Shared Voices:
Anti-racism in communication

Introductions - Nekeisha first; Ryan second
Where we work; what we do; how long we’ve been working intentionally on anti-racism communication;

RYAN
In societies across the globe, race and racism continue to be realities that affect what we see, how we see, who creates, who listens, where doors are open and where access remains limited. As communicators seeking to share our message with integrity and as people of Christian faith seeking to break down barriers, we believe it is important to ensure that what we write, speak, design is done in ways that promote justice for racialized people and others who are oppressed.

There are a couple of points we’d like to make before we dive into our process and examples.
First, we don’t think of ourselves as experts. We are however practitioners who are constantly learning and growing on a journey toward counteracting racism in our society. We hope that what we share will encourage others to participate in this journey, but we also acknowledge that our experiences and our conclusions are not universal rules or a ten-step program to becoming anti-racist.

NEKEISHA
Second, we want to note that what we are going to look at is subtle types of racism that might be easily missed if we are not being attentive. Blatant forms of racism in the media such as the controversy around figures like radio personality Don Imus or Michael Richards attract a lot of attention. But racism is often perpetrated in less obvious ways that compromises our message and creates barriers between us and our audience, often without our knowing. These subtle ways our words and images influence our thoughts and behaviors—these are what we will examine today.

RYAN
One more caveat—Shared Voices, our guide to anti-oppression communication, which is available for $10 here or at the Mennonite Church USA booth in the exhibit hall, also touches on issues of sexism, Westernism, classism and other forms of oppression. The issues are similar, but not the same. Today, for simplicity’s sake, we’ll talk primarily about race.
We want to hear from you

• What interested you about this workshop?

NEKEISHA
First we want to hear from you.
What interested you about this workshop?
What is racism? The definition we have used is simple: race prejudice plus power.

Racism occurs when a dominant racialized group in society uses power to enforce their racial prejudices in such a way that they receive more benefits and privileges at the expense of other groups. Structural racism in particular occurs when social systems perpetuate the social position of the dominant racialized group through longstanding policies and practices.
NEKEISHA
Racism and other forms of oppression are different from bias, discrimination or prejudice because:
It pervades both institutions and individuals.
It restricts beyond an individual’s control.
It is hierarchical—privileged groups benefit (often unconsciously) from the disempowerment of subordinated groups.
Dominant groups have the power to define and reinforce what is “normal”; thus, discrimination and marginalization can be made part of our “normal” structures.
[definition from by Paso Consulting, Training and Core Concepts]

Communication practices that do not attend to racism often participate in this. Therefore, we must be intentional in addressing it. The way we communicate must be intentionally transformed both to reach and to represent multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial groups of people across the globe.
Why should any of us care? There are so many answers, based on our church’s expressed goals, an inherent sense of equity, common sense, but also because…
Shared Voices: Why anti-racism is key to our work

• “As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”
  - Galatians 3: 27-28

• “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”
  - Matthew 22:37-29

• “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”
  - Luke 6:31

RYAN

...we believe God calls us to care.

We also care because those of us in the majority need to understand the power of our stories and our images and how they shape us. And we care because equal status and equal power truly benefits us all.
NEKEISHA
As communicators, we either participate in the system and reinforce patterns of racial oppression or we work to actively understand and counteract those oppressive patterns. As representatives of a mission agency and a Christian seminary, our burden is especially great. Western Christian missions have long been used as tools for colonialism as often as conversion. At Mennonite Mission Network, our models of mission step away from colonial assumptions; our communication models must do the same. The stories and images we share have power; we need to understand how those stories shape us.

Are there any questions of clarification about the definitions we are using before we continue?
Shared Voices: Implementing an anti-racist process

1. Departmental anti-racism training

2. Anti-racism consultant (external review)

3. Anti-racism communication team (internal review)

RYAN - So what have we done?
The first step is training at the Mission Network is training—more than 80 percent of Mennonite Mission Network employees have experienced a three-day training to learn about the history of race and racism in America, the ways racism consciously and unconsciously shapes all of our identities, and the way that we could begin to heal in our individual lives, in our churches and in our other institutions. We struggled together with new concepts like white privilege and internalized racial oppression, and developed a shared definition for racism that we could use in our context.

As a new waves of communicators in our department went through the process, two exciting and positive things began to happen. First, each new group of trained staff brought back new energy and ideas. Second, we all began to share a common language with which we could discuss, critique and strengthen our work. The quality of our conversations around issues of race improved and increased. We could ask each other about the use of an image or the wording of an article. We could discuss and disagree about what was or wasn’t anti-racist in healthy, and honest ways. I think that’s important to note—that there are lots of times when a problem with a story or a design, doesn’t have a neat, one-size fits all solution. An issue might have many different solutions or require compromise. What mattered was that we had the language and the analytical tools that helped us see things we hadn’t seen before, be more comfortable with conversations that we didn’t have before, and decide on solutions that we didn’t think about before. We came to understand that becoming anti-racist required that the character of our department be transformed with our materials.

[click] We have hired a series of anti-racism consultants to review our publications. They have the power to alter our work.

[click] We formed an internal, three-person anti-racism communication team to review smaller pieces and offer internal guidance on specific issues.
We worked collaboratively for a year to establish Anti-racism communication guidelines for all Mission Network staff members and workers. Every communication staff person had a voice in this document.
Shared Voices: Implementing an anti-racist process

1. Departmental anti-racism training
2. Anti-racism consultant (external review)
3. Anti-racism communication team (internal review)
4. Anti-racism communication guidelines
5. Agency-wide training and ongoing review

We formed an internal, three-person anti-racism communication team to review smaller pieces and offer internal guidance on specific issues.
AMBS

- Anti-racism at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary
  - Internal review during theme/concept development, writing and design
  - External review from anti-racism consultants

NEKEISHA
In anti-racist communication, the skills you develop are portable. Currently, I work at AMBS as a graphic designer on a small communication team that includes a communication director and a part-time graphic designer. Having served on the internal anti-racism team at the Mission Network and as one of the co-authors of the Shared Voices guidelines, I now bring these eyes to my own work as a designer and this affects the choices I make when representing the seminary visually.
I am involved in the process of developing the themes and content of some of our larger publications. So for example we have a promotional piece called “Why I am at AMBS” that has first-person student reflections on their reasons for coming to and studying at AMBS. I help ensure we get diversity of voices that don’t overexpose and thus exploit the students of color we have on the campus, and that reflect life at the seminary in ways that are invitational and accurate.
Finally, we have also used anti-racism consultants to review our work and we are currently in the process of streamlining this so that more of our regular publications (annual report, course catalog, Why I am at AMBS etc) have an external review so that things that I or others don’t see are corrected.

It’s time to get into specifics. What we will present today is based on five years of working and talking about at this issue intentionally. It is based on mistakes we have made, long conversations, testing out our thoughts and insights from others.
RYAN
Let’s start with images. What we see in an image has power. Images are iconic and they teach us about the world. In our images, who are the agents.
By “agents,” I mean who is in control or performing the action in the photos? What do these photos say to you about the agents here?
Shared Voices:

Who are the agents?

How does a simple photo choice change our assumptions about the roles played in a particular event?
RYAN
Where are the subjects positioned in the photo? Who is in the foreground? Who is in the background? Who is at the center? Who is at the top or bottom? What does that imply about the people involved and their relationships?
Who is positioned where?

RYAN
Where are the subjects positioned in the photo? Who is in the foreground? Who is in the background? Who is at the center? Who is at the top or bottom? What does that imply about the people involved and their relationships?
NEKEISHA
Sometimes a photo can tell the truth but not the whole truth. Stereotypes usually come from mutations – or mutilations – of some kind of truth. What stereotypes do these photos either reinforce or destroy? Here are two photos from southern Africa. What do we infer from each photo?
NEKEISHA
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RYAN
Who is being depicted in positions of authority and leadership? Is this accurate? Does it tell the whole story?
Our partners are active and able participants – not passive recipients – in mission work. Even if a Westerner takes a position of shared leadership, photos can show the context of that activity.
In this relationship, the translator Tshandu is as important in delivering the message as is the teacher Sawatzky, since she is the one providing the context in the Xhosa tongue. Sawatzky said her translation changes session to session as she determines the best way to offer that context.
Shared Voices:

Does a photograph create a relationship? Does it imply a relationship? Does it harm a relationship?

Photographers have a responsibility to those they photograph. It is legal for a photographer to create images of people in public places, but is it ethical? Especially in a cross-cultural setting or one involving people of color, the power of the camera should be shared. Sometimes *showing a photo to a subject is enough to create the kind of connection that can lead to growth or relationship.
Most photographers talk about taking or shooting photos. Note the violence and possessiveness in that language. What if we talked, instead, of making photos, which implies that the subjects have as large a role as the photographer?
RYAN - [India story] Police in India – glared at start of the week. One or both of us took at least one photo a day. The last day I was there, I had a wonderful conversation with the chief of police. I won’t use it anywhere as a news story, but we made a personal connection that hopefully augmented his feelings about Mennonites.
Mission workers Phil and Christine Lindell Detweiler receive prayer from a group of children outside of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

NEKEISHA
Photography is collaborative, not sneaky. And conversation with a subject is vital for including names. When a person is not named in a photograph, they usually become a part of the background. Without a name, or with selected names, we send a clear message as to who is important.

Compare two ways to caption this photograph. (Note: I have the name of every person photographed here.)
Children at the Responsible Kids Club in Kwapata, Edendale Township, outside of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, pray for adult visitors and their leader, Mthoko Mvalelwa.

You might also note the subject matter—the children are praying for the North Americans, not the other way around.
Do stories exoticize people from various countries, cultures and racial backgrounds?

NEKEISHA
In our attempts to appreciate other cultures, we can easily treat people like objects of curiosity and spectacle. Is what you see a normal part of life or something extraordinary, like this drama performance?
Do stories exoticize people from various countries, cultures and racial backgrounds?

NEKEISHA
What about these “strange” meats? There is nothing inherently wrong with photographing food, but what is the larger cultural context, and is that all that we are told about this culture?
Do stories exoticize people from various countries, cultures and racial backgrounds?

NEKEISHA

Do our metaphors reinforce stereotypes? Do our visuals make people from another culture or country look strange, exotic and different, rather than like other human beings? Are we telling a story that our readers haven’t heard about this ethnic group before? Do our words challenge perceptions about “all Black people” or “all Asian people” or “all Native peoples”?
Shared Voices:
Anti-racist writing & editing

• Are the voices of people of color included in a story? Are they allowed to tell their own stories, or is someone else narrating?

• Whenever possible, we show stories to our sources and ask for their feedback and changes.

Consider the power of the pen. You’ve heard that the winner of the war draws the map, or that history tells stories from the winner’s point of view? Who holds the pen in our communication? What voices are heard, and in what way?

2. Do sources have control over how they are being depicted? We occasionally miss deadlines when we do this, but it is an important step in ensuring that voices are heard and respected.
Shared Voices: Anti-racist writing & editing

- Listening to stories is an important part of life for the Samogho people. Although most of this tribe cannot read, they are excellent storytellers.

- Emphasize the values of the Samogho people. Instead of focusing on low literacy rates, focus on what is valued within this community—oral history and storytelling.

- Listening to stories is an important part of life for the Samogho people and they are excellent storytellers.

RYAN
Don’t focus solely on brokenness. There are times when we need to tell painful stories. But often stories of people who have some kind of spiritual, material or physical needs—especially if they are from a different cultural, ethnic or racialized background—tend to concentrate solely on their deficiencies. But even people with needs have assets and skills that are important to their communities or that we can recognize and respect. Notice how many stories, films, or books are based on the white or the Westerner “saving” groups of color. (Click)
Let’s look at an example—and note that most of our examples come from our own mistake files. Do you see any red flags here?
In this case, we place a Western value—literacy—on an oral culture and emphasize what we consider to be a weakness. Most of the Samogho cannot read because they communicate orally and until recently have had little reason to learn to read. The oral tradition can be a strength, not a perceived weakness. We can communicate the concept without adding our own values.
Shared Voices: Anti-racist writing & editing

- We would like you to help the church raise money for Mennonites in the Congo.

- The request makes the Congolese seem less like partners in the project and more like passive recipients of the gift. The sentence could be changed to better describe the partnership between the Mennonite churches in North America and in Congo.

- We would like you to work alongside the Congolese Mennonites as they build their church.

Who is doing the action in your communication? Is it always North Americans? All of us know that we are not the sources of all action. Allow your partners to be the actors that they are.
Shared Voices: Anti-racist writing & editing

- Campos, a talented Colombian working mother, led the group in worship.

- Qualifying adjectives may be meant to compliment a subject or group, but they can do so by implicitly denigrating others in that group. In this case, should we assume that other Colombians—or mothers—are not talented? Do mothers not work unless they are outside the home? Would we use the phrase “working father?” Consider using nouns as attributes instead of adjectives.

- Campos, a local attorney, used her gifts as a worship leader to inspire the congregation. She and her husband have three children.
We did a Beyond Ourselves issue on ministry in Asia a few years ago. We were excited about the empowerment we thought we had shown. What do you think?
Pushing up leaders

Dr. Veron Miller

As part of its ongoing mission to promote leadership development, the United Methodist Church (UMC) has established a program focused on training upcoming leaders. This initiative aims to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary to lead effectively within the church and broader communities.

The program features a combination of theoretical and practical components. Participants engage in workshops, seminars, and mentorship programs to enhance their leadership capabilities. Additionally, they are provided with opportunities to apply their learnings through hands-on experiences.

Leadership requires true commitment and a true call.

Taking time for mission

Mr. and Mrs. Dinges

Missionary work often involves a deep commitment to service and a willingness to learn from diverse cultural contexts. Mr. and Mrs. Dinges have been deeply involved in missions for over a decade, sharing their faith and connecting with local communities.

In this setting, they emphasize the importance of patience and adaptability. "When working with people from different backgrounds," they say, "it’s crucial to approach each interaction with openness and respect.

The couple is passionate about empowering individuals to make a difference in their communities. Their work reflects their commitment to fostering sustainable development projects and supporting education initiatives.

For more information on how to get involved in mission work, please visit our website or contact us directly. Together, we can make a positive impact on the lives of those we serve, one community at a time.

Continued on page 3
Never too old for Christ

He learned pastoral leadership by doing

By Hanna Miller

W hen God called Vicki Johnson to become pastor, she was 43 years old. Vicki had served as a lay leader and a youth pastor, but never a pastor. She had never thought she would be in that role, yet here she was, called to lead a church of 800 people. The church had faced financial struggles and was in need of leadership. Vicki stepped up to the challenge, relying on her experience and the support of her family. She worked hard to bring the church back to financial stability and to create a sense of community among the members. Through her leadership, the church became a beacon of hope in the community. Vicki's story is a reminder that God can use anyone to lead and that age is not a barrier to spiritual growth and leadership.

By Shann Miller

W hen the church decided to hire a new pastor, they interviewed many candidates. However, none of them seemed to be the right fit. Then, one day, they received a call from a church in another city. The church was in need of a new pastor and was interested in hiring someone with experience. After some consideration, the church decided to hire this candidate. With her leadership, the church saw a significant increase in membership and in the community's perception of the church. The church members felt a sense of community and归属感 in a way they had never experienced before. This story is a reminder that sometimes, the answers to our prayers may not come in the ways we expect, and that God can use any situation to bring about His will.

By Brian Miller

W hen the church was in crisis, the congregation needed a leader who could provide direction and guidance. The church members were feeling lost and disconnected from one another. With the help of a prayer group, the church members began to pray for guidance and wisdom. God answered their prayers by sending a new pastor to the church. With her leadership, the church saw a significant increase in attendance and in the congregation's sense of community. The church members felt a sense of belonging and purpose in a way they had never experienced before. This story is a reminder that God can use any situation to bring about His will and that prayer is a powerful tool in times of need.
Encounter, Engage, Expand

Koreans are spreading the gospel

Dr. Yoon Miller

In the heart of Seoul, South Korea, and more recently in Sichuan province, these Christians are reaching out to their neighbors in a variety of ways. The Korean Anabaptist Center, an affiliate of the Anabaptist World Movement, is working to empower Korean Christians to engage in mission and community development. The center has been active in various initiatives, including the establishment of a satellite church in China, the training of leaders, and the development of educational materials. These efforts are aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of the gospel and its implications for daily life.

The Anabaptist model

By Ryan Miller

This slide discusses the Anabaptist model, which is characterized by a commitment to radical discipleship and a call to live in radical community. The model is rooted in the teachings of the early Christian church, particularly the Anabaptist tradition, and seeks to embody the principles of the gospel in all aspects of life. The slide highlights key elements of the Anabaptist model, including radical discipleship, communal living, and a commitment to nonviolence and social justice. The Anabaptist model is presented as a way for Korean Christians to engage in mission and community development in a manner that is faithful to the teachings of the early church.

Peace without faith in Christ is worthless

This slide emphasizes the importance of faith in Christ for true peace. It suggests that while peace is important, it is not enough without the transformative power of faith in Christ. The slide encourages Christians to deepen their relationship with Christ and to allow their faith to guide their actions and decisions. The slide also reminds listeners that true peace cannot be found without the presence of Christ in their lives.

The slide concludes with a call to action, urging Christians to engage in mission and community development, to live as radical disciples, and to strive for peace with justice and righteousness. The slide encourages listeners to trust in God and to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide their efforts.
Our feedback was that, first, most of our photos showed Asian partners and ministers in positions of submission, which fits one Asian stereotype. One staff member argued that prayer is a position of power, which is true, but when our images still unintentionally supported that submissive Asian stereotype. It can be a huge challenge to translate images from one culture into another culture, even with some context. The other main critique was that the stories carried one byline – Ryan Miller – my byline. That’s because I went on the trip, so I was doing the reporting, but because I didn’t share the pen, everything came through my voice and my filter. Since then, we have worked to make sure our pieces feature many bylines and include first-person stories from our sources, not just stories written by North Americans interpreting what our sources say.
NEKEISHA – The story of the process behind creating the AMBS viewbook and balancing the reality of AMBS demographics with the hope of what it could be. Transparency is important—we include a statement of our commitment to anti-racism in the viewbook as well as a demographic profile so that prospective students understand the reality numerically and not only from the impressions we offer in our images.
Sometimes we make the best of choices that are not perfect. Consider this series of photos. What do you see?

Here’s a story about a doctor who visited Congo to perform surgeries alongside Congolese doctors. This is an engaging photo—Doctors with patients. But the white doctor, unintentionally or intentionally, is in the power position, above the patient and his colleague with a protecting hand on her shoulder. He is in control.
What about this one?
Our second choice was the best surgery photo we had. Good balance, nice lighting. But here it appears that the white doctor is doing the work – his hands are dirty – and the African doctor is assisting. Also, the white doctor is facing the camera while the African is in profile. This was a difficult conversation, but we chose…
Shared Voices:

Making sacrifices

This photo. Not as strong. Faces more obscured. But they are working together in similar positions. Not the best photo, but the best choice.
Shared Voices:
Headlines after recent trial of two white teens convicted of assault after killing a man in a brawl

- 2 teens get jail time in Mexican's beating death – cnn.com
  - Identification as "Mexican" labels victim as "other-than-us"
- Teens get jail time in Shenandoah death – Allentown Morning Call
  - Victim not important?
- Shenandoah teens sentenced to prison in killing of illegal Mexican immigrant – Reading Eagle
  - Is victim's documentation important?
- Shenandoah Teenagers Involved in Hate Crime Sentenced Today – Civilrights.org
  - Focus remains on teens, not victim
- Teens Sentenced In Beating Death Of Immigrant – WGAL
  - "Beating death" eliminates culpability; different from "Teens fatally beat..."
- Teens Convicted of Murdering Luis Ramirez Sentenced To Seven Months in Jail – Latina.com
  - Names the victim

Our word choices are critical. The same event can be described in many different ways, as in these headlines on a trial result in June 2009. What do these headlines imply about the people involved in the story?
Shared Voices:

- Heavy-handed bombing raids and house raids, which are seen as culturally unacceptable by many Afghans who guard their privacy fiercely, and the detention of hundreds of suspects for years without trial at the Bagram air base and Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, have stirred up Afghans’ strong independent streak and ancient dislike of invaders.


How many cultures consider bombing raids and house raids “culturally acceptable?” Wouldn’t most cultures appreciate independence and have a long-held dislike of invaders?
On his 100th day in office, Barack Obama enjoys high job approval ratings, no matter what poll you consult. But if a new survey by the New York Times is accurate, the president and some of his policies are significantly less popular with white Americans than with black Americans, and his sky-high ratings among African-Americans make some of his positions appear a bit more popular overall than they actually are.

*Byron York, Washington Examiner, April 28, 2009*

Apparently, black Americans’ don’t count fully in this assessment of popularity. Some of these examples are obvious; some are more subtle. But all of them exist. They are real. As faith-based communicators, part of our burden is to ensure that our words are not oppressing others. We hope these examples help us think through what that might mean.

What questions or examples would you bring to the conversation?
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