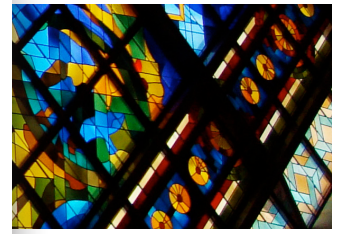




# 40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on *Anti-Racism*



## Reflections on the Term “BIPOC” (Part 2)

DAY 23

*Ren Ito*



### Learning

Ren Ito continues to reflect on the category “Black, Indigenous, and other people of colour,” or “BIPOC.” Where did it come from? Why does it make the distinctions it makes? There are a lot of questions about it, and not many reliable answers.

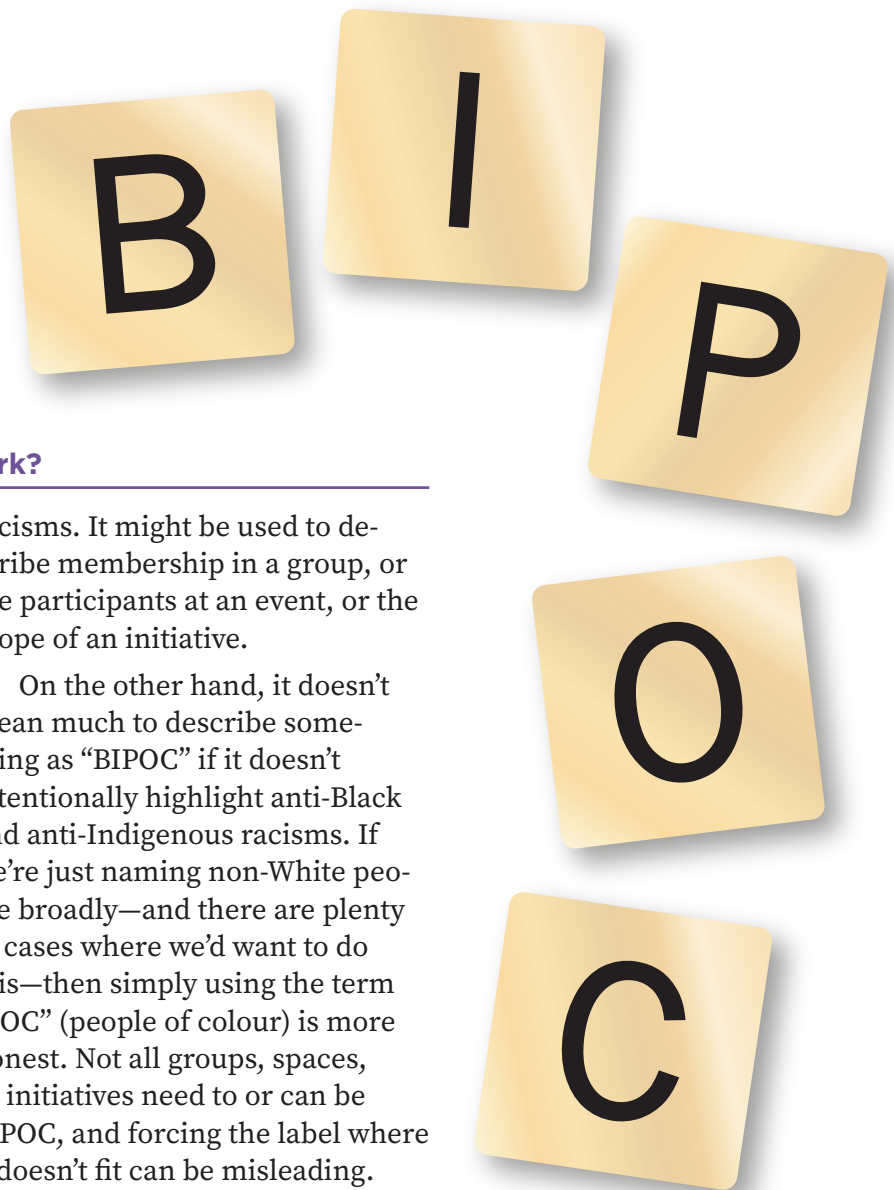
#### So how does the term “BIPOC” work?

BIPOC names the relationships between differently racialized groups. Like the related “people of colour,” it’s a collective category, but unlike “person of colour” (POC), it doesn’t work well as a singular identity, because it’s meant to name differences (between Black, Indigenous, and other POC) on a collective scale.

In other words, “BIPOC” can be used to describe any collective of people of colour that intentionally distinguishes the experiences of Black and Indigenous people in order to address the violence, understand the foundations, and highlight the distinctiveness of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous

racisms. It might be used to describe membership in a group, or the participants at an event, or the scope of an initiative.

On the other hand, it doesn’t mean much to describe something as “BIPOC” if it doesn’t intentionally highlight anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racisms. If we’re just naming non-White people broadly—and there are plenty of cases where we’d want to do this—then simply using the term “POC” (people of colour) is more honest. Not all groups, spaces, or initiatives need to or can be BIPOC, and forcing the label where it doesn’t fit can be misleading.



## As a person of colour, this label makes me feel left out.

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It's understandable that highlighting Black and Indigenous people would make "other people of colour" feel left out. This can be especially challenging for Asian people, who often have a specific experience of being made to feel placeless or "invisible."

It might help to remember that "BIPOC" is a collective label. It's not really about you or anyone else as an individual; it's about a group or space that you share with others. And as a person of colour, you're still very much a part of that group, and are no less important than anyone else.

Labels aren't for everyone: they're generalizations, so they're always going to paint over differences and leave out details. You don't have to use them if they don't feel right. Just remember that others might feel differently about them.

## Should I use "BIPOC" or not?

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There's no easy answer here: it's up to you, and the people you're working with, to discern what terms work best in your situation. The above questions are meant to offer some guidance. Here are a few other tips:

- Where other people's experiences are concerned, it's a good idea to follow their lead. If you're White, it may be best to defer to the non-White people you're working with.
- If you can't agree on a term, an open-ended conversation about different terms and what you do or don't like about them might help. It can also help to distinguish between what a term means or does and how we feel about it.
- You may find that you simply can't agree on a common vocabulary. That's okay—it might be an indication that you aren't ready, as a group, to move forward together in your work. Move on if you can, and avoid imposing your preferred terms onto others.

## What are some other terms?

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Many labels other than BIPOC exist, and are used in different contexts, with different meanings and implications. Here's a brief list of some terms that you might encounter, and things to consider when you do.

- **People of colour (POC)** is a catch-all term that refers to "colour(ed)," an older legal category of (non-White) race in many colonial settings (including Canada). The contemporary term reclaims "colour" as an identity. Some object to its association with "coloured" and/or its U.S. origins.
- **Visible minority** is a Canadian legal category, originating in labour law, that designates people who are neither White nor Indigenous. This category does not include Indigenous people. Many consider this term euphemistic, and object to its emphasis on "visibility" and assumption of "minority."
- **Racialized** originated in academic studies of "racialization." It gained prominence as an identity label in Canada in the 2000s, and is commonly used in the United Church. Some object to its implied passivity, while others argue that all people (including White people) are racialized.
- **Ethnic** is a misnomer when used as a stand-in for race. This term describes ethnicity (a complex concept that combines cultural, national, and at times, racial markers). When used to mean "non-White," it also associates ethnicity and culture as markers of difference.

- **Migrant/immigrant/newcomer** is used to describe histories of migration, but that often is conflated with non-White, non-Indigenous peoples in general. While such peoples might not be indigenous to this continent, many have complex histories of arrival that are misrepresented by these terms.
- **Non-White** is a simple inversion of “White” as a racial category. This was also an early legal/census category in many colonial settings. Some object to using a category that appears to centre “White” as the norm.

After all, we’re each fearfully and wonderfully made. Who wants to be reduced to a category? But a history of forceful categorization, through colonization, has made categories unavoidable. For the many peoples among us—Indigenous, Black, Asian, Latinx—who’ve been categorized whether we like it or not, living with and in spite of categories is a never-ending struggle. We know the pain of being categorized, and struggle daily to live with and in spite of the categories that’ve been imposed on us.

And as we exist in a world that’s been shaped by these categories, we struggle to use them, to make sense of them, to live with and in spite of them.



## Faith Reflection

*Michiko Bown-Kai*

Many of us may be familiar with the words of Paul, found in Galatians 3:26-29, which speaks to Christ’s unifying ability to end divisions between Greek and Jew, man and woman, enslaved and free. These words are often interpreted to mean that Christian hope looks like the ending of difference, and that we should aspire to a beloved community here on earth where identities are no longer relevant. When I hear Paul’s words, I am inspired to believe in a vision of a world where categories and identities are no longer used by systems of oppression to cause harm and ascribe power and privilege to some. However, I do not believe this means that we need to minimize or erase the identities that we hold as children of God.

Nor do I believe that our path towards building this Kingdom can be achieved by ignoring how our identities inform our lived experiences, spirituality, and relationships with God.

How we name ourselves does matter to us on a spiritual level. Throughout the Bible we see examples of God showing care and blessing to people by (re)naming them. In the Pentecost story, we celebrate the fact that it was the gathering of many nations, all explicitly named, who experienced communion through God. May we continue to honour God’s blessings in our lives, including our racial identities and the language we use to express belonging and solidarity within the unjust reality of White supremacy.



## Children's Activity

Michiko Bown-Kai

It is easy to assume that the language of identity, with all of its political complexity, is too complicated to discuss with children. However, empowering children with age-appropriate information offers them opportunities to better articulate their feelings, experiences, and needs.

Here are several examples of resources that introduce concepts about race, racism, and racial identities.

- For high school youth, watch this [short video](#) explaining the term BIPOC.
- For young children: Read *A Book About Racism* by Jelani Memory, or watch a [video](#) of the author reading the book.

- For young children: Watch Sesame Street's [Coming Together: Standing Up to Racism Town Hall](#).

These discussion prompts can help you introduce and discuss the concept of identity.

- “Just like your name, there are other words that are special because they tell people about who you are. What do you think those words are?”
- “Your identities are something to be proud of because they make you the unique person you are.”
- “If someone says something about one of your identities and it makes you feel bad, that does not mean your identity is wrong or bad.”

Follow up Activity Ideas:

- Create a collage that celebrates name, identity, and the many ways we understand ourselves.
- Look through pictures and photo albums as a starting point to talk about the different identities that have been important to ancestors, family, and community over the years.



## Group Commitment

Michiko Bown-Kai

Today's reflection on the term BIPOC reminds us that language is important in how we communicate respect and build relationships. Language has the capacity to help build worlds and create the future. Language is contextual and always changing, which means that using language in anti-racist ways involves a commitment to ongoing learning of how certain terms/words evolve, and what meaning they have in particular spaces and communities. For example, as someone who is East Asian,

Asian, and mixed race, I need to be mindful about the ways in which these words are understood, and how they have different meanings depending on when and how I use them. These words may be helpful descriptions but they cannot substitute the depth of understanding that is created through conversation about these identities. I like to imagine that learning and building language together in community is like weaving a basket; it creates the potential for us to hold each other's stories better.

Commit to inviting more conversation about the language being used to talk about race. Rather than assuming what language someone uses, ask, “How do you describe racial identity?” or “What words feel the most affirming of your experiences?” Ask yourself how you can use language in a way that is expansive and celebratory of racial differences, and which resists the ways that White supremacy can collapse us into reductionist categories.



# Advocacy

Michiko Bown-Kai

The relationship between racism and language is multifaceted. One of the ways we can continue to learn how to engage in anti-racist work is to support our friends, families, and communities in rooting out language with racist histories and impact, and using language that is appropriate. This means engaging in research, teaching others about anti-racist language in ways that are productive, being accountable for harm that is caused when racist language is used, and creating and providing resources (such as glossaries) for learning environments so people have the information they need.

Applying new knowledge is also an important part of advocacy. This may include actions such as:

- reviewing the language used in policies and resources by an organization you volunteer with and ensuring it is appropriate.
- sorting through books and resources available in spaces such as a church library and ensuring outdated resources are taken out of circulation.
- ensuring that scripture readings use up to date and anti-racist translations.

For further reflections on race, anti-racism, and language:

- Read this [article](#) on Standard English and Racism
- Listen to this [podcast](#) about updating vocabulary



**Ren Ito** is a Network Coordinator in the Church in Mission Unit of the General Council Office. He spends much of his time participating in racial justice initiatives and helping to create community and collective spaces for people of colour. Ren is based in Toronto, where he is completing a PhD in race and Christian theology at the University of Toronto.



**Michiko Bown-Kai** (they/them) is a mixed race fourth generation Japanese Canadian (yonsei) who is passionate about the intersections of faith, social justice, and the arts. They are currently serving in congregational ministry at Saint Luke's United Church in Cambridge, Ontario (territory of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Attiwonderionk peoples, Haldimand Tract Treaty).

