

## **Faith and Society Files: Pastoring Multi-ethnic Churches**

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## **Pastoring multi-ethnic churches**

**by Gale Richards**

What might pastoral care be like when it takes seriously the influence of ethnic identity and enables individuals to participate fully in the life and mission of the church? I will offer some reflections on this question, based on my 2012 study of nine Baptist churches in the West Midlands. <sup>1</sup>

A helpful context for this article is a brief account of the arrival in the UK of many of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people in our churches. In 1948 the Nationality Act gave UK citizenship to members of Commonwealth countries, and the subsequent arrival of the *Empire Windrush* from the Caribbean is often used as a pivotal landmark of mass migration to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s. This migration led to sizeable BME populations (in addition to the existing Irish minority), which have increased over the decades through more measured migration after the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968, and subsequent Immigration Acts. In addition, some people have sought asylum in the UK, and more recently some have arrived as EU nationals. How did churches receive these new arrivals?

*Between the 1940s and 1960s many immigrants to Britain went to churches belonging to the same denomination as those they had attended in their home country. However, factors such as worship and preaching styles, community cohesion and racism caused many Black Christians to switch to the churches that were then emerging from the African Caribbean diaspora. However, this did not deter many others, who felt called to stay or who genuinely believed that they had no reason to leave...as it would simply not be true to say that all Black people were treated appallingly when they came to Britain...It is also clear that all was not, and indeed is still not well for Black Christians in historic denominations. Many have suffered and*

*continue to suffer, racism within these churches. Often this takes the form of exclusion from decision making processes, little or no encouragement to enter pastoral ministry, poor pastoral care, and even White flight, because too many Black people were joining their church.* <sup>2</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, recognising that racial injustice still persists in the UK, the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) has appointed a Racial Justice Adviser (RJA). The BUGB website records that this adviser, working in conjunction with BUGB's Racial Justice Group (RJG), seeks to ensure that the life and structures of BUGB reflect a commitment to racial justice.

### **The example of Jesus**

I suggest that part of this commitment to racial justice means supporting local churches in finding appropriate approaches to pastoral care in a multiethnic context. What might such an approach look like? Some reflection on the life of Jesus seems a useful starting point.

As we look at the gospel accounts, a time of preparation seems clear. Luke's account suggests that Jesus was 30 when he began his ministry with the calling of disciples (Luke 3:23). We also know from Luke that Jesus spent significant time in the preceding years listening to and engaging with the people group to which he was later to minister (Luke 2:41-52). This picture from Jesus' life contrasts with Baptist ministers today, who receive only two days of reflection on racial justice issues as part of their training, despite research<sup>3</sup> suggesting that ethnicity can play a significant part in shaping an individual's life experience in the UK. My study suggests that such training is not sufficient to equip ministers systematically to raise awareness of the experiences of racial injustice that

members of their congregation (or wider community) may be experiencing, or to suggest ways of challenging it. In some churches there is a lack of 'colour consciousness', a failure to be aware of the experiences of injustice encountered by people from particular ethnic backgrounds. Parker writes:

*Color consciousness is not simply a cognitive state of being or conscious intellectual activity but also a physical manifestation as well...the knowing and doing among those who move away from false consciousness...<sup>4</sup>*

I believe that there is only one race, but many ethnicities. Since ethnicity can be very broadly defined (not just based on physical appearance), I feel it might be more useful to talk of 'intercultural consciousness' rather than 'colour consciousness' in relation to ethnic injustices. This consciousness is born out of what I would call 'intercultural dialogue' and 'intercultural relationships' (Lartey<sup>5</sup> uses the term 'intercultural' to show that to some degree all human beings are like *all* others; like *some* others; and like *no* other).

### **BUGB initiatives**

The BUGB Racial Justice Adviser (RJA) and Racial Justice Group (RJG) need to work with Baptist Colleges and Regional Baptist Associations to increase the 'intercultural consciousness' of ministers in training and in service by advising on and monitoring the extent to which core modules for ministers (as well as stand alone modules, placements, trips, sabbatical opportunities and reflection days) enable intercultural consciousness. Mullings<sup>6</sup> cites the example of The Queen's Foundation offering modules in Black and Asian Theology, and Bible and Liberation, as well as sessions within the curriculum as a whole incorporating aspects of Black and Womanist Theology.

Ministers appropriately prepared for 'pastoring' multi-ethnic churches by having an intercultural consciousness would, if we look at the life of Jesus, also need systematically to use four approaches to pastoral care: ministry, social action, empowerment and personal interaction. It is beyond the scope of this article to reflect in detail on each of these four approaches, so I will offer brief comments on the latter three, with more detailed reflections on the approach of pastoral care as ministry – which is probably the area in which churches might engage with the most BME individuals.

(i) *Pastoral care as social action.* A powerful gospel image of truth being spoken 'to structures' is where Jesus challenges the authorities who seek to stone a woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11). In the gospels Jesus systematically challenges the core approach of the teachers of the law and Pharisees (eg Matthew 23). Yet my study suggests little if any evidence of lobbying, campaigning or demonstrating against the structures that are enabling racial injustices in UK society.

(ii) *Pastoral care as empowerment.* An example of drawing out and building up unnoticed strengths and resources within and around people and communities can be found where Jesus identifies and calls 12 of the most unlikely individuals, and intentionally grows them as his disciples. We see them journeying with Jesus, observing as he teaches, heals *etc*, and then we see him releasing them to do the same.

My study suggests that some churches may not be intentionally drawing alongside the BME constituency, who may - potentially more than other individuals (due to the level of disadvantage experienced in wider society) - need opportunities to explore their true capability.

*(iii) Pastoral care as personal interaction.* Jesus had many healing encounters with individuals through word and/or deed – for example, the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4). The reader is struck by Jesus’ awareness of the woman’s need, as well as the way he does not look down on her difference. Instead he listens and offers alternative perspectives for her to reflect on how this might change her life and that of others. My study suggests that some churches may not be providing opportunities for congregation members (BME and non-BME) to be aware of and develop the skills needed (*eg* the ability to listen in a patient, sensitive, non-judgmental way) so that healing conversations around racial justice issues to take place.

*(iv) Pastoral care as ministry.* This caring might typically be associated with Jesus’ teaching at the synagogue, or his Sermon on the Mount, or the telling of parables to gathered crowds, or leading the Last Supper. These things might typically take the form in Baptist churches today of Sunday worship services. I want to use Pembroke’s idea that pastoral care in worship services can be regarded as having four theological themes: reconciliation, lament, hope and communion.<sup>7</sup> Pembroke acknowledges additional themes, but suggests these four cover any other pastoral concern you might care to name. I am inclined to agree with

Pembroke as I reflect on the gospel ministry of Jesus, although I would be keen to stress a link between liberation and hope that Pembroke does not clearly state.

**Reconciliation.** Worship services should include a focus on our need to be reconciled with God and neighbour - congregations being led in worship to a place of self-awareness of their sin. This process includes the use of 'Christ as a mirror', reflecting on how he affirmed ethnic identities and created the space for different cultures to be both celebrated and challenged. The process will also name our sinful tendencies to stay in the comfort zone and avoid challenging situations - balanced of course with reminders of God's accepting and affirming nature, so we are not left in an unhealthy state of feeling ashamed, inferior, or defective.

Research on BME disadvantage suggests that racial injustice is still very much at play in today's society. So it would be not be surprising if:

*Members of ethnic minority groups may internalize the prejudicial stereotypes of the dominant culture. They may come to condemn themselves as... 'ignorant' or 'lazy.' Even when a person begins to be successful according to the standards of the dominant majority, a lingering feeling of inferiority may plague her.<sup>8</sup>*

**Lament.** Worship should allow expressions of protest as a way of letting out the anger and frustration felt in the midst of suffering and distress - as evident in the protests in the Psalms (*eg* the strongly worded Psalm 44:11-12 and the more softly worded Psalm 27:9). At the same time, lament in worship will need to be balanced, for example, by pointing to God's saving grace through Jesus' death on the cross, and the divine solidarity in that God does not stand aloof from our pain and suffering.

Many of our multi-ethnic churches will have a history of racial injustice dating back to the arrival of current BME members in the 1950s and 1960s. Research suggests that racial injustice still occurs in the UK today. Consequently there may be a need to provide the space in worship for congregation members (BME and non-BME) to release anger and frustration. As Pembroke<sup>9</sup> argues:

*...there is more authenticity associated with bringing our total experience of life – peacefulness and anger, a sense of order and disorientation, God's presence and God's absence- than with offering up an edited version in which only the nice, 'acceptable' bits are included.*

**Hope.** Worship should also witness to hope through trusting in God, which will include recognising the good that can come out of suffering.

*It is not possible to find witnesses where there is no genuine experience of community. If we are to tell each other our stories of pain and confusion, we need a relatively high level of trust...The tasks of helping each other to nurture hope and of building community are indissolubly linked.<sup>10</sup>*

Part of this hope will involve re-reading biblical texts from particular ethnic and cultural perspectives, revealing that minority groups can and have overcome racial injustice. As Reddie<sup>11</sup> cites, this re-reading is necessary because of the dominance of Eurocentric philosophical thought in interpreting texts. Mullings<sup>12</sup> highlights the impact of re-reading from a black and minority group perspective by citing the Civil Rights Movement in 1960s America, from which the academic discipline of Black Theology emerged. This development was followed by the emergence of what Grant<sup>13</sup> calls Womanist Theology - re-reading biblical texts from a black woman's perspective, which highlights a combined experience of gender and racial injustice issues.



**Communion.** Embodying communion emphasises that the fullest expression of faith involves giving and receiving in community, as a contrast to the failure of self-giving and lack of concern for the common good which are the hallmarks of the individualistic western societies in which we live. This emphasis will need to be balanced by a theme that healthy communion will mean balancing love for others with proper love for self.

My study suggests that there are likely to be missed opportunities for racial justice issues to be addressed in worship services. The RJA and RJG need to work with Baptist Associations to support ministers in ensuring that churches create specific moments in Sunday worship to address racial justice issues (*eg* Racial Justice Sunday), and additionally to weave into regular Sunday services (through prayer, testimony, sermons, sacraments and reports) a greater awareness of justice issues. It may be that racial justice issues are addressed on a rotating monthly basis, so there are several opportunities throughout the course of the year.

It is also important that within Sunday services individuals have access to images, symbols, words and sounds which reflect their ethnic backgrounds and cultural heritage. This is first so that there are no barriers to worshipping God in a heartfelt way, and second to help everyone to develop intercultural consciousness.

To conclude, a model of pastoral care that takes ethnic identity seriously will have intercultural consciousness at its heart. Such a consciousness needs to be

cultivated in ministers as part of their initial and in-service formation. These ministers in turn need to enable this consciousness in the congregations they lead, which will entail working to a model of pastoral care (as ministry, social action, empowerment and personal interaction) that enables the whole congregation (BME and non-BME) to own the struggle for racial justice at personal and structural levels within the church and wider society, recognising we all potentially have a part to play in the achievement of racial equality and justice for all.

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### **Notes to text**

1. Further details of the study can be obtained by email from: [projectdevelopmentworker@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:projectdevelopmentworker@hotmail.co.uk).
2. M. Sturge, *Look what the Lord has done*. Scripture Union, 2005, pp 55-56.
3. See Merrick & Brady, *Race in Britain 2012: has life changed for ethnic minorities?* in *Independent on Sunday*, 8 January 2012, pp 1, 8-9.
4. E. I. Parker, *Teaching for colour consciousness* in R. C. Bailey (ed), *They were all together in one place? Toward minority biblical criticism*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009, pp 331-346.
5. E. Lartey, *In living color: an intercultural approach to pastoral care and counseling*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003, p 171.
6. L. Mullings, *Teaching black biblical studies in the UK: special issues for consideration and suggested hermeneutical approaches*, in *Disclosure Journal*, **8** (2), 2009, 81-126.
7. N. Pembroke, *Pastoral care in worship: liturgy and psychology in dialogue*. London: T&T Clark, 2010, pp 3-5.
8. Pembroke, *ibid*, p 27.
9. Pembroke, *ibid*, p 63.
10. Pembroke, *ibid*, p 101.
11. A. Reddie, *Working against the grain: re-imagining black theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. London: Equinox, 2008, p 50.
12. Mullings, *ibid*, p 81.
13. J. Grant, *White women's Christ and black women's Jesus*. OUP, 1989, p 200.

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