systemic discrimination and join forces to change it.

So those are ten ways to not conform to a culture of hate, ten ways to renew our minds and our communities. Perhaps our church needs to think about ways in which we can challenge the culture of racism, xenophobia, and homophobia that surrounds us. Let me conclude with one story of a church that decided not to be conformed, but to be transformed:

A large number of homeless people were attracting the attention of churches in a large city. Some churches started opening their doors at night to provide a place for people to sleep, until the city council passed a bylaw forbidding churches to function as homeless shelters. One church decided they would not disobey the bylaw, but that they would not conform to it either. And so every night, they held a prayer vigil, an all-night prayer vigil, to which anyone, congregation member or homeless person, was invited. As each person entered the church for the vigil, they would be handed a blanket, a pillow, a hymn book and a bulletin. Thus it was that homeless people found a safe place to sleep, and congregation members found a real freedom in setting aside conformity to the world and seeking to do the will of God.

When we really devote ourselves to the loving God who loves us all with a passionate and compassionate love, we will, like Johnny out of step with the rest of his squad, often find ourselves out of step, marching to the beat of a different drummer. But when everyone else is marching to the drumbeat of deadly conformity, then the drumbeat of life itself is the only one worth listening to.