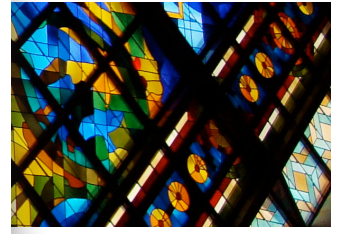


# 40 DAYS OF ENGAGEMENT on *Anti-Racism*



## Words to Combat Systemic Racism

DAY 32



### Learning

Samuel V. Dansokho

A Latin expression describing the power of comedy and humour says that “laughing corrects customs” (*castigat ridendo mores*). A laugh or a smile can accomplish a great deal on our shared journey towards an anti-racist United Church. While the fight against racism is a marathon requiring endurance and a positive attitude, it does not always have to be arduous and depressing. “Words to combat systemic racism” can be punctuated with outbursts of laughter.

You may be familiar with *Jeopardy*, a game show in which the answer is provided and contestants have to come up with the question. Well, here’s a game in which you are given a phrase (that I actually heard with my own ears) and have to guess the original context as closely as possible (the leader has the answer on the back of the card). You can also suggest an appropriate response or ask a question to get people thinking. Ready to start?

**Version 1:** If several people are playing, the person with the closest answer gets to suggest an appropriate response. Obviously, you can all discuss and debate basic truths that may not be obvious right away!

**Version 2:** You can discuss one phrase each day with young people or group them together to create subthemes (e.g., 1, 3 and 11; 2, 4 and 5; 6, 10 and 11, or 7, 8 and 9).

1. “Your people have natural rhythm.”
2. “They don’t attend the fundraising meals we organize for people to socialize.”
3. “What lovely clothes! Are they your pyjamas?”
4. “They really know how to play the system.”
5. “You’re not like them.”
6. “I met so-and-so the other day. You must know them.”
7. “You call that food?”

8. “Wow! Their children are clean, well-dressed, and educated.”
9. “I’ve got a monkey on my back.”
10. “We saw some beautiful animals over there.”
11. “When it comes to race, I’m colour blind.”
12. “You’re lucky to be here and not back there. Living in Canada is a real blessing, wouldn’t you say?”

### Original Context

1. People often say this to me when I clap my hands to upbeat music or, with a look of horror, as they decline an invitation to join me on the dance floor! No, it’s not true that Black people have natural rhythm—at least no more than some of the “frozen chosen” I have invited to dance. I would much rather hear a “Yes, thank you! AND I invite you to join me for the next waltz!”

2. Well-intentioned women in the congregation organized a paid meal to raise funds and, they hoped, build relations with families recently arrived from Africa. Is it a tradition where you live to “sell” or “buy” food at community meals? How much might that cost a family with several children? What is meant by good table manners? Who serves a menu of salads, sandwiches, and cold plates?
3. This is almost always the first reaction you hear when you meet someone. Although less common, another response is a witty comment meant to add a touch of humour. Can’t you think of something else to say rather than commenting on unusual clothing? Would *you* wear your pyjamas in public (other than perhaps on Zoom, and even then...)? Do you really believe that everyone should wear jeans and a T-shirt?
4. This is an annoyed or mocking comment made behind the back of someone who receives social assistance. Who is the social assistance system or Christian charity intended to benefit? Is it meant to give a clear conscience to those providing the assistance or to inflate their ego? Does someone who is forced to hold out their hand not have dignity and self-esteem? How can we demonstrate true solidarity rather than condescension? Are you aware of the financial costs faced by immigrants just in administrative fees?
5. This is what I was told during a conversation about others when I asked, “But how do you see me?” The statement is false and hurtful, even (especially!) when meant as a compliment. Am I supposed to feel ashamed of being like my people? Am I a better person by being more assimilated, which is to say by accepting cultural, social, and even spiritual alienation?
6. This often comes up when people from here tell people like me about encounters they have had during meetings or trips. Africa is not a single country, but rather an immense continent. People can get a sense of that from the Internet. But beyond trying to understand the geopolitical structure of Africa, what are the unspoken meanings behind this reaction?
7. This spontaneous reaction of many, usually reflecting disgust, is often regretted by the speaker as soon as the words are out of their mouth. The thin veneer of politeness has been broken to reveal prejudices normally hidden behind illusions that are commonplace in liberal society. If *that* isn’t food, say what you think it is and, at the same time, what you think of the people who eat it...especially if it’s true that we are what we eat!
8. Meant as a compliment, this is the reaction of some good people following Sunday worship over a snack or outside in the parking lot. What were you actually expecting, if this seems unusual to you to the point of making a comment? What are you REALLY saying: that poor or immigrant families are presumably dirty, undisciplined, and uneducated?
9. This was the “innocent and amusing” caption written under the photo of a local child sitting on the shoulder of a young person taken during his recent visit to Liberia. When I responded with indignant anger, the young man became deeply embarrassed, and so someone thought they should explain that it was “only” a question of language, since the expression generally has no racist connotation. So what?
10. During an awareness-raising meeting about the high social cost imposed on African populations by the immoral debt inflicted on their countries, one woman I had just met, by way of introduction, said, “Oh, you’re from Africa? I have visited Kenya and South Africa. What beautiful animals you have there!” She had just been on a fully paid safari organized by a travel agency. She was taken from her hotel to a luxurious hotel-style campsite, given park tours aboard an air conditioned bus, entertained in the evenings by folklore performances and, fifteen days later, brought back to the airport. The only expense she incurred was the purchase of “authentic” souvenirs in the duty-free shop.

11. This shameless peremptory declaration is made as an ice-breaker by some people, in good conscience bordering on self-deception. I generally respond by saying that I have no desire to be invisible and, furthermore, wish no invisibility upon anyone. What is the intended purpose of this very special type of blindness? Is it to provide an illusory protection against the moral duty to be anti-racist?

12. Every time the media mention a human or natural catastrophe in Africa, someone always brings up this message in a spirit of commiseration and unsettling certainty. What is our responsibility for what happens over there? What is our duty to others? How can someone rejoice at being saved from the misery of others? Does COVID-19 not prove that we are all at risk when others are exposed?



## Faith Reflection

*Kathy Yango*

When preparing Titus for ministry on the island of Crete, the apostle Paul used another's words to describe the people of that place. Paul said, "It was one of them, their very own prophet, who said, 'Cretans are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons.' That testimony is true." ([Titus 1:12-13](#))

Some excuse Paul for using this quote, saying that Paul himself was not universally applying these characterizations to every person in Crete, but only making Titus aware of the evil proclivities that existed within the culture where he ministered. What do you think?

- How might you respond when a member of your faith community is perpetuating stereotypes? What are some different ways of responding individually, pastorally, prayerfully, or in the context of community?
- What stereotypes do you tend to hold towards others? What factors might have influenced your attitudes? What can you do to prevent a perpetuation of these stereotypes in your own interactions with others?



## Children's Activity

Kathy Yango

Tell this brief, but true, story about Samantha and discuss the questions that follow.

*Samantha is in Grade 2. Chelsey, who is White, has been in the same class with Samantha since Kindergarten. One day, Samantha came in from recess in tears. She reported to her teacher that she heard Chelsey say to some other girls on the playground that "Samantha doesn't have any friends because she's Black."*

- What do you think about this story?
- Do you think what Chelsey said could be true? How do you think Samantha might feel?
- Do you think it is right to exclude others because they are different?
- What would you say to Chelsey?
- What would you say to Samantha?
- Do you know anybody in your school who is left out because of their skin colour or appearance? How could you be a friend to them?



## Advocacy

Kathy Yango

Post a quote about stereotypes on the social media platforms you use. Go further by sharing why you are posting it.

Here are some examples:

- "Stereotypes lose their power when the world is found to be more complex than the stereotype would suggest. When we learn that individuals do not fit the group stereotype, then it begins to fall apart." (Ed Koch)
- "I think putting labels on people is just an easy way of marketing something you don't understand." (Adam Jones)
- "People forget that stereotypes aren't bad because they are always untrue. Stereotypes are bad because they are not always true. If we allow ourselves to judge another based on a stereotype, we have allowed a gross generalization to replace our own thinking." (George Takei)



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**Kathy Yango** is currently a teacher with the Toronto District School Board. Previously, she worked in international development in the Philippines, focusing on team-building curriculum and education programs in marginalized communities.

