



COVID-19 AND THE RACISM PANDEMIC WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT

By Kim Uyede-Kai, Minister, Communities of Faith Support and Right Relations

When news of the coronavirus first began to spread in Canada, Chinese-Canadian restaurants and businesses quickly took a devastating hit. Once-crowded restaurants were nearly empty. Other Asian restaurants and businesses that were neither Chinese owned nor operated were also shunned and targeted with racist graffiti and vandalism. “Chinese”-identified and “Chinese-looking” people were publicly blamed for the growing pandemic and the downturn of the global economy. Anti-Asian jokes proliferated, and online race hatred became common on many social media and news threads. Canadian-born or immigrant Chinese and other Asian ancestry children were bullied in school. Canadian-born and immigrant Asian ancestry adults alike were verbally abused or randomly assaulted in public places whether they were wearing a face mask or not.

As COVID-19 spread and provinces and communities in Canada declared a state of emergency, Indigenous communities also began to close their access roads in efforts to self-isolate and protect their elders and community members. This resulted in non-Indigenous people being denied access to roads through reserve lands and to the lower-priced gas and tobacco they were used to obtaining. Inconvenience, entitlement, and anger turned again to anti-Indigenous discrimination and hatred, with incorrect assumptions about Indigenous “privileges” and non-Indigenous entitlement to treaty and unceded land and resources. Some of the anger was redirected from the previous rail blockades across the country supporting the Wet’suwet’en protest against the disputed pipeline location.

As wearing face masks became more acceptable among non-Asians and eventually recommended to help stop the spread of COVID-19, Black communities were increasingly impacted. For Black people, particularly men, wearing a non-medical face mask on the street, in a store, or in other places of business often puts their lives in real danger. Racial profiling by the public and police is still a lived reality and is now heightened with COVID-19.

The curve of the escalation of the disease of racism is rising with the curve of the escalation of COVID-19. While there is presently no vaccine against either disease, COVID-19 will eventually be eradicated. Racism will continue to mutate unless we make collective efforts to STOP THE SPREAD.

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Racism historically rises and spikes when there is fear or threat or economic loss, especially when it is perceived to diminish the dominant community's self-invented narrative and access to resources and finances, and when power rests with those who use power for gain and control at the expense of others. Thus, the curve of the escalation of the disease of racism is rising with the curve of the escalation of COVID-19. While there is presently no vaccine against either disease to stop the spread of both, COVID-19 will eventually be eradicated. Racism will continue to mutate unless we make collective efforts to stop the spread.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Here are suggestions for what you can do to “flatten the curve” of racism in this time of COVID-19 and beyond.

NOTICE

Notice when verbal or visual racial lenses are used in reporting: Is Wuhan or China used to describe COVID-19 just because that is where it was found to originate? When are Asians shown wearing a face mask in negative or positive ways?

REMEMBER

Remember that the H1N1 (“swine flu”) 2009 pandemic was not described as the “American flu.” Remember that the news media did not extensively cover hatred, shunning, or graffiti of Italian and Spanish ancestry people or immigrants, restaurants, or businesses in Canada when those countries experienced large numbers of deaths and hospitalizations.

READ

Read the COVID-19 comments on social media posts. Don't shy away from the strongly worded or hateful ones. Do any of these comments secretly mirror yours? What can you learn from the responders who stood up to the hateful ones? If you find some comments abhorrent, how would you respond if they were directed to you? Be more respectful and less defensive in your language than the haters.

KNOW

Know there are other valid Asian-Canadian experiences when the one Asian ancestry person you know says they haven't experienced any racism because of COVID-19 or any other time.

LEARN

Learn some history of anti-Asian discrimination in Canada and where it continues to exist today in the church and beyond, and where the history intersected with your history. Educate yourself about the history of resistance to anti-Asian discrimination in Canada and where it

continues to exist today in the church and beyond, and learn who their allies were then and are now, and stories of intersection. Make an effort to learn some of the history of anti-Black, antisemitic, anti-Indigenous, and Islamophobic discrimination in Canada; where it continues to exist today in the church and beyond; histories of resistance; who allies were then and are now; and stories of intersection.

CALL OUT

Call out race discrimination and hatred when you see it or hear it, even if it's in your own family or church. Especially if it's in your own family or church. Where did they learn to discriminate? How did it become part of their identity? How does that discrimination serve them now? Can a different race narrative be told that unites human family?

BELIEVE

Believe Asian ancestry people when they say they have been targeted or feel unsafe because of what they look like. Your disbelief or skepticism is your issue to ponder and not for an Asian person to convince you that their experience is real and not imaginary. Remember that Canada is generally assumed to be White and that Asians are often seen and/or depicted as new immigrants or visitors even if they are four or five+ generations in Canada. Believe Indigenous people when they say they have been targeted or feel unsafe during COVID-19 because they are Indigenous. Your dismissal or disagreement is your issue to ponder and not for the Indigenous person to convince you that their community's health is more important than your access to tobacco or gas. Remember that many Indigenous communities do not have the same access to health care and community infrastructures that other non-Indigenous communities do. Believe Black people when they say they have been targeted or feel unsafe during COVID-19 because they are Black. If they choose not to wear a face mask or face-covering bandanna, believe that this might be their choice to increase safety from racial profiling and attacks over keeping asymptomatic airborne transmissions from spreading. Remember that Black people have experienced a history of racial discrimination and threats of violence that still exist today.

PAUSE

Pause before needing to point out other hatreds and discriminations, i.e. ableism, LGBT2SA+, Islamophobia, antisemitism, classism, sexism. Even as different identities intersect in individuals, i.e. one person can be Asian and female and physically challenged and Jewish, this is a moment to listen to how particular racialized groups are targeted and impacted by a particular health pandemic, and to stand together rather than divide or pull each other down.

DEMAND

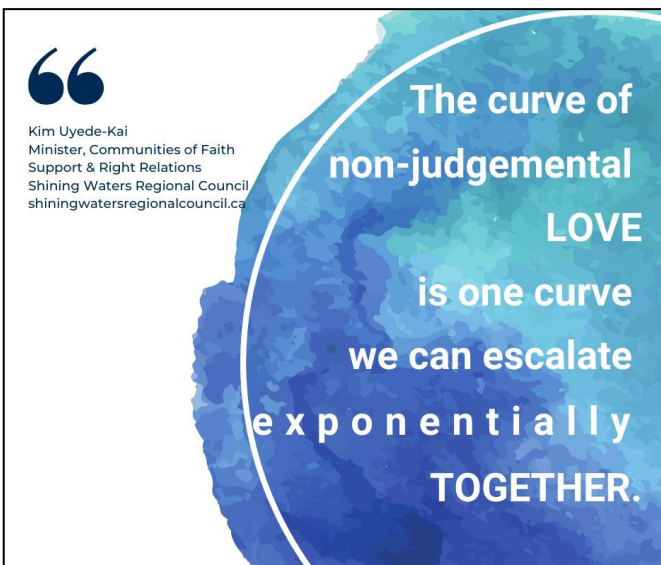
Demand of governments that clean, accessible, potable water be a priority for all Indigenous communities, an issue more magnified when frequent hand washing is a major COVID-19 preventative measure.

REFLECT

Take the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the call to “stay home,” what “home” means for you on this Indigenous land, those you willingly share home with and those you don’t.

In this extraordinary time of physical isolation, we can pray unceasingly, alone and with others online. As church, we can be agents of peace in community and country, starting with ourselves. Let us live every day as though we are all related in love and that all are God’s beloved in this home we call creation.

The curve of non-judgemental love is one curve we can escalate exponentially together.



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*Resources in the time of
COVID-19 Pandemic*

*Shining Waters Regional Council,
The United Church of Canada
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