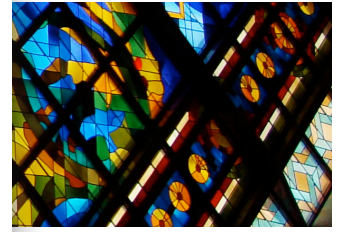




# 40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on *Anti-Racism*



DAY 3

## Colourism, Shadeism, Beauty Standards, and Race

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### Learning

“I am too dark to wear this.” If that statement causes any discomfort, please stay with that feeling. That feeling of discomfort is what someone close to you may have felt from a very young age. It is a common case of what we call *shadeism*.

Shadeism, or colourism, is the term for assumptions or stereotypes that are made based on one’s skin tone or shade. Another example of this would be this sentence: *People with lighter skin tones are considered to be more intelligent than people with dark skin tones.*

In comparison, White people are encouraged to have a “bronzy summer glow”, go to tanning beds, and desire a darker skin tone. However, a Black woman with the same skin tone as a tanned White woman is often still considered inferior, simply for being Black.

Shadeism includes skin tone, hair texture, and facial traits. Shadeism is not simply a matter of dark or light, but of one’s physical appearance and race. Shadeism is

an example of internalized racism for people of colour.

The origin of shadeism varies in different parts of the world. In some Asian countries, lighter skin tone was associated with noble classes; tanned or darker skin typically meant you spent more time working outdoors. As a result, lighter skin was a symbol of wealth and superiority.

In North America, shadeism is deeply connected to our history of slavery. Among people who were enslaved, those with lighter skin were favoured, while those with darker skin were assigned more physical fieldwork labour.



In addition, Black women were often assaulted by their White enslavers, and any resulting children would have lighter skin. While these children were not necessarily recognized as official family members, they were typically favoured over other people who were enslaved, making a lighter-skinned appearance more desirable among the enslaved community.

Today, shadeism exists in children’s stories, employment, and our judicial system. This prejudice has particularly harmed Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour (BIPOC). Shadeism is at its most influential in the beauty industry. Well-known companies promote “skin-lightening” creams and face masks.

The media also encourages shadeism by the underrepresentation of dark-skinned celebrities in the film industry. Dark-skinned women are a rarity in mainstream films. BIPOC characters are often antagonists, or have

no significance to the story. As a result, many BIPOC children will associate goodness with Whiteness, and may learn to hate their own skin. Shadeism divides BIPOC communities. There is shame within Black and Asian communities regarding dark skin tones, and lighter skin is praised and prioritized over a person's compassion and/or skills.

For this day of engagement, we are invited to consider the effects of shadeism in the beauty industry, but more importantly, the effects of these standards on racialized youth and children. By unpacking this issue, we will be called to take this awareness and begin, or continue to support and value, the youth in our lives.



## Faith Reflection

If you have access to Voices United, please read or sing #284: "Joyful is the Dark."

You are invited to sing the hymn if you are familiar, or read the words carefully.

While in song or in reading, please consider the following questions:

- How is beauty portrayed in this hymn?
- Is this portrayal of beauty common in hymns at church?
- What song do you know outside of the church that portrays beauty in this way?

This hymn presents darkness, or blackness, as beauty. It is one of few hymns that do so. Not many mainstream songs associate blackness with beauty either. What is so troubling is that this hymn is breathtakingly beautiful. As people of the church, we have lost many chances to express our faith in such a beautiful way.

What other hymns or songs do you know of that name darkness in a positive way?



## Children's Activity

Have you talked with a child or youth about shadeism? Was it intentional? If you are unsure how to answer, there is work to be done.

In this section, you are invited, as a parent, guardian, youth, or friend of youth, to consider four pieces of advice from people of colour and White youth on what they would have appreciated from their parents as children.

### 1. Listen and ask. Then listen.

If you listen closely, chances are children will talk about shadeism, although it is not their responsibility. Take that opportunity.

Ask them to explain. For instance, if they assume a stereotype based on skin colour, you could ask, "Why do you think that way?"

Then listen. Be patient. Give them time to think about their answer.

### 2. Healthy representation!

Surround children with healthy BIPOC representation.

- Buy action figures or dolls with non-White shades
- Buy children's books by authors who are part of the BIPOC community
- Watch media that have real, genuine BIPOC characters and more than one skin tone

### 3. Explain.

If a child or youth makes a stereotypical comment, be calm, be clear, and explain why what they have heard or said is harmful. If you feel they will not listen, ask them instead. Did they feel what they said could be harmful? Why? Once they respond, reaffirm or correct them.

### 4. Tell them you love them.

Tell them you love their appearance and that it is okay to talk about skin colour and race. Say that you are proud of them, that they are doing well, and that you support them.



## Group Commitment

It's possible you have felt the impact of shadeism in your own life, but never had a term to define it. You may feel ashamed of not discussing shadeism before now. But staying in that space of uncertainty and guilt will not provoke change.

Let us sit in our individual discomfort as we unpack our own experiences with shadeism and its presence in our lives. You can ask

yourself these questions occasionally when consuming media, and refer to them if you feel someone else may need to sit in discomfort as well. It may be valuable to discuss these questions with someone you trust.

1. How do I feel about my own skin color? Have I ever been positively/negatively compared to someone else based on skin tone?
2. Who is being uplifted or disparaged in this conversation or piece of media? What stories are we telling about people with this skin color? Who is missing from this piece of media?
3. How might this media be perceived by someone with a lighter or darker skin color? How could that impact their view of themselves and their place in the world?



## Advocacy

As mentioned, none of us are the whole fault of this issue. Based on our world's history, we have been told "lighter is better" from a very young age. At the same time, there are ways the world can be held accountable. Below are some suggestions to create a safer space for our children.

- Brands and companies that use shadeism as a business tactic are extremely harmful. Ethically divest from those brands and engage others on your social

media and among your social circles as a way to have your voice heard by the companies. Share with the company that you simply don't support their brand, and explain why. As a youth, young adult, or adult, we have the financial independence to make these choices.

- Creating a national "shadeism awareness" day can provide families and schools an opportunity to discuss this with children.
- Support businesses and organizations that promote genuine embracing of all skin tones.
- Within the church, talk about shadeism intentionally in a committee meeting or as part of a sermon.
- Understanding that it is not the fault of those who are encouraging shadeism in your community, but a societal structure that we were all born into.

## Resources

[What is Shadeism?](#)

[Campaign Raises Shadeism Awareness](#)

[Shadeism: Filmmaker looks at discrimination among people of colour](#)

[Colourism and the discrimination from within](#)

[Confront Colourism Guide](#)



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