

Racism and white privilege

# Defining the terms

by NORAH MCMURTRY

WE LIVE IN A RACIST SOCIETY. In order to take action against racism, we need to have a clear understanding of what it is. Racism is a system of advantage and privilege based on “race” in which one group of people exercise power, both overt and covert, over others on the basis of skin colour and racial heritage. It is racial prejudice plus systemic power and it is embedded in all of society’s institutions, including the church. Racism is not measured by intent, but by its outcome – the dehumanizing impact on those who experience it. It confers privilege on and sustains the dominant / powerful group. In Canada, the dominant group is white people.

Racism is a white problem. This is seldom named and white people often do not recognize how we are complicit in the systems of power or what our role is in dismantling racism. Too often the focus is on people of colour, who are expected to overcome the systemic barriers themselves. Many white people will say with great sincerity that they are not racist but fail to see how they benefit from the system by virtue of their skin colour. Peggy McIntosh refers to white privilege as the “invisible knapsack” of advantages and assumptions which make white people at home in this society (see page 34) : “Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal...”

Identifying white privilege is elusive because it is embedded in everyday assumptions about how things “should” be. It is difficult to identify unhelpful characteristics of the dominant white culture when we are immersed and educated within it. In *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*, Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones have listed a number of norms and standards that are damaging to both people of colour and to white people. Some of these characteristics of dominant white culture include: perfectionism; a sense of urgency that makes it difficult to take time to be inclusive; defensiveness; worship of the written word; paternalism where decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it; either / or thinking that eliminates more complex analysis; power hoarding; fear of open conflict; individualism that discourages working in a team; a system which values quantity over quality, where bigger and more are considered progress.

One of the ways the values and ideas of the dominant white society are maintained and made normative is through language. Language not only expresses ideas and concepts but also shapes thought. For example, the metaphor of light and darkness is entrenched both in societal images and in our biblical and liturgical imagery in the church. Light is traditionally associated with goodness and purity, while darkness is associated with evil and negativity. Kim Uyede-Kai identifies other racist colour associations in her article on the back page. Our challenge is to find images and metaphors which are rooted in justice. Women are familiar with this same struggle as we address sexism and exclusive language in our churches.

In this issue of *Making Waves* we examine various manifestations of racism in our churches and our society. Understanding how white privilege and racism are at play in our lives is like peeling layer after layer from an onion. It is a difficult and often disturbing journey and will challenge our self-understanding. It is a journey of transformation that responds to God’s call to us to live love and justice in the world.

Norah McMurtry is WICC’s Program Coordinator.



**Anti-racism:** a process aimed at eradicating racism by identifying, challenging and changing attitudes, behaviours, and structures that perpetuate racism.

**Cross-racial hostility:** Hostile attitude and oppressive behaviour exercised by people of colour against one another based on "prejudice plus trying to feel power."

**Internalized racism:** A direct result of racially motivated discrimination. In Canada, racism affects people of colour and Aboriginals by leading to their acceptance of Euro-centric values and causing them to see themselves as inferior to white people.

**Multi-culturalism:** The practice of recognizing and celebrating cultural diversity.

**Privilege:** Unearned power giving economic, social and political advantages to those belonging to dominant groups in any society.

**Racial discrimination:** Discrimination based on "race"; denies equal treatment, civil liberties and equal opportunity to targeted groups and individuals.

**Racial prejudice:** Unfounded state of mind that casts one group in an inferior light, despite the absence of scientifically proven evidence.

**Racialized people:** Anyone who experiences racism because of their race, skin colour, ethnic background, accent, culture or religion. This term shows that race is socially constructed. Racialized women are subject to different stereotypes than men, but what they have in common is that they are subject to racism.