

BEFORE THE THRONE OF GOD: MULTICULTURAL CHURCH AS ESCHATOLOGICAL ANTICIPATION¹

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Abstract

Written out of personal experience from a perspective rooted in the indigenous British church, this paper suggests that intentional working towards a truly multicultural church most closely represents God's intention for His people. In our thinking, experience, and manner of gospel working, we are presented with challenges that need to be addressed and overcome to make this happen. But then, no-one said it would be easy to strive for God's best.

My Story

I grew up in rural Norfolk in a market town with a population of 4000. It was the largest place for over 100 square miles and served a community peppered with small farming villages and hamlets that were much smaller. All the pupils at my Secondary School were white British. For the town as a whole the only people who were ethnically different were those with a strange twang in their voice and unusual customs who arrived from an exotic location in the South, London. Either retiring or seeking a rural lifestyle in which to bring up their children, they were buying houses on the new private estates that were being built in the 1960s and 70s.

The only international exposure I got was at church. The large Methodist Church my family attended was fully committed to overseas missions. An

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influential minister while I was in my teens had been a missionary in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), participating in the pro-independence movement and arguing for racial integration. Indeed, as a young teenager I invested my pocket money in supporting one of our older young people who went to the South Pacific for a year on a missionary placement. The church's commitment was engaged and informed, if a little paternalistic. The church Sunday School was well over a hundred strong, and among them were three black children: two were African foster children, living with two spinster sisters; the other was the son of a West Indian RAF Sergeant from the local air base. Kurt was a year younger than me, and my friend. When I started preaching at 16, I studied with his Dad, Wally, who was also experiencing God's call to preach. Together we sat and listened to an LP recording of Dr Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech in our minister's study – a powerful moment.

Why do I share this story? Context is everything and to properly understand and interpret what I say later, you need to know where I have come from. My background in rural England – my home, my school, my church – never led me to conclude anything other than it was completely natural and normal to have a friend who was black and to study alongside a fellow preacher who was black.

Roll the clock forward and in 1990 I became the Senior Minister at West Croydon Baptist Church. One of the things that really excited me about this pastorate was that, depending upon how you counted its community, between a quarter and a third of the congregation were non-white. Shortly after I arrived, in talking with Peter Brierley of the Christian Research Association,² he observed that it was one of the most integrated multicultural churches he knew of in the country. Its story is also worth recounting to add to the background of my observations. In the late 1950s and early 1960s it had bucked the trend of church decline, gathering a large translocal congregation centred on biblical preaching. When the time for a pastoral change came in the mid 1960s, conscious of the growing inward migration from the West Indies, the church sought to call a black minister for this predominantly white 500-member church. Being unsuccessful in their search they ultimately called an ex-missionary who had served in Jamaica to be their pastor. The church was intentional in wanting to welcome those who were settling in South London and made strategic decisions to further that intent.

When I arrived in 1990 there was a strong tradition of inclusion in every aspect of the church's life. Three years in we called a minister of Trinidadian heritage to join us and the integration continued to grow as the multicultural life of the congregation was further enhanced by a new wave of African immigration and, indeed, by people from all over the world. For almost a

2 Peter Brierley was responsible for the English Churches Census from 1989–2005, initially with MARC Europe, then, latterly, with the Christian Research Association.

quarter of a century this colleague has proven a close and trusted friend. When I left after eleven years we had in excess of 35 nationalities represented and the congregation was around 40% non-white. But that's to jump ahead of the story.

I want to tell you about Florence. She was a Windrush Generation Jamaican in her sixties. Back home she was a Baptist, but when she arrived in Britain, while she sent her children to church, she didn't really come herself. On reaching retirement age, facing her own mortality, she reconnected with the church she had sent her children to years before, was converted and sought believers' baptism. In this she wasn't unusual; rather she was one of many over the years. She sticks in my mind because on the morning of her baptism, as she shook hands with me at the door, with a beaming smile across her face, she thanked me for what had been a very special service and said, "Roger, this used to be a white church and now it's a black church!" Now that really got me thinking, not least because the church was still 60% white. Clearly what she was saying was something other than a numerical observation – actually I think it was about ethos and culture and belonging. Compared to the formal Baptist hymn/prayer sandwich and long expository sermons of the 1960s, however genuine the welcome was, now the upbeat Spring Harvest style worship, charismatic spirituality and contemporary informality had unconsciously repositioned the church to be much more culturally aligned to those of Caribbean or African heritage. Actually, contemporary Western culture is heavily influenced and shaped by black culture, but that's a digression into cultural hermeneutics rather than an exploration of the vision of a multicultural church.

The other thing to share at this point comes out of the controversial Asylum and Immigration Act of July 1996 which threatened to remove state benefits from most asylum seekers. A Churches Together in Croydon forum was called to address the anticipated avalanche of need. Recognising that the Home Office's national office of immigration, Lunar House, was only three hundred yards away from our church, we thought we might open a drop-in centre. A relatively recent arrival in the church's worshipping congregation had a background in leading community provision through the Co-operative Movement, and she agreed to head up the initiative.

Over the next two years, a clothing store, food bank and access to electrical goods were established alongside links with health, housing and advice services to make the Day Centre a one stop shop. In 1998 there were 1588 new registrations and the Centre had effectively become too big for one local congregation to service. First the other churches of the borough started providing willing helpers and then other local volunteer organisations became involved. It was one of the first such ministries to be established in Britain during the asylum crisis of the late 1990s, and was often held up as a model of good practice for those seeking to establish similar provision elsewhere. The Refugee Day Centre, West Croydon, became a charity in its own right,

with key individuals joining its list of patrons, including the Mayor of Croydon, Cllr Shafi Khan, and the Chairman of the Council of Mosques and Imams in Great Britain, the late Dr Zaki Badawi.

While the Day Centre grew to be an independent body in its own right, it was birthed out of a particular local congregation which already understood and was comfortable in its own internationalism and multicultural nature. That the other churches were ready to step up to the plate and support it when additional help was needed, – and indeed, the churches were by far and away the main providers of support for asylum seekers in the voluntary sector throughout the country – is indicative of the global perspective that abounds in Christian communities.

From Croydon I moved to take on the oversight of 175 Baptist churches centred in Oxon, Berks, Hants and Dorset. This was a wholly different experience. Most of the churches were almost entirely white, even in the urban areas of Oxford, Reading, Southampton, Portsmouth and Bournemouth. Where we did have significant diversity among us was with two mono-ethnic congregations, one Korean and the other South Asian. The latter was a well-established community of first-generation immigrants that had begun to struggle. While I was not closely involved with this fellowship, in hindsight it is clear to me that they had reached the key transitional moment where their rising generation of British-born children were increasingly dissatisfied with an inherited model of church that reflected more closely the culture of the sub-continent rather than their native culture in contemporary Britain.

In 2007 I moved to Spurgeon’s College to lead the teaching of mission and evangelism. Since the turn of the century the College has experienced a significant transition. A generation ago the College mostly only trained Baptist ministers; now Baptist ministerial students are a minority, albeit a significant minority, of the students who are on campus week by week. A large proportion of the student body, Baptist and non-Baptist, are of immigrant background rather than the white British heritage of former years. The College has consciously sought to be inclusive in its worship life, curriculum and overall ethos, typified by my predecessor, Principal Dr Nigel Wright, who liked to acknowledge the College as ‘Bapti-costal’. While this is a journey that the College is still on, we are not the ‘staid, stuffy traditional Baptists’ that the Senior Pastor from a large Pentecostal church who studied with us recently was delighted to discover.

The reflections that follow flow out of this experience where these formative influences and episodes have shaped my life, my understanding of the gospel and my perception of the vision of the Kingdom that is ours in Christ. My testimony is located within a white, Anglo, indigenous narrative of the last half-century that has witnessed the burgeoning of an expression of Christianity in the UK that has its roots in the global South. It is a testimony to an expression of church life that has tended to be more internationalist

in its perspective, more inclusive in its day-to-day life and, if leaning towards a benevolent paternalism rooted in empire, was much more well-meaning, egalitarian and committed to social justice than has been the case in wider British society.

Along the way a growing comprehension of the multicultural aspects of the biblical narrative has both confirmed and focused this direction in my ministry. As the pastor of a multicultural congregation I saw biblical stories in a new light.³ God called Abraham to be a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:1–3); Moses' second marriage was to a black Cushite woman (Num 12:1); and how could I have missed the place of Africa in the expansion of the Christian community in Acts indicated by the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–39)? Then, of course, there is the heavenly vision of New Jerusalem, where there was

... a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

‘Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.

(Rev 5:9, 7:9)

In what follows, my objective is simple and straightforward, in the light of the heavenly vision; understanding the place at which we find ourselves, what should the church of Jesus Christ in the UK do next?

Taken for granted

While there are so many things that could be said, so many worthy and interesting avenues that could be explored, with the limited space available I need to take a number of things for granted. First, I want to take as foundational a *pentecost-shaped eschatological* vision of God's affirmation of our ethnic diversity. It sits in the very nature of the 'good news' itself which is '*panta ta ethne*' (for every people group); it affirms the heart of cultural distinctiveness in the miracle of mother-tongue at the coming of the Spirit (hence Pentecostal); and it is at the heart of the heavenly city where the river of life brings healing to the brokenness, pain and dysfunctionality of all ethnicity rather than washing it away (and is therefore eschatological because of its end times vision).

³ A more comprehensive account can be found in Malcolm Patten, 'Multicultural Dimensions of the Bible', in *Evangelical Quarterly* 85.3 (2013), 195–210.

Second, it is without question that contextualisation, or inculturation, is a key concept both missiologically and ecclesologically, and that it is directly relevant here. That is, the need for the gospel to inhabit the culture of those receiving the good news. Several years ago I knew a black pastor who was leading a Pentecostal church plant in South London, which, after ten years, had grown to number 500 members. Their aim was to reach the whole of their community for Christ and the pastor was exercised by the fact that the vast majority of the congregation were 20- and 30-somethings of African and Caribbean heritage. When he discovered contextualisation it was as though scales fell from his eyes and he instantly understood his challenge as they were particularly attuned to young black culture.

Third, that the experience of multiculturalism is predominantly an urban phenomenon. The contemporary sociological commentator, Zygmunt Bauman, highlights a division in society between what he terms mixophilia and mixophobia – those who love multicultural Britain and revel in it, and those who fear it and hate it – observing that the former tend to gravitate towards life in our cities.⁴

Fourth, the identification by Philip Jenkins of the impact of Christianity from the global South on the churches of the North as one of the key issues of the next half century, with the coming together of economic migration, political upheaval and reverse mission.⁵

And finally, David Goodhew's observation in his recent edited volume, *Church Growth in Britain*, that the growing migrant churches are beginning to move out of the cities and into towns along key travel corridors like the A1 and East Coast mainline, following the expansion of lively entrepreneurial business development.⁶

A vision of the New Jerusalem

That said, what inspires me, what I work for, and what challenges me is the vision of the New Jerusalem, of the worshippers of the Lamb, ethnically healed and before the throne, worshipping and serving God together, rich in their diversity but one functional and functioning community. If we are to work for the Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, this is God's vision for us. In our generation migration and globalisation make this more of a possibility than perhaps at any other time in history, but at this particular moment in time we are far from the realisation of God's best for us.

So, let me name the glaringly obvious implication of this, my 'elephant in the room'; mono-ethnic churches are much less than God's best. I do think

4 Zygmunt Bauman, *On Education: Conversations with Riccardo Mazzeo* (London: Polity, 2013), 1–6.

5 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd edition (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 201–236.

6 David Goodhew, ed., *Church Growth in Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 8.

that they are understandable and comprehensible. They are understandable for expatriate communities because as ‘aliens in a foreign land’ it is always about our roots and our identity in shared culture, a common first language and a familiar worldview; it is about solidarity, strength in numbers and the opportunity to organise when you are a marginalised and discriminated-against minority. If I were living in another country that was wholly different from the UK, I can see the powerful attraction of an expatriate congregation. This is completely intelligible because it is human nature. We appreciate being among people like us – PLUs as a friend of mine calls them.

If this is our natural default position it may seem that the heavenly vision is just that; only realisable in glory; but that would be a counsel of defeat and a rejection of a godly pursuit of a holy vision that actually is realisable through the powerful enabling of the Holy Spirit.

Rising to the challenges

I am convinced that local congregations are the fundamental building blocks of the Kingdom, and are far more influential catalysts of the Kingdom than denominational hierarchies, summits of leaders or national initiatives. So, in exploring the challenges that are presently before us, I will unashamedly do so from the perspective of a local congregation pursuing this heavenly vision of a multicultural church. In doing this we will discover challenges in our thinking, in our experience and in our action.

In our thinking . . .

With regard to our thinking I have two things to be rejected and two things to be embraced. First, we need to reject overly simplistic narratives of why mono-ethnic churches exist in contemporary Britain. Rather than being prima facie evidence of either institutional racism or an unwillingness to integrate, they are the fruit of a complex interplay of a variety of legitimate cultural, social, geographical, theological and practical issues rooted in difference. However, that there is evidence of racism and exclusion on the part of the indigenous Christian community is not in dispute, and that there is a separateness on the part of migrant churches who, even though they use the buildings of an established indigenous church, appear to be very unwilling to share Christian fellowship at any depth with their host, is also without question. Where the reasons for separation are misdiagnosed, inappropriate responses to the presenting symptoms are inevitable.

Of course, mono-ethnic congregations thrive as they do because a mono-ethnic approach has a proven track record of success. This is entry-level Church Growth theory from the 1970s, “the Homogeneous Unit Principle,” an ecclesiological strategy based on the common insight that “birds of a feather flock together.” This is the second thing that needs to be rejected.

Widely discredited, we need to continue to resist it too because its fruit, for all its success, does not bear scrutiny against the vision of the heavenly city. Indeed, it will actively keep us apart and work against God's best for us. It panders to our human nature, to join with the PLUs, and as seductive as it is to see success as a sign of God's blessing, success is no arbiter of either spiritual or ethical fidelity, which is why Jeremiah exclaims, "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?"

The "Homogeneous Unit Principle" is insidious though; even an apparently mixed congregation can be seduced into the multicultural compromise that owns a common denominator, single culture – whether reductionist or aspirational – rather than a celebration and affirmation of diversity. It is our differences in understanding that are the first part of our thinking that we need to embrace. Our cultural and theological worldviews are different. African honouring of ancestors and Muslim openness to the spirituality of dreams have much to contribute to a Western Christian spirituality steeped in rationalism. But then, it is possible to love the Lord our God with all our mind too, and to study for a PhD in a confessional context and remain faithful to Christ. Such differences easily keep us apart; therefore we need those skilled in helping us interpret ourselves to each other and to learn to integrate our respective insights.

We also need to acknowledge and own that the rising generation does not mirror either the understanding or the experience of their parents. In a society that is committed to multiculturalism, mono-ethnic churches will increasingly seem anachronistic and out-of-step with everyday life and experience. Vulnerable to being perceived as backward-looking and out of touch, such churches run the risk of alienating young people with a different experience of contemporary Britain.

Of course, there is an opposite trajectory in play too. British-born youth in migrant communities can, in a quest to discover their roots and identity, fall prey to radicalising influences that take them in a wholly different direction. While, to date, this has only emerged within the Muslim community as some of their young people have espoused *jihad*, what if a similar call came from so-called Christian internet preachers for recruits to join a Christian army to fight a holy war against Islamists who were murdering Christians and committing sacrilegious atrocities? Jenkins has already speculated about 'the next crusade' and explored the possibilities of religious conflict over the coming half-century, especially in those countries with large numbers of Christians and Muslims like Nigeria.⁷ From a UK perspective, the possibility seems a lot closer in 2015 than it did in 2002 when the first edition of his book was published.

It is sobering to note the observations of those who have reflected on the tragedy of the Tutsi and Hutu atrocities in Rwanda and Burundi in 1994. How could this have happened in the wake of the much-celebrated East African

7 Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 201–36.

Revival of the late 1920s–1930s? Maggy Barankitse, founder of Maison Shalom in Burundi, observed that Christianity had accommodated itself to the primacy of ethnic identity, leaving the African values of community and solidarity vulnerable to subversion by the forces of hatred and revenge. The challenge she identifies is one of raising children beyond the story of ethnicity, where they embrace a bigger vision, and their identity is rooted in a Christian understanding of love.⁸ For Rice, the 1994 genocide testifies to the inability of both Western missionary institutions and indigenous church leaders to see beyond superficial understandings of church growth, and the failure to be a prophetic presence in the midst of, “. . . tit-for-tat violence, colonial power, . . . social privilege, and the *tribalization* of the church.”⁹

Genuinely multicultural churches affirm the cultural tradition of all who are part of their community, while, at the same time, present a biblical vision that resists the demonising of others on the basis of ethnicity, and they value all people of all nations as they are valued by God and are the focus of God love and concern. Nationalistic convictions within the indigenous community also come under the scrutiny of gospel inspired multiculturalism. Those who seek to enlist the historic faith of these islands as some kind of theological bulwark against immigrants in general and people of colour in particular, will find the throne of grace an uncomfortable location before which to appear. There is no room for the sentiments of “little Englanders” where the gathering includes those “. . . from every nation, tribe, people and language.” Once again, a truly multicultural church affirms our ethnic identity, but places it within an inclusive, diverse and affirming vision of God’s eternal plan for humanity.

In our experience . . .

To these challenges to our thinking must be added challenges that confront our experience. While I want to reject the narrative that paints all indigenous churches as relationally and institutionally racist, the experience of discrimination, abuse and rejection is both real and painful. This can neither be ignored nor glossed over. Like brambles in a garden, if it is not rooted out it will continue to choke growth and inflict further pain and injury. God’s genius is that the “good news” of the Kingdom provides the way to freedom. Sin requires repentance, that complete change of thinking and reorientation to the truth that is liberating. And forgiveness itself liberates those who have

8 Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 174–76. See also, Emmanuel Z. Kopwe, “Mediation Between Ethnic Groups: The Rwanda and Burundi Experience,” in *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*, eds. Robert Schreiter and Knud Jorgensen (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 184–90.

9 Chris Rice, “Cape Town 2010: Reconciliation, Discipleship, Mission, and the Renewal of the Church in the 21st Century”, in *Mission as Ministry of Reconciliation*, eds. Robert Schreiter and Knud Jorgensen (Oxford: Regnum, 2013), 5.

been sinned against, releasing them from living in the present under the shadow of the past with its debilitating and undermining influence.

Then, just to further raise the bar, it is hardly surprising that the experience of our congregations is also likely to mirror that of our wider society. From ingrained and deep-seated attitudes that have been inculturated from birth, to contemporary political commentary, prejudice needs exposure to the gospel and truth to bring transformation. Similarly, the temptation to make premature and stereotyped judgements needs to be resisted. The white elderly lady not well-versed in expressing her ideas in the language of racial equality may appear racist when there is not a discriminatory bone in her body. Or the Iranian living in B&B accommodation with his family may not be a benefit scrounger at all; rather, he may be an asylum seeker whose English is not at the required level of competence and is not yet allowed to practise as a doctor even with his years of experience.

In our action . . .

Challenges in our thinking, challenges in our experience; there are challenges to how we act too. The first one is perhaps the most significant, and it has to do with intentionality. Being in partnership and working for a multicultural expression of faith is not easy; it is hard work. The default position is to stick with what we know, to remain where we are comfortable, to live and move and breathe within our own networks. There is never enough time to do everything that we want. There are never enough resources to facilitate every opportunity, so it is always easier for things to remain as they are. Only concerted and intentional action will overcome this challenge. A colleague who pastored a multicultural church for twenty years reflects that you cannot minimise how difficult working to this end is. It is disturbing because it takes everyone out of their comfort zone, and to be genuinely multicultural partners requires self-sacrifice from everyone; self-sacrifice because whenever another voice is heard, mine has to be silent; self-sacrifice because, if not, what results is not integration but assimilation of one by the other.

With our active partnering too there needs to be recognition that existing organisational and institutional infrastructures always best reflect a previous reality and therefore, as a matter of course, advantages the insider over the outsider. As a nonconformist working ecumenically alongside Anglicans, I have been on the wrong side of such disadvantage on many occasions. Working systems are always on catch-up; this is not a reason to write them off, just to recognise that they always need vigilant attention from those living inside them to ensure that they remain inclusive and responsive to change and therefore “fit for purpose.”

So, if these are some of the key challenges before us, how do local churches go about building partnerships and become a genuine expression of a truly multicultural church? While those with more translocal roles have the

responsibility to help shape thinking, encourage activity, and release resources, it is the local congregations where the real and important action is.

Theorists might call the next step “dialogical activism.” The Victorians, more practically, called it “the fellowship of activity.” It is how the ecumenical movement made unprecedented advances in the life of local churches during the twentieth century in the UK. That is, we engage in conversation, build relationships and establish partnerships by doing things together. For a local congregation it almost certainly means joining their local Churches Together group, or participating in initiatives like Street Pastors, food banks and debt counselling initiatives. For groups and networks of churches it means not doing separately what we can do together, thus modelling leadership that embodies the Kingdom values that we are committed to and to which we aspire.

So, in my own area of work this means looking to see how we can provide shared training for mission and ministry. Given the journey the Lord has taken us on over the last decade we have already revised our curriculum as a confessional college and how we talk about what we do and how we do it. There is conscious self-sacrifice here; Spurgeon’s College is not as “Baptist” as it was, but it is a much richer learning and discipling environment as a consequence.

In other areas we could talk about collaborative church planting; hospital, prison, and commercial chaplaincy; a combined approach to community prayer cover and a whole raft of other possibilities. Rather than just hiring the premises of established Anglo congregations, why should an African church not look to a closer partnership and cooperation? What about shared intern or gap-year initiatives that have added value through being collaborative? Or projects working towards community empowerment and social transformation that have much greater credibility from a broader community base? In this way, maybe an interim stage in the development of our partnership in the gospel can develop by this mutuality of action. The vision of the heavenly city can therefore be embedded not only in our thinking, but in our experience and action; a commitment to Kingdom building rather than empire building, however sincerely construed the latter might be.

Conclusion

If the vision of the people of God worshipping before the throne of God is our eschatological destiny, we have a God-given responsibility to seek for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. I have argued above from my own experience and observation that this has challenges for our thinking, our experience and our action.

In our thinking we need to reject simplistic accounts of mono-ethnic churches – i.e. racist attitudes or unwillingness to integrate – and the seductive lure of filling our churches with “people like us.” By contrast, in embracing the insights of those who have a different cultural and theological worldview

to our own, we enrich our discipleship and deepen our spirituality. Recognising that the rising generation lives in a different world from that which formed us also enables us to meet them where they are, as well as helping to protect them from those who would use “faith speak” as a means for their own political or ideological ends.

In our experience we need to recognise and deal with racism, discrimination, abuse and rejection at the cross of Christ. Repentance and forgiveness bring new life. We also need to constantly take account of how our wider social context impacts the experience and understanding of our congregations and the temptation to make premature and stereotyped judgements must be resisted. We need men and women who can interpret our differences to each other.

In our action, building multicultural expressions of church will always be the harder path, and, of necessity, therefore needs a high degree of intentionality and perseverance. It will require self-sacrifice, but is best built incrementally through “the fellowship of activity,” rolling up our sleeves and doing things together.

David Shosanya likes to talk about the British church scene as a central heating system, and how the boiler house heat of “Majority World” churches is disconnected from the pipes and radiators of the indigenous church that are installed around the country. “Our challenge”, he says, “is to hook them up so that the whole house can be heated.”¹⁰ I agree, and it starts by catching a vision of the heavenly city and then being intentional in making our local churches an anticipation of heaven on earth.

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¹⁰ Roger Standing, *As A Fire By Burning: Mission as the Life of the Local Congregation* (London: SCM, 2013), 70.