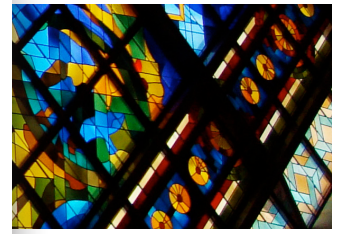




# 40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on *Anti-Racism*



DAY 10

## Challenging Microaggressions

*Adam Kilner*



### Learning

My personal experience and the experience of Wilbur Howard (The United Church of Canada's first Black person to be ordained, and first racialized person to serve as Moderator) brings to the forefront the issue of microaggressions.

After my first year of university, I applied for a summer job running a program for children and youth in cottage country. I emailed a resume off to a committee and was invited to be interviewed for the position. I attended the interview in an apartment complex where, upon seeking entry, the person in the unit could see me from their television. The interview went extremely well and I was offered the position a week or two later—which I took.

It was peculiar, however, when one of my references called me to say that during a phone call with one of the committee members a strange comment was made: "I was quite surprised to see a Brown fellow walk in." While the surprise of that committee member re-

mains seared into my mind almost twenty years later, it didn't stop the committee from offering me the job. This isn't always the case.

I have been reflecting on that comment for many years because of how inappropriate it was. It was actually reading about Wilbur Howard that had me understand what was going on. I'll tell you about that shortly.

Prior to my interview all of my interactions with the committee had been via email or over the phone. I am a Black Canadian. My name, Adam James Kilner, is basically an English name. I grew up in Sarnia, Ontario (where I currently serve as an Ordained Minister) and speak with the same accent as others who live there. The only reasons I can think of why the person made the comment they did was that on paper my name sounded White to them, and my accent on the phone made them think I was a White person.

The person likely didn't intend harm, yet I continue to think about that experience almost twenty

Microaggressions are subtle, indirect, or unintentional comments, actions, policies, or incidents that discriminate against a marginalized group.

years later. I don't dislike that person. I simply wish they had kept their comment to themselves so that I wouldn't still be thinking about it. It was unintentional, yet I've never forgotten it.

We already know from numerous studies that across this continent people with non-English sounding names are less likely to make it to the interview stage, let alone get the job. My situation seems to be an outlier.

Wilbur Howard travelled to South Africa in 1975 on behalf of The United Church of Canada and had a similar experience. He was representing the United Church (a predominantly White denomination). After his trip, *The United Church Observer* reported that "the

authorities were surprised to find that the moderator of the United Church was a Black man.” When eating at restaurants in South Africa, Howard was required to receive his food from the back door.

While Howard’s experience was outright racism, my experience was subtle and indirect, with the harmful words never spoken directly to me. In fact, the comment, as I understood it, was made flippantly. I imagine the person who said the words would be unsettled to know how long they have stayed with me.

As a racialized person serving as a minister I, along with Indigenous and racialized colleagues, have routinely received

the comment, “you speak so well” and it is widely viewed as a microaggression with the longer version being, “you speak so well for a (insert racial identity, ethnicity, non-English language here) person.”

Years ago I officiated a funeral in Alberta. I introduced the person who would be giving the eulogy, who was the son of the deceased, and then I sat down on one of the chairs behind the podium in the funeral home. The chapel of the funeral home likely had 200 people in the room when the eulogist spoke some unfortunate words. With tears in his eyes and, likely, no ill-intent he said, “My dad would have never wanted a Black

man officiating his service.” I don’t remember anything about the eulogy that day because I was so embarrassed and enraged by the insensitivity of those words. There was uncomfortable laughter from the congregation. Luckily where I was sitting nobody could see me trying to keep my composure. The words here weren’t subtle, but this was a microaggression because I don’t think the person meant for his words to be inflammatory, even though they were.



## Faith Reflection

God who acknowledges all people,  
please work with each of us to build up  
our capacities for empathy and justice.

Let us take time to consider how our words and actions  
might affect people we interact with  
who are from marginalized demographics in our society.

As philosopher Cornel West says  
“justice is what love looks like in public”  
and we are a people who are called to partner with God  
in the furtherance of hospitality and justice.

Also, God, please give us the courage to offer apology  
when necessary, including how we might change our behaviour,  
when we unintentionally hurt others.

We can become a reconciled people  
if we take the time to come to understand cultures and practices  
that are not our own.

We long to be a peaceable people.

Amen.



## Children's Activity

Wilbur Howard was a minister. He loved serving God. Wilbur became the leader of The United Church of Canada and travelled to South Africa at a time when Black people couldn't do the same things as White people. This was happening in South Africa because the country had a system called apartheid, a government policy that separated South Africans as *Bantu* (all Black Africans), as *Coloured* (all mixed-race Africans), or as *White*. Apartheid was an official policy of the South African government from 1950 to 1994.

In the apartheid system, some people believed that White people were better than Black people. Laws would not allow White people and Black people to live in the same neighbourhoods. If Black people wanted to eat at White-owned restaurants they would have to get their food at the back door—they weren't allowed inside. Black people and White people weren't allowed to marry each other. People who were not White were not allowed to go to certain parts of the country, and had to apply for special documents if they wanted to move around.

Wilbur went to South Africa in 1975. When he got there, the government leaders were surprised to see a Black Canadian representing the United Church. When they discovered that he was Black they made him eat out of the backs of restaurants. They had assumed he was a White person because he had come from Canada and they thought that he had a White-sounding name.

Apartheid was legally abolished in South Africa in 1994, but the effects of racism and microaggressions continue today.



## Group Commitment

Often the person committing the microaggression is unaware of how their comment or body language affects the person experiencing it.

Many racialized people experience the uncomplimentary “compliment” about their ability to speak English. For many, English is their first language. For many others, they've been speaking English for a large portion of their lives, even if it isn't their first language. One of the unspoken signals of this kind of microaggression is that “this person doesn't belong here,” furthering a false narrative of Canada as a White nation when, in fact, the land was occupied by Indigenous peoples thousands of years before European explorers landed. Additionally, there had been Black people in what is now Canada more than two centuries

prior to Confederation. Practicing Muslims were recorded in the 1871 census, just four years after Confederation. This land has hosted tremendous human diversity over many generations.

Additionally, asking racialized people where they're “really from” assumes they don't belong here. There are many racialized people whose ancestry on this land goes back centuries, just as there are many White people whose ancestry does the same. There are many racialized people who are recent arrivals, just as there are many White people who are recent arrivals.

With these issues in mind, take on a daily practice, perhaps at the end of each day. Consider journaling with responses to these questions and discussing them in your group:

- Did I think before I spoke today? Did I consider another person's feelings before speaking today? (This might include sharing an offensive joke or making a blanket statement about another group of people.)
- If I have friends or family who are racialized or Indigenous, or a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, did I attempt to defend any insensitive comments by invoking them in the conversation?
- If I made insensitive comments, are there steps I can take to avoid doing so in the future? Did I apologize?

The invitation is to ask these questions of yourself and know it is okay to feel uncomfortable when reflecting on these questions.



## Advocacy

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Read the book *Where Are You From?* by

Jaime Kim.

Watch the video [Addressing Microaggressions and Biases in the Workplace](#).

Make a list of microaggressions that you have learned, and continue to update the list as you go forward. Make a plan on how you can address microaggressions as they arise—both individually and as a group.



**Adam Kilner** is a United Church of Canada minister and community activist. The focus of his work has been on developing just and healthy relationships, especially in regard to race, gender, orientation, and interreligious dialogue. Adam received the In-School Mentor of the Year Award from Big Brothers Big Sisters of Lacombe, Alberta in 2011 and a Distinguished Alumni Award from St. Paul's University College at the University of Waterloo in 2015 for his commitment to youth and social justice.

