

**B**ullying is now a major reason that American teenagers give for skipping school and eventually dropping out of high school. Students get bullied over race, sexual orientation, clothes, looks, handicaps, intelligence and economic class.

Yet, where can we find a voice of sanity that will publicly call for a halt in the practice of bullying? It is not the Christian churches. Indeed, many Christian pastors and fundamentalists practice the art of bullying themselves, demanding obedience to holy books and creeds.

I cringe every time I hear preachers and devout Christians declare “The Bible says...” Rarely do they identify the author or the circumstance of the passage to which they refer. “The Bible says...” is the sledge hammer of Protestant Christianity.

The message is all too plain: Get in line or you are headed for punishment, rejection or even Hell. It is the ultimate bullying tool because it is difficult for a parishioner to out-gun a holy god who has spoken with finality and without error. Dynamic and authoritarian preachers are especially good at Bible rhetoric that is calculated intimidation.

**Preachers may be the most skilled persons in our society in the practice of bullying.**

And then there are the creeds, which were originally devised to force conformity to Christian belief. The creeds of Christianity have been and are regularly used as the club for bullying. Again, the message is clear: Agree or be denied ordination; agree or be silenced; agree or be censored; disagree and be labeled a heretic and be excommunicated.

**B**ullying also is practiced at the highest level of American civil society, with bullying a front-line tool of U.S. foreign policy. One could say that America in its world leadership role has refined and redefined the art of bullying.

We constantly send messages to the nations of the world: Behave and we will send you money; misbehave and we will place sanctions against you; get out of line too much and we have the power to crush you; dare rattle your own sword and we will station our battleships off your coast.

None of these public practices teaches our children the ways of peace. Then we seem surprised when we find bullying prevalent among our school children. Teenage gangs are simply another manifestation of a bully system that pervades many of the most respected institutions of society.

While details change, the dynamics of bullying never change. The story line repeats itself over and over. A bully finds ways to intimidate others to establish control over them. The person who is the object of the bullying has three choices: submit, run away, or fight back. None of these standard responses produce good results.


I had a chance to reflect on the dynamics of bullying when the Palmer Arts Council in Alaska presented a play written by Brian Guehring, a teacher with degrees in children's theatre from Duke University and University of Texas. He wrote the play, “The Bully Show,” for audiences of young people in grades 4 through 8. His goal was to educate teachers, administrators and students about the practice of bullying in the school setting.

A local fifth-grade teacher, a theater veteran, became the director. The play can be done with a three-person cast. An eighth grader, a sophomore and a senior were chosen for the parts. The play is interactive with the audiences and the cast developed excellent skills in handling unrehearsed and spontaneous responses from their young audiences.

In September 2012, The Arts Council presented “The Bully Show” 18 times at school sites. Nearly 5,000 students saw the production and teachers used the shows for classroom discussion. As an Arts Council board member, I traveled with the show and saw the production several times. I received a quick education in the dynamics of bullying.

In the play, the lead actor is the host of a television game show, called “The Bully Show.” The host is presented as dedicated to bringing bullying among school children to an end. But she was very assertive in the way she ran her show. There was no doubt about who was in charge.

**N**ear the end of play, she is confronted by an assistant producer for being a bully herself. When a closer look is taken, the game show host had used the very same tactics to gain the dominance and control that she found unacceptable in others. The confrontation between the game show host and her assistant was the high moment in the play; and it was my own moment of truth.




I, too, if placed in the right circumstance, can become a bully. Upon further reflection, I saw myself surrounded by bullying, living in a bully nation and part of a bully Christianity.

**What we see in our school children, they have learned from parents, government and church.**

**Bullying is an American way of life.**

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## Dear Christians

### The Root of American Bullying

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The issue of bullying in U.S. schools has attracted much attention of late. But the problem is not isolated to schools, with bullying evident in major institutions, from the U.S. government in its foreign policy to Christian churches demanding obedience to the Bible, as retired Baptist minister Howard Bess explains.

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By the Rev. Howard Bess

