

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

Diaspora and Ethnic Churches in the UK

Response by Emmanuel Oladipo

1. NT Church Essentially Multicultural

The multicultural nature of the New Testament Church is inescapable. It led to a whole host of problems. Examples:

- * Greek widows were being neglected in the daily distribution, and so a multiracial team of second tier leaders was appointed as Deacons to handle the problem.
- * Some Jews insisted that all converts obey the Laws of Moses, and the first General Council was held in Jerusalem.
- * Peter withdrew from fellowship at table with gentile Christians in deference to visiting Jewish leaders at Antioch, and Paul rebuked him to his face.

In addition, racial stereotypes were not unknown, as evidenced by the poet's description of Cretans: "always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons," quoted by Paul with approval.

A lot of hassle could have been avoided if they had set up monocultural churches in different cities, but they did not. Paul told the Colossians that in Christ "there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all." (Colossians 3:11). That letter was from the Apostle, himself a Jew with Roman nationality from Tarsus, together with his Greek protégé, Timothy; and as usual, his final greetings give us a rich flavour of Romans, Greeks and Hebrews associated in various ways with his ministry.

2. Diaspora Church largely inward looking

In our days, very much is made of the reverse flow of evangelistic outreach from the South back to the North. While there is no denying the vibrancy of the Church in the global South and the northward flow of Christian migrants, I believe it is only fair to say that the jury is still out concerning their much touted missionary impact on the West in general and on this country in particular. In the main, their ministries of outreach to unbelievers, and their nurture of those in the faith, are confined to people of their own background.

Thank God for those immigrants who have truly entered into the life and culture of Britain and are sufficiently comfortable not only to worship God along with the indigenes but are able to minister effectively among them. Unfortunately, they are so few in number that our Speaker's definition of the native churches as "monocultural white Anglo-Saxon" remains largely incontestable. To teach Mathematics to John I need to know Mathematics, and I also need to know John. The zealous Christian brothers and sisters from the South know the gospel but have quite a lot to learn about their host community, and especially the newer arrivals.

The result is that each party remains ensconced in their comfort zone, as we commune together separately with one another and separately with our common Lord and Saviour. Like one unsympathetic commentator lambasted Churches preaching against segregation at the time of the Civil Rights marches in the USA, "Ten o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week."

This is what Dr John Stott has to say about it:

“It is of course a fact that people like to worship with their own kith and kin, and with their own kind, as experts in church growth remind us; and it may be necessary to acquiesce in different congregations according to language, which is the most formidable barrier of all. But heterogeneity is of the essence of the church, since it is the one and only community in the world in which Christ has broken down all dividing walls. The vision we have been given of the church triumphant is of a company drawn from 'every nation, tribe, people and language', who are all singing God's praises in unison (Rev. 7:19ff). So we must declare that a homogeneous church is a defective church, which must work penitently and perseveringly towards heterogeneity.” [From "The Message of Romans" (The Bible Speaks Today series: Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 397].

3. Good but should be better

Having said that, we must acknowledge two areas of ministry in particular where these immigrant Christians are making a tremendous impact on the overall Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ in this country: in ministry among fellow immigrants, and in standing up to be counted, often in situations where the trumpet of the leadership of the native church blows an uncertain sound.

(1) Ministry to Immigrants

Christians who come from other lands do not always feel welcome in English churches, and even when they are, adapting to the more reserved style of worship does not always come easily. On the basis of the concept that the only barrier to the gospel should be none other than the inherent offence of the Cross, it makes missiological sense that we send out evangelists who do not put the wrong foot forward, however inadvertently, in their representation of the glorious Good News to our foreign guests.

To the best of my knowledge, it is mostly Caribbean pastors who are ministering to Caribbeans in this country, with little or no input from the indigenous sector, and Nigerian-born ministers are constantly being imported to look after the spiritual welfare of their countrymen and women here.

It would be wonderful if native churches could identify, train and equip national and immigrant leaders to work as teams in this specialised ministry of integrating fellow believers who come from alien cultures and in reaching out to evangelise unbelieving migrants. Thank God there are some Churches and agencies who already work in this way, not as a foreign implant but as part of the work of the Church of God which is in Britain. I believe this to be one of the thrusts of The Philips Project, (www.philipproject.org.uk). May their tribe increase!

(2) Standing up to be counted.

As a specialised sector of the Church of Jesus Christ which is in Great Britain, Diaspora churches have a distinct advantage. The Press is for ever snapping at the Church every time it plays its proper prophetic role in standing against ungodly popular trends. They are careful, however, not to rage against minorities, (other than the Evangelicals, whom they tend to class along with the

“flat earth” brigade!). Diaspora Church leaders, therefore, can and do make pronouncements on controversial issues and expect not to be pilloried in the same manner as native church leaders. Fortunately, their cultural background does not predispose them to the same dignified reserve which makes native Christians reticent to create a scene even in the face of gross affront to cherished values of their faith. And so when there is a demonstration in Parliament Square against some new Bill designed to erode our freedom in Christ, there is a preponderance of non-Caucasians in the crowd.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I accept the idea of the three approaches the Church can take in response to the issue under consideration and that the whole tenor of Bible teaching endorses the third – to be a paradigm for human reconciliation and unity. I will like to add, however, that while this is true it is not to the exclusion of the other two. The Church can and should be a protagonist for reconciliation and promote and model – not “impose,” which is neither desirable nor practicable – unity. And the church should generate programmes which stimulate and even provoke united action, especially around the theme of Mission. More than that, I will like to argue that these are essential steps towards the third, which we cannot accomplish in one big leap forward from our present disparate positions. These smaller steps will enable us interact with one another in a non-threatening manner and thereby help us to get to know one another better and thus predispose us not merely to work shoulder to shoulder as partners in the work of the gospel but rather as fully integrated stakeholders in the Family Business to the glory of our heavenly Father.