

Diversity: A Dialogue on Definition, Importance, and Use

By: Business and Marketing Editor Isaiah Mudge and Guest Contributor De'Shawn Ford

Introduction (Isaiah Mudge)

The following article is an example of civil discourse between myself and De'Shawn Ford. At the moment of my writing this introduction, neither De'Shawn nor I know the opinions of the other on the topics below. Furthermore, neither of us will read the other essay until we have written our own. The exercise will be for each of us to convey our thoughts in a cool-headed, clear, and concise manner. We will then each provide a number of brief questions for the other to answer. The goal of the exercise is to demonstrate healthy dialogue. In this polarized time, De'Shawn and I will each try to genuinely understand the other person's perspective.

When we question each other at the end, our questions will be either to improve our own understanding, or to challenge the other person to consider something he has not thought of before. In either case we are acting out of genuine care and respect for the other person. We sincerely hope you, the reader, will do likewise.

The content of the article will center on the word diversity, which has been at the heart of extensive debate and distress at CUW. De'Shawn and I will write on our thoughts according to the following outline:

- a. Please give a working definition for the word diversity.
- b. What is the importance of using this word, to what extent should we ensure that it continues to be used in dialogue?
- c. Is it possible for this word to be abused or misused, so that we should be cautious about how we use it?

d. CUW is a Christian university. What special considerations should we have regarding the word on account of this (both in use and implementation)?

Note: “Use and Implementation” in Item d means we will discuss both the word and what it means. For example, we will both discuss our thoughts on using the word “diversity” and we will discuss the actual presence of diversity on this campus.

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De’Shawn Ford: On Diversity

Diversity. Merriam-Webster (2022) defines Diversity as “having or being composed of differing elements.” When one thinks of the word, they are inevitably drawn to a key component of its definition: Difference. When one uses diversity in reference to other people, the differences they are referring to can be any number of things, ranging from skin color to sexual orientation. In her series of essays titled “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” black, lesbian essayist and poet Audre Lorde (2018) states that “difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.” Though these words were written in the 1970s, they ring true even in our modern times. Differences serve as the basis of beautiful inventions and innovative creations. They can serve as the foundation for learning, as long as one is willing to accept another perspective. In this way, they can promote healthy, efficient communication between people. Difference has always been a defining characteristic of

progress in its truest form. Differences are what makes humanity unique and can and should serve as the basis for appreciation. Diverse beliefs, thoughts, cultures, races, and opinions serve as arguably the most important contributor to monumental change throughout the history of nations across the world. Embracing diversity can protect vulnerable people, particularly minorities, from abuse at the hands of those in positions of power. Diversity reminds a nation of the multitude of differences that make up its fabric and to appreciate these differences. This is what I will reference as the “true” meaning of diversity throughout this paper.

I do not believe that many people I have met and spoken to about matters related to diversity would disagree with this assertion. But recently “diversity” and its use have been matters of controversy at Concordia. In the aforementioned use of diversity, differences serve as bridges that connect people and fundamentally change the world for the better. However, it is undeniable that the word “diversity” has also recently been used and associated with political agendas that deviate from its true purpose. It has been used as a buzzword for corporate companies and article headlines. Some groups, most notably civil rights organizations, have used “diversity” and other words, as a means to garner support for a particular agenda.

Before I continue, I believe it is important to note that corruption of diversity’s meaning is not unique to these groups. Diversity has frequently been used as a means through which to divide and separate people throughout American history. This use of diversity is what I refer to as the “them and us” use of the word. There are two ways in which diversity has been used to further divide and separate people throughout American history. Lawmakers and politicians highlighted only the challenges and changes that arise as a result of the acceptance of diversity in its true sense. They preyed on the natural fear of the unknown and the new that is a fundamental characteristic of human nature. This fear resulted in the creation of the infamous Jim Crow Laws,

the practice of redlining, and the superpredator theory. These different principles established whites as the ingroup and others as the outgroup, “Them and Us.”

Political initiatives based on the importance of diversity can and have done good for underrepresented populations, such as the NAACP’s fight for the integration of schools in the famous Brown vs Board of Education case (NAACP, 2021). However, the use of words like “diversity” coupled with political agendas and stances changes the context of the word, an important component of its definition. It begins to corrupt the true nature of the word. This corruption of the word presents a number of issues. Most notably, it creates barriers instead of bridges and prevents the very appreciation that is essential for growth.

Diversity then becomes a “them or us” concept, rather than a “we” concept. It becomes a point of contention, as opposed to a point of conversation and conflict resolution among different groups of people. When someone says that they “don’t support Black Lives Matter Organization” (important to note that the organization is separate from the movement here), it is common that someone might assume they must be against diversity, when in fact this could not be the case. It may simply be that an individual does not support a portion of the organization’s political agenda, but that same individual may attend every rally and speak out against systemic racism against Black Americans, much like someone who supports the organization itself. In the end, these individuals are fighting for the same true appreciation of diversity but subscribe to different political beliefs.

There is an important distinction to make between the “diversity” tied to political agendas and its true form. A true appreciation of diversity is not political in and of itself, but can and often does affect political change. Understanding differences requires careful discussion, but the

“all or nothing” belief which comes as a result of viewing diversity through a corrupted lens creates a barrier to this understanding.

The issue at hand here seems to be one surrounding the two contexts in which diversity may be used. The first is what I have previously described as its true meaning, as a means through which love and acceptance of differences fuels a greater good for humanity. The second, more dangerous context in which “diversity” is used is in the context of being supplementary to a group or an organization’s beliefs or political agenda, wherein becomes a separator. It makes dialogue surrounding the term divisive, not inclusive. It fuels a “them versus us” mentality, fueling a desire to be proven right and win rather than to learn and grow. An understanding of this dangerous misconstrual provides a potential explanation for the recent controversy surrounding the word.

As I mentioned before, for centuries of American history, differences have been used by those in power as a stopping point, something to be called out and used to separate. As a response, many minority cultures’ existences rest on the celebration of the very differences used to once discriminate and separate from the rest of the country. Langston Hughes’ “I, Too” and James Baldwin’s “Untitled” are two examples of embracing such differences. Both poems speak to the challenges of having to exist in a country that has systematically been set up to ensure your failure because of your difference, in this case, Hughes’ blackness and Baldwin’s homosexuality as a black man. Thus, a criticism of CUW’s desire for a president who supports diversity by white, Christian students and faculty was perceived as an attack on not only the terminology but on the people whose being has become tied to the very word (Prospectus, 2021). It feels to some like an attack on the struggles of minorities and those are different from the perceived Christian ideal.

Because of the political agendas and organizations that “diversity” is popularly attributed to, Christians may have found it concerning that the institution would support it. This is understandable and such concerns can be considered warranted as it relates to faith. But, Concordia’s support of diversity, if it was used in the first context, is supported by faith, and should not represent a cause for concern (Gal. 3:28). Concordia’s acknowledgment of diversity then represents a future to look forward to, but not one without change. If this is the case, I believe that change is certainly a contributor to the issue at hand here then, because to accept the true meaning of diversity is to accept change and be willing to do the work required to respect differences.

Moving forward, we must come to understand the context of our language. It is not only essential but a prerequisite for reaching true understanding. We should seek to appreciate differences, not fear them. Diversity should serve as the basis for creation, not destruction. It should open doors, not close them. We should listen to the stories it has to tell, the lessons it has to teach. They will be what saves us from our own ignorance.

Isaiah’s Questions for De’Shawn

Isaiah: In your introduction you write that differences “can serve as the foundation for learning, as long as one is willing to accept another perspective.” To what extent must we accept other perspectives to have productive differences in a diverse society? Can I disagree with someone else’s perspective, even disagree with things foundational to their identity, and still respect them?

De'Shawn: I think that if we want to have productive differences, we must be willing to fully accept another perspective. I'll explain this in a little more detail because I see where this may be confusing. I believe that we are able to accept perspectives freely, in the same way in which we can accept opinions, without agreeing with or internalizing those opinions. One can accept the way that another is interpreting something (perspective) without agreeing with their perception.

Now, as it relates to things foundational to another's identity, I think that the same train of thought applies, though this naturally takes on a more personal tone. I also think it is important that we not make snap judgements when it comes to perspectives, or even opinions. It is important to ask careful questions and take the time to understand others, because there are so many things that contribute to the way that we interpret the world around us (e.g. race, gender, economic status, sexuality). To respect another person is to give "due regard for their feelings, wishes, rights or traditions," and I fully believe that it can be possible to respect others, even when disagreeing with their perception of the world.

I'll use sexuality as an example. I think that it is certainly possible to respect different perspectives of sexuality, even as a Christian. I say this because our sexuality is not defined solely by choice, but by a number of different components and contributing factors (e.g. genetics, developmental background, etc.) (APA, 2022) (Scott, 2021). I am personally not a follower of the LCMS. But I believe that, logically speaking, the same attitudes and approaches that the LCMS utilizes against homosexuality, considering it frames it as a choice (again, simply not the case, at least not the complete one), should therefore be applied to other sins or transgressions as well, but this is simply not what is done. If one can pick and choose what they adhere to in this sense, then the entire foundation of the faith ought to be re-examined.

Isaiah: In your final body paragraph you write, “to accept the true meaning of diversity is to accept change and be willing to do the work required to respect differences.” What is the work we must do to respect differences? For instance, the LCMS perspective on homosexuality is “to help the individual to bear his/her burden without fear of recrimination and rejections by his/her sisters and brothers in Christ,” but also very clearly that “homosexual behavior is contrary to God’s Word and will,” (LCMS, 2022). Can CUW as an institution hold this view while still respecting diversity among its students? Do students who believe Christians are wrong on this have a duty to respect the beliefs of the Christians too?

De’Shawn: I believe it is the responsibility of CUW as an institution that is home to a diverse range of students and staff, to respect and care for all of the students under its umbrella, so to speak. I believe that Concordia can say, “We don’t agree with your sexuality, but you acknowledge that you exist within the bounds of our institution, and so we respect you as a human.” In this way, Concordia is able to care for these students, and provide them with relevant resources and support, regardless of their beliefs. This is the work that I am referencing. Understanding different perspectives and accepting challenges to your beliefs is an actual act of work, as it consumes mental energy and requires intentional effort, a fact corroborated by psychological principles. It is possible to consider and respect different views without compromising on your own.

As this relates to an institution, there is also the obvious financial considerations as well. Concordia does not, and likely will never, screen the students that pay them to attend the school. There is no questionnaire or labeling on applications that explicitly states, “if you have

committed these sins or believe in this, we will not accept your money or application.” If an institution is willing to accept tuition from an individual of a diverse background, I believe they not only can, but must support those students and at the very least, attempt to understand and respect their perspective. It ties back to what I said about respecting differences, it requires accepting and acknowledging challenges to the way one views the world. Providing resources and platforms for those under one’s care or institution is not, and should not be seen as, the same as outright endorsement. I believe that this absolutely works both ways and requires the same approach on both sides of the argument.

Isaiah Mudge: On Diversity

Your story is good. Perhaps his story is good also. This is an African proverb, one learned by my parents during their ten years of missionary service in West Africa. What it means is this: withhold judgement. Wait, listen, and see, until you think you genuinely understand both sides. Your first goal is not to determine what you think is true, it is to learn what you may not already know. The wisdom of this saying is important for Americans to hear, given the frantic pace of life that we are known for. Perhaps if we slow down and really listen, his story will be good also. It is important for people to hear perspectives from different cultures and backgrounds so that they do not become entrenched in the things which their culture assumes. This is what writers such as C.S. Lewis mean when they encourage the reading of old books from different times, and this new perspective is the greatest gift which diversity brings to a culture (Lewis, 2022). The Merriam-Webster definition of diversity is, “the condition of having or being composed of differing elements,” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Primarily this word is used regarding cultural and racial differences, and the presence of diversity brings the unique gifts

mentioned above. Differences between people are normal and healthy. They help to teach people to communicate with one another, and the differences in belief and opinion cause a mutual sharpening of thought between people so long as they are speaking with and learning from each other. Diversity of thought, belief, opinion, race, creed, and culture forces a nation to endure conflict, to reconcile, and to grow. On a personal level, embracing diversity is important in protecting the various members of people groups, especially races, which have been treated as inferior and harmed. Use of the word “diversity,” itself is important for a nation to remind itself of the value in its differences and to stay keyed-in to different perspectives and outlooks on life. *Your story is good. Perhaps his story is good also.*

I have never spoken with a person who disagreed with the points stated above regarding the goodness and importance of a diverse and respectful nation. Yet, there has been an outcry recently with the use of the word “diversity,” at Concordia. The reason for this is that there are two primary ways in which “diversity” can be used. The first is the one named above, wherein diversity represents people of broad backgrounds all respected and listened to. I believe everyone I have ever met at CUW supports this. The second is identical to the first, but it is used as a means for political control.

Let me explain. Some groups, especially civil-rights organizations, use diversity as a means to push policy. Due to its prominence, Black Lives Matter will be the example used in this paper. BLM is certainly a powerful civil-rights organization which has done good for black communities and minorities in the U.S., promoting diversity of all kinds. Yet, one of BLM’s central demands is to defund policing within the U.S. (BLM, 2022). One may believe that policing will encourage safer communities, which will assist with trust and cultural mixing, and therefore disagree *not* with BLM’s goal, but with its methods. The proposed “second” use of

diversity occurs when one person says, “*I do not support BLM,*” and the response is, “*you must hate diversity.*” Two people may have the same goal and disagree on methods. When the word “diversity” is used to prevent a complex view of our fellow humans, or to force one to conform entirely to the ideas of another, it is being abused. The Africans have it right in this instance. When our knee-jerk reaction as a culture is to accuse on impulse, perhaps we should slow down. *Your story is good. Perhaps his story is good also.*

When this second use of “diversity” occurs, it becomes difficult for people to hold nuanced views. It creates an “all or nothing” approach to thought; either you are entirely on the side of an organization, or you are entirely opposed to it. The complex situation which this creates for Christians is when some tenants of an organization oppose Christian beliefs. Let this be made clear: love and respect for all people, bar none, is biblically mandated (John 15:12, Gal. 3:28, 1 John 3:16). This is a powerful biblical defense for the first type of diversity which was named above, although many Christians throughout history have failed to uphold it. It is also true that Christ himself commanded Christians to defend and protect all biblical teachings (Matt. 28:19-20, Rom. 16:17-18, 1 Pet. 3:15). In essence, Christians must have nuanced views in this area. The Bible is not opposed to diverse groups of people, but sometimes it is against the beliefs held by them. To use BLM as an example again, the organization stated in 2020 that one of its core principles was to disrupt the nuclear family (Bernstein, 2020). This language was removed after backlash, but it alone would provide ample reason for a Christian to be non-supportive of the organization, since the nuclear family is instituted and commanded by God (Gen. 2:24).

As members of a Christian university, then, it is important for everyone to stay attuned to the complex relationship between this first and second use of “diversity.” The first is love and respect for all kinds of people. The second is expected agreement with political movements or

organizations which are fighting for the first. When this second use is employed, it becomes difficult to communicate clearly. If someone says, “*I do not support BLM,*” and the immediate response is, “*you must hate diversity,*” it destroys careful dialogue between two people who may very well agree. When this occurs, and it has, the opposite also becomes true. If one cannot disagree with a civil rights organization without others assuming they are against diversity, they then cannot support diversity without others assuming they support civil rights organizations and all they stand for. This makes it difficult for Christians who support diversity to communicate their beliefs without seeming to support organizations with which they disagree.

This is the reason for recent concern over the use of “diversity,” at CUW. When the administration specified that they were looking for a president who supports diversity, many Christian students and faculty became concerned (Concordia, 2021). This was not because these students and faculty are against diversity, but rather because they did not know which use of “diversity,” the administration was employing. If the administration were supporting respect and love for all people, there would be no issue. If the administration is looking for someone supportive of organizations which may oppose Christian beliefs, then Christian students and faculty have cause to be concerned.

Going forward as a university we must recognize the misunderstandings caused by nuanced differences in our language. Ironically, these misunderstandings come from diversity. They extend from the different experiences and backgrounds had by each student at CUW. The solution is simply to listen. When someone disagrees with “diversity,” simply pause and ask why. *Your story is good. Perhaps his story is good also.*

De’Shawn’s Questions for Isaiah

De'Shawn: What are your thoughts on CUW providing resources for those who may not hold the same views as LCMS/Christians? Do you believe there is or should be a limit to how much CUW does provide?

Isaiah: I think there are basic resources that must be provided for all students. These include food, housing, and safety. Assistance through the food pantry, the counseling office, or the comfort dog program would apply here as well. The various campus ministries also exist to support all students spiritually regardless of their allegiance to the LCMS. These are all resources which CUW has an obligation to provide to students who do not hold LCMS views, although it provides them to students who do hold LCMS views as well.

I think that CUW also has a responsibility to provide resources that push its students to learn and grow. For students who may not hold LCMS views this means ensuring that classes are teaching LCMS beliefs well so that students can learn and be challenged. This also means ensuring such students have the opportunity to voice disagreements and to have their own opinions without any fear of recrimination. This will force LCMS students to engage with different ideas as well, so that all students are mutually pushing each other, as is the goal of diversity.

Where CUW does need to limit resources is where the resources begin to actively support beliefs which Christianity/the LCMS deems to be wrong. I think CUW should provide resources for pregnant students on campus, for instance, but it must not provide resources directing students to abortion centers since that supports an act which the LCMS holds to be wrong (LCMS, 2022). As another example, CUW should allow students to meet and discuss in groups

such as philosophy club, but it could prevent the club from using CUW funds to host an event which is raising money for an anti-Christian organization.

De'Shawn: You spoke about the first use of diversity being a “love and respect for all kinds of people.” What do you think that looks like in practice? More specifically what do you think CUW can do better as it relates to supporting those who do not fit within its primary demographic (i.e. White, Christian, Heterosexual, Cisgender)?

Isaiah: Love and respect for others comes down to recognition of God’s love for all people. The heart of how we ought to treat others then comes down to following Christ as he acts in the Bible. He loved people. He valued them, encouraged them. He never mocked them or tried to hurt them. He listened to them and had conversations with them. However, He also corrected them and He resisted them when they believed things that were wrong.

This shows us that love and respect for all people is more complex than it may seem. In practice it involves upholding others in their physical, mental, and spiritual health. It means genuinely wanting what is best for those around us, no matter who they are. As Christ showed us, it also means lovingly and firmly pushing back when others follow an ungodly path. Christians must have this resistance in order to love rightly, because if you believe someone is harming his relationship with God, others, or himself and you simply stand by then you do not love that person at all.

As an example, the greatest place where the church has screwed this up has been with the LGBTQ+ community, and I will use homosexuality as the primary example. Through their fixation on a specific sin, many Christians have propagated the belief that homosexuality is a

greater evil than the sexual temptation that nearly all people endure. These people have failed to remember that love must accompany firmness of belief. Christ would have resisted the LGBTQ+ community as well, but he would never have made them believe they are unloved on account of the struggles they endure. Emulating Christ is the Christian call.

As a Christian university, the administration and faculty of CUW must support this Christian call. They would be violating their offices if they did not. This means that CUW must ensure that all of its students, especially those who have endured the kind of mistreatment that many minority communities have, are loved the way Christ would love them. There must be support for physical, mental, and spiritual health with no discrimination. CUW must also uphold the Bible as true, and CUW must side with Biblical teachings where they conflict with the culture. To best support minority demographics at CUW, our administration must heed this call. It will ensure that the administration gives every support and help to such students that it can without going against its responsibility to uphold what is true.

To do better at this, I think the administration primarily needs to ensure that students and faculty have venues to communicate openly on these issues without any fear. Dialogue will allow the leaders at CUW to know what they need to improve on regarding all students. Finally, students need to have the charitability and carefulness to discuss these issues with each other. The administration of our university can make a space for these conversations but nothing will happen without our support. It would take effort but I believe it is possible to create a closer and more loving community if all sides are willing to try.

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