

Why Skin Colour Is Not Free Information

Some people have a gift for striking up a conversation with someone they've just met. But for most of us, it's more difficult. We may greet a visitor to our church with "Hello, how are you? It's so nice that you came today!" but we dread the awkward silence that follows.

One way to open a friendly conversation is to look for the "free information" the visitor is providing. For example, a Lion's Club logo on a visitor's jacket tells us that they have an interest in community service. Perhaps that's a shared interest, and a good conversation opener. A pink ribbon on a blouse opens other possibilities for connection. An iron ring on someone's pinky finger tells us that they are an engineer. And, if we know that engineers normally wear this ring on the hand they write with, we've learned something else that might help open a conversation.

Free information helps us make personal connections, connections that can be an important first step for a newcomer looking for a sense of belonging. But, if the visitor has a skin colour that is not "White" and we use this piece of information to start a conversation, they will likely end up feeling even more like an outsider than before.

In a country as diverse as Canada, and in a world where populations are increasingly transient, the colour of a person's skin is a very shaky foundation upon which to build a conversation. The seeker visiting our congregation may be a Chinese-Canadian person whose family has been in this country for generations, or an Afro-Canadian in the midst of an immigration process. Whatever their story, our attempts to use their skin colour to get past a conversational silence will lead them to feel excluded, to feel somehow not "really Canadian." Assuming that we can tell if someone is "really Canadian" by the colour of their skin is, of course, a racist assumption.

Here are just some of the most common questions and comments that people of colour say make them feel like outsiders who don't belong:

- Where are you from?
- When did you come to Canada?
- Do you think you'll ever go back to your home country?
- Where did you learn to speak English so well?
- Do you like living in Canada?
- My, look how light your daughter's skin is. She's so cute!
- You are so articulate! (*implication*: unlike other people who look like you)

"So very many times," one young woman writes, "I get asked, 'Where are you *really* from?' It is as if people are relieved to know that my parents are immigrants, because even though I was born here, I cannot really be Canadian because I am Black. People usually don't believe me when I tell them that I was born here. They want to go back through the generations to find out where my 'real' ancestry is."

Forming questions that are based on media stereotypes, we may inadvertently associate a newcomer with criminal behaviour. For example, one person commented that, upon learning that she was born in Colombia, people frequently make reference to Colombian drug dealers!

Or in an attempt to make a personal connection, we may overgeneralize from our own limited experience, with unintended effects. “When people find out that my family heritage is in the Caribbean,” one person writes, “they will frequently say, ‘Oh, I spent a day in Trinidad on a cruise. As someone from St. Kitts, are you like those people there?’”

Every time we imply that a person of colour is one of “those people,” they feel less like they truly belong. We don’t mean to send that message—quite the opposite, in fact. Our good intentions are not of much value, however, if our comments inadvertently make the visitor feel like “the other.”

A person’s skin colour is not free information that we can use to get us through the awkward conversational silence. This is powerfully illustrated in the words of a bi-racial woman:

I have been leading worship in churches for almost a decade. Congregants of all ages in rural and urban settings still ask, “What self-tanner do you use? or “Did you just get back from vacation?” Trying to explain being bi-racial can be painful. I often bring my mother to churches in which I lead. She can be standing right next to me and a congregant will come up and say, “Who is this? I thought you were bringing your mother.” She is Caucasian, with red hair and green eyes. I am not. Sometimes I wish I could walk up to the brunette adult children of blond parents and say, “Hey, where are your parents?”

We all make assumptions. Part of being a welcoming church, though, is to be aware of the assumptions we make. Gone are the days when families are all one colour, one race, or one ethnicity. We all need to be careful when we comment on skin colour. If folks comment on my colour, I feel self-conscious and this heightens the experience of being, at times, the only visible minority person in a congregation. Not good, when one is seeking acceptance.

If a person’s skin colour has special significance for them, they will share it once they have become trusted friends who belong to the same church. It’s wonderful how many flourishing inter-racial friendships, and inter-racial congregations, are born with a warm “Hello, how are you? It’s so nice that you came today!” as a prelude to a deeper conversation about things that really matter.

Discovering those things can be as easy as noticing truly free information, like an iron ring on the finger, a pin on a lapel, or a child clinging to a parent’s leg. Or that the person standing before us came to the congregation in search of something of vital importance to them.

—Steve Willey, *Intercultural and Diverse Communities in Ministry*