

## Decolonizing Language

### *General principles*

The impact your language has on another person matters more than the intention behind it. Saying “I didn’t mean that in an offensive way” does not make up for any offence felt by the person spoken to or about.

“Race” is an inaccurate term. While the problem of racism exists, there is only one human race. A more accurate term is ethnicity.

Avoid racist and colonizing colloquialisms. Think carefully about metaphors and analogies before using them. Consider these examples:<sup>1</sup>

- Last Man on the Totem pole
- Holding down the Fort/ Circle the Wagons
- Let’s have a powwow
- Rain dance
- Indian Giver
- Indian time/summer
- Too many chiefs, not enough Indians
- Off the Reservation
- Sold Down the River
- ThePeanut Gallery
- Grandfather Clause
- Long time, no see
- No can do
- Gypped
- Eenie- Meenie, Miney- Mo
- Hip- Hip- Hooray
- Uppidity

## *Colloquialisms* Racist Origins

Avoid “colourblind” language. For instance, the phrase “Colour doesn’t matter” can be seen as overlooking both the benefits of diversity and the challenges people of certain ethnicities face.

Don’t practice tokenism. For instance, don’t use one person or event to indicate The Salvation Army is diverse. Also, don’t presume that one person from an underrepresented group speaks for everyone in that group.

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<sup>1</sup> Slide from “‘Your Colour Will Not Matter There’: Songs and Slogans of the Church.” Session 3 of “Moving Salvationists Beyond ‘I’m not a Racist.’” Produced by Indigenous Ministries, The Salvation Army Canada and Bermuda Territory, 2021.

## ***Common examples in The Salvation Army***

Shaped as a military force, The Salvation Army has its own colonizing lingo that can be misunderstood or considered out of date when it comes to ethnic diversity. We want our message to be clear and consistent with our efforts toward reconciliation.

The following examples come from Salvation Army songs and culture. They each bear good intentions. But when we consider that the impact of our words on others is more important than the intentions behind them, we can look for other words that are both clear in meaning and relevant to today's context.

### *Colonization*

- Song #980: Soldiers of Our God, Arise – “Spread His fame, His praises sing / And conquer every nation.”

Behind this song is the intent to see that everyone is saved by God's power. The language, however, can be interpreted to mean that human power “conquers” or defeats nations. This is not the language of reconciliation but of colonization. Consider altering it to “Spread His fame, His praises sing / *Witness with every nation.*”

### *Race*

- Song #1006: In Christ There Is No East or West – “Join hands then, brothers of the faith, / Whate'er your race may be / Who serves my Father as a son / Is surely kin to me.”

Behind this song is the desire that all human beings become part of God's family. The word “race,” however, is an inaccurate term for ethnicity. Additionally, it highlights only one aspect that makes us different parts of one body of Christ. Consider altering it to “Join hands then, brothers of the faith, / *Whoever you may be* / Who serves my Father as a son / Is surely kin to me.”

### *Colour*

- Song #1011: They Shall Come from The East – “The black, the white, the dark, the fair, / Your color will not matter there.”

Behind this song is the expression that all human beings are equal and have a place in God's kingdom. However, it uses colourblind language. Consider altering to, “The black, the white, the dark, the fair, / *Your colour will be honoured there*” or “*Your colour should not matter here.*”

- William Booth's book *In Darkest England* plays off *In Darkest Africa*, a book written by his contemporary, Henry Morton Stanley. Stanley equated the dark skin of Africans with a continent devoid of light. This does not mean we should not read Booth's book, only that we should have a heightened awareness of the impact of its language today.
- The term “white” is found throughout the Bible, including “white robes” (e.g., Mark 9:3, Revelation 6:11) and “white as snow” (e.g., Isaiah 1:18, Revelation 1:14). While this language is not wrong, “white” is given a positive connotation. The Salvation Army tends to emphasize whiteness as a symbol for salvation and holiness. Using different imagery may be more appropriate. For instance, Jesus talks about spiritual birth by referring to the wind of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5–8).