

What's in a word?

A workshop on language

by **NORAH MCMURTRY**

Materials:

- hymn books
- Bibles
- copies of *Making Waves*
- flipchart paper
- markers

Preparation:

- Write list of racially charged words onto flipchart paper.

WE USE LANGUAGE TO CONVEY EXPLICIT IDEAS but there is much that is implicit in what we say and how we say it. Language not only expresses ideas and concepts, it also shapes thought at both a conscious and an unconscious level. As the women's movement took hold in both church and society, women began to challenge how language is used to exclude women and maintain inequality. We asserted that "man" does not mean both men and women, a point brought home humorously, when choosing whether to use the women's washroom or the men's. We have examined symbols, organizational structures, scripture, hymns and more to look for the underlying assumptions about the inclusion or exclusion of women.

The women's movement itself is being challenged for its assumptions and exclusion of the experience and perspectives of Indigenous women and women of African, Asian, Latin American or Middle Eastern heritage. In the struggle against racism and for racial justice we must continue to examine our language to find how it has embedded in it assumptions about people of dark and white skin. We need to hear the critiques of how light and dark imagery is used. We need to ask how texts, symbols and images reflect and reinforce ideas of colonialism and empire. We need to find language and metaphors that are liberative and rooted in justice.

In the book, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, Paul Kivel invites readers to look at how racism is embedded in our language and culture, in how we see the world. He says the goal is not to enforce a kind of political correctness but "to develop ways of talking with each other that are respectful and that counter historical patterns of exploitation and domination." The first two exercises used here are from Kivel's book.

OPENING: Read "The Colour of my Skin" by Omega Bula on page 8.

Exercise 1 WORDS MOBDS

EXERCISE 1: WORDS

Each of the following words and phrases contains a derogatory racial meaning in its definition or derivation, or puts a comparatively positive spin on whiteness, white people, or white culture. Read together through this list of racially charged words:

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| black deed | Dark Ages |
| blacklist | alien |
| black market | red menace |
| white lie | to Jew down |
| white hope | yellow-bellied |
| dark (as in dark day) | Indian giver |
| to gyp (from gypsy) | Black Death |
| yellow peril | white wedding |
| to scalp | whitewash |
| Jew's harp | that's white of you |
| war paint (referring to women's make-up) | to be in the dark |
| cotton-pickin' | white/pure as snow |
| black-hearted | to be dim-witted |
| black mail | terrorist |
| white knight | far east |
| black magic | enlightened |

For discussion:

- What other words or phrases can you think of that are racially charged?
- Can you list alternative, racially neutral words you could use in place of these words?

EXERCISE 2: PICTURES

Racially demeaning usage also needs to be challenged in our visual images. When the good guys wear white and ride white horses and the bad guys wear black, the same racially tainted values are passed on. Advertisements, movies, and TV images rely on the development of images of darkness to convey danger and to provoke white fear.

One example is the Disney movie *The Lion King*. Throughout the movie, lightness is associated with good, darkness with evil. Everything from the lightness or darkness of the manes of the lions and the colourings of different animals, to the sunshine in the lions' kingdom versus the murky land of the hyenas, reflects the racial and moral hierarchy of the film. This is reinforced by the language of the characters: the lions talk in middle-class "white" English and the hyenas in a more colloquial street dialect. These racial colour-coded values can be found consistently in Disney movies going back to *Sleeping Beauty* and *Dumbo* (remember the crows) and introduce young children to our racial hierarchy in a way that seems natural and unremarkable (or at least is not remarked upon by adults).

For discussion:

- What films have you seen where the use of images of white and black, light and dark, or the racial casting of the heroes and villains was used to reinforce light/white=good and dark/black=bad?

EXERCISE 3: LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLS IN THE CHURCH

Break into three groups and continue this process of examination, with each group looking at one of the following areas related to our Christian worship, and answering the discussion questions. Then report back to the whole group.

- **Bible passages:** Exodus 10:21-24; Psalm 51:1-12; John 3:16-21; Ephesians 5:8-11
- **Hymns:** Look through your favourite hymns, especially related to Christmas and Easter, and choose a couple that use imagery of light or dark or both.
- **Symbols:** The Christ candle used by many churches is usually white; the liturgical colour and clergy vestments for celebrations like Christmas, Easter and baptism are usually white. What colours are used in what context; what message do they convey? What colours are not used? What other symbols can you reflect on?

For discussion:

- How is the idea that light/white=good and dark/black=bad expressed in each Bible passage, hymn or symbol?
- What is the overt and covert message conveyed in this imagery?
- What alternative passages, words or symbols could be used that promote justice and liberation for all? (See *the Bible study on page 15 for some examples.*)

CLOSING: Sing "Form Us O God" by Judith Snowdon on page 21.

Then pray
 Move over the face of
 my deep,
 my darkness,
 my endless restless chaos,
 and create, O God;
 trouble me,
 comfort me,
 stir me up,
 and calm me,
 but do not cease
 to breathe
 your Spirit into
 my waking soul.

by Jan L. Richardson

Exercise 2

PICTURES

Exercise 3

SYMBOLS

Permissions:

Exercise 1 and 2 are excerpted from *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel (2002: New Society Pub., Gabriola Island, BC). Reprinted by permission.

Move over the face of my deep, by Jan L. Richardson, is from her book *Night Visions* (1998: United Church Press, Cleveland, OH). Reprinted by permission.