Faith and Society Files: An Analysis of a Multicultural Church

Research by Malcolm Patten to discover and analyse the issues that have arisen from seeking to develop a Baptist Church in London as a multicultural church and to consider the impact of such an emphasis on the congregation.

Summary of DMin thesis completed at Spurgeon's College, UK, 2011.
Malcolm Patten: malcolm.patten@virginmedia.com

An analysis of a multicultural church

The purpose of this research has been to discover and analyse the issues that have arisen from seeking to develop a Baptist Church in London as a multicultural church and to consider the impact of such an emphasis on the congregation.

1. Introduction

In 2002 I became Associate Minister at a Baptist Church in London alongside a friend with whom I had trained. We shared a common interest in the issues that arise in multicultural churches and determined, with the church's support, to work together to tackle these issues and explore what it meant to be a multicultural church.

For us at the time this was a response to two social and demographic factors. First, the church was multicultural in its make-up. There was already a mix of white British, black British, Caribbean, African and Asian people in the congregation. We noted that there were many churches in the vicinity which tended to attract people of a similar background; however our passion was to celebrate diversity.

The second factor was that the local community around the church was becoming increasingly diverse. This presented us with a mission imperative: becoming an increasingly multicultural church, whatever that would mean, may, we imagined, increase the scope of the local population that could call *this* church *their* spiritual home.

We found that there was very little attention given to multicultural churches amongst publications at the time. Much of what is available now in this area has been published in the last ten years. One book that influenced us greatly was *Breaking Down Walls,* written by Raleigh Washington and Glenn Kehrein, and published in 1993. In the book they tell the story of a church which they planted in Chicago, USA, with a clearly stated intention to be multicultural.[1] There were obviously contextual differences: Washington and Kehrein's congregation had a focus more on racial reconciliation between white Americans and black African-Americans whereas our context was more ethnically diverse; their congregation had *begun* as a multicultural church whereas we were working in a church with a 130-year history, most of which the church could be described as mono-cultural. We also recognised the cultural differences between the American setting and the British setting. However, with the paucity of resources available, despite the differences in context, we used this book as a template for the development of WCBC as a multicultural church. We adapted material from this book along the way and from 2004 I began this research project with the hope of generating research and insights relating to multicultural churches in the British context.

2. A description of the church

The church had an ethnically diverse congregation and was situated on a busy junction near a busy regional centre in the largest borough in Greater London. Around the time of the survey, there were approximately 200 members and the ethnic profile of the church was 44% white British, 35% black Caribbean, 15% black African, 5%

[1] R. Washington & G. Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993)

Asian and 1% mixed heritage.[2] The Diaconate, the senior leadership of the church totalling 10 members, was made up as follows: five were white British, three were black British of Caribbean origin, one was of mixed heritage (white British and Caribbean) and one was black British of West African origin. The church also hosted a Refugee Day Centre which was run by volunteers drawn from a number of different churches. The Refugee Day Centre, which regularly supported people from current war zones and places of famine and disaster around the world, featured significantly in church life and added to the general interest in the church on serving an international community.

3. Theoretical approach

There are various theoretical approaches that can be employed when conducting congregational research. I considered that a grounded theory approach would prove most useful. Grounded theory is an approach that does not begin with a pre-formed theory which it then tests, but rather investigates the way '…individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to a phenomenon'[3] (in this case the multicultural community), and then allows theoretical propositions to emerge. In this way theory is grounded in data from the field. Martyn Denscome notes that, "Because there is an emphasis on discovery and because there is a stress on the need to approach investigations without being blinkered by the concepts and theories of previous research, the grounded theory approach fits neatly with the needs of researchers who are setting out to explore new territory."[4]

One of the major issues in this research has been to establish an appropriate level of epistemological credibility. This is because the essence of the research is to consider how people of diverse, and sometimes complex, ethnic and cultural backgrounds understand, perceive and respond to the development of multicultural values within the church. It is also acknowledged that my *own* ethnic and cultural background bring bias and prejudice to the process of thinking, interviewing and reflection. The issue has been to establish what can be known to be true in the midst of so many perceptions and interpretations that people within the church have of one another, and of what is happening in everyday church life.

I considered then that the interpretive interactionist approach of Norman Denzin[5] would maximise the scope for multiple ethnic and cultural perspectives to be expressed and considered. Denzin describes interpretive interactionism as being existential, naturalistic and concerned with 'the social construction of gender, power, knowledge, history and emotion'.[6] He states his conclusions that 'in the world of human experience there is only interpretation' and that 'all interpretations are unfinished and inconclusive'.[7] Schwandt agrees with this, stating that: 'In this sense, philosophical hermeneutics….can be said to endorse the conclusion that there is never

[2] Based on analysis of 211 adults listed in Church Family Directory published January 2008.
[3] J.W. Creswell *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among five traditions* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998) p 56.
[4] M. Denscombe *The Good Research Guide* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003 [2nd edition]) p 113.
[5] N.K. Denzin *Interpretive Interactionism* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2001)
[6] Denzin, 2001, p 39.
[7] Denzin, 2001, p xii.

a finally correct interpretation….philosophical hermeneutics sees meaning not necessarily as constructed but as negotiated'.[8]

This fits well with this multicultural field of research, as multiculturalism itself assumes that each ethnicity is essentially of equal worth and value, and that to live well together requires a *negotiated* space. The interaction of individuals bringing their cultural perceptions and interpretations constantly generates new situations, actions and reactions and results in the writing of new texts of social behaviour.

4. The survey

A survey was carried out which formed the major part of the data for this research. Eighteen people were interviewed between 9th February and 19th March 2009 using a semi-structured interview style. The interviewees were selected in proportion to the ethnic profile of the church and sought to include leaders and non-leaders, those new to the church and those who had been in the church for a long period of time.[9]

Coming out of the survey four significant findings arose which will be discussed in this article: the change in worship style on Sundays, the increased diversity of the leadership, the awareness of prejudice and the attraction or 'buzz' which people felt was there.

4 a) The changes in worship style that developed. The survey showed that people perceived the worship style to be the most significant aspect of church life that had been shaped by the presence of people from different ethnic backgrounds, with two-thirds of those interviewed raising it as an issue. They described it as ….

I then explored further to try to determine to what extent the worship style may have changed because of the presence of people of different ethnic backgrounds and to what extent it may have developed as a consequence of factors outside the scope of this research. While interviewing I probed respondents further on this matter and found that they were able to articulate in various ways why they believed the worship style of the church had developed as a consequence of the multicultural context. One respondent said, "I think that our style of worship has changed a great deal and I think that's largely due to the multicultural congregation that we have now". Another said, "Where your open worship used to be people just saying prayers, people are now singing songs from their different cultures".

A male interviewee from a country in Africa was asked, "Is there a sense that people from the Caribbean, [or] people from Africa are… comfortable with more expressive ways of worship because there is more expressive worship in the places where they come from?" His response was, "Yes we are more expressive in our worship…we want to express, put everything into it, our whole being, our emotion, into the worship of God". Similarly a female interviewee from a Caribbean country said, "I think that it's mainly people from the Caribbean, African in particular, [where] obviously their style of worship, not in all churches in Africa or Jamaica or wherever, but a lot of them, are used to Pentecostal or Charismatic styles of worship and they have brought that to our church."

Clearly those interviewed believed that the worship style had significantly changed as a result of people from different ethnic backgrounds being present. What

[8] T.A. Schwandt, 'Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry' in N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (eds.) *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003) p302.
[9] Based on analysis of 211 adults listed in *Family Directory* (Croydon: WCBC, 2008).

also emerged from the survey was the impact that this had on the longstanding members of the congregation, primarily of a white English background. A Jamaican woman, felt that it also released the indigenous people of the church to become more expressive in their worship, as she went on to say, "…and I think it's allowed people to be just that more free, that bit more freer in their worship". This observation was also expressed by two white respondents. The first said,

> I think it's good because there's been people from the Afro-Caribbean background [who] have been more free in their worship, speaking in tongues, like [X] and [Y] and I think that's good and… that's shaped the church as well. And I think that's brought a release to people to be a bit more open in worship.

The second said, "I think more African [and] West Indian people are more open… not charismatic but more free to share… yes, more open. I think that helps English people to open up themselves a bit more".

It is worth noting that not only did the worship style change, but people have changed too as a result.

4 b) The development of an ethnically mixed leadership team.

It is important to say that the leadership team was not all white British before my colleague and I began intentionally seeking to develop the church multiculturally. However, it became increasingly diverse, and the importance of this became more readily appreciated.

Half of the respondents highlighted the development of a mixed leadership team as a noticeable change. Moreover, of the nine respondents who highlighted this aspect, five out of the seven white people interviewed noted it. In other words, a greater proportion of white British people than any other group observed the change in leadership. This seems to suggest that the shift in the balance of the leadership from white indigenous people towards a multicultural team had been noticed particularly by the host community. This need not be interpreted negatively. One white lady said, "We have quite a few in the deacons of a mixed culture which is good and it is good to see people from other cultures taking the lead".

However, if white people were more likely to notice the change in the make-up of the leadership, the survey seems to show that black people were more likely to notice the more welcoming environment and the increased opportunity to participate with specific contributions in worship: "We've involved other cultures in helping to lead our worship and help the congregation get a better understanding of different worship styles" said one black lady; a young Nigerian man observed, "Sometimes everyone is encouraged to bring their songs to the table. For example there was the African band, …singing in different languages, praying in different languages…".

This raises several questions: Is there a cultural difference in what is significant to different people from different backgrounds? In other words, are white British people more sensitive to the organisational structures and locus of power while those from African and Caribbean backgrounds are more sensitive to the welcome and worship? Or rather, does it reflect the different *contextual* needs of people rather than their *cultural* needs; in other words, are white people anxious about being taken over by black people and are black people wondering if they are accepted or welcomed here? Whether either is true, or elements of both, the issues of worship and leadership

in multicultural churches touch on an important aspect which needs further reflection, that of empowerment.

It becomes self-evident that for a multicultural church to continue to develop, the indigenous host community must sacrifice something of what is familiar to them to create the space for the other communities to express themselves, allowing diversity to emerge. This is true in all aspects of church life but particularly so in the church's expression of worship and in the development of its leadership. Eric Law develops what he describes as the "cycle of Gospel living in a multicultural community". [10]

The diagram he uses to illustrate this shows how those who hold power in a community must be prepared to give away such power to enable those who have no power to be empowered to participate fully in the community. Similarly, as those who gain power participate fully, they in turn must be prepared to give it away to others in a continual dynamic of mutual invitation to participate.

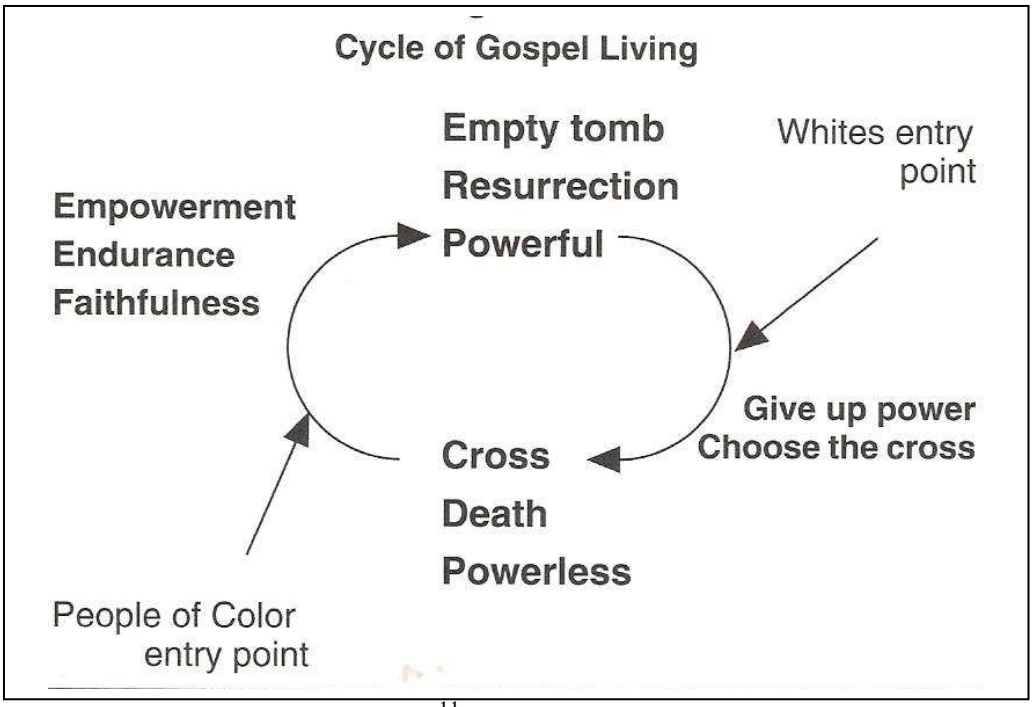

Diagram 1: Cycle of gospel living[11]

Although the diagram as shown assumes that white people will be those in the position of power, this may or may not be the case. The important thing is that whoever holds power, in this case regarding the dominant style of worship or dominance in leadership, must enter the cycle at the point of giving up power and choosing the way of the cross. In contrast, whoever is excluded or marginalised in the community, and may have endured with patience their position in the community, enters the cycle at the point of resurrection, reflecting the empowering of the Spirit to rise and take the lead. As can be seen, Law roots this cyclical dynamic in the death and resurrection of Christ, enabling him to describe it as a cycle of Gospel living.

[10] E.H.F. Law *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 1993) pp 73-74.
[11] Law, 1993, p 74.

This model proposed by Law helps to explain what has been happening at this church. The journey of empowerment had begun on the beach at Brighton when Nigerian members of the church were heard by members of the leadership singing traditional Nigerian songs. We liked what we heard and so began an intentional strategy of inviting members of differing ethnic backgrounds to lead the congregation in songs of worship which led to a cycle of empowerment in worship. This is something which began in a structured way, with appointed times scheduled, but led, as time went on, to a freedom to participate spontaneously in open times of worship. By creating planned times for this kind of cultural expression, the message was transmitted that this kind of expression was not only permissible in this church but was to be encouraged, thus paving the way for the spontaneous. Furthermore, as has been observed previously, the indigenous white people were enabled to appreciate the rightness of this and support it, and also become empowered themselves to express *themselves* more freely. In this way, a process becomes evident which begins with the deliberate actions of the leadership, facilitates the emergence of cultural expression, and results in a permissive space which transforms both the public act of worship and the worshipper. As it happened with regard to the worship, so it happened similarly with regard to empowering people for leadership.

4 c) The awareness of prejudice.

Cliques can and do develop in any church, but the research reveals that there was a particular concern over cliques developing along ethnic lines. One person expressed their anxiety, saying, "Still you do see little cliques of groups of white and little cliques of groups of black", and another, "There are times when certain cultures will group together because you will invariably go towards people who look similar to you, or people who speak similar to you or people from, for me, of West Indian heritage. And no matter what you do there will always be cliques".

The issue of cliques was felt most strongly by two white indigenous female respondents who struggled with the experience of finding themselves as outsiders, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Both of these women had grown up in areas of England where there were very few people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

> Personally I find it quite [a] cliquey…church, and sometimes as a white English lady I can feel quite isolated sometimes. I've been in situations where it's been predominately black and people have either spoken in a local dialect or say Jamaican patois and I'm thinking, my goodness me, I can't engage in this situation. And sometimes I feel slightly marginalised being white, because I can see everybody's black and I'm white and so I feel like a bit of an outsider sometimes. Even though it's an inclusive church I do feel a bit lost.

The other woman shared her experience of joining a group that met in another person's home:

> It's the first time that we've ever really been in a minority… I did feel perhaps a little bit pushed back maybe, and there are some points when an own tongue is used, a mother tongue is used between groups, and that kind of isolates you a little bit because you don't really know what's going on because you don't understand… So [it was] slightly isolating at certain times.

The sense of bewilderment and frustration that must inevitably arise in a multicultural environment was expressed by others too. One who worked with young people in the church observed:

> Just constantly being bewildered about what is going on or how anyone's going to react… the worst thing about, well the hardest thing I'd say about multicultural church, working with young people, is that you never feel like you've got a cohesive group or any activity or event that's entirely successful. Nothing ever works the way it would in a uni-cultural church.

Gordon Allport, an American social psychologist, developed what became known as "intergroup contact theory" in which he attempted to show that increased contact between people of different ethnic and cultural groups reduces prejudice. Given his context, in the United States in 1954, where debate over the integration of black and white people in schools and factories was still a contentious issue, this was a bold attempt to change the social climate of his time. Despite his work being over 50 years old, it is still quoted today in the field of social psychology.

Allport maintained that,

> Prejudice… may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups. [12]

In so doing he highlighted two factors that he thought were *essential*, and two factors that he thought would *enhance* the process. The two essential factors were "equal status contact! and "the pursuit of common goals". The two factors that would enhance the process were "institutional support" and "a perception of common interests and common humanity".

Thomas Pettigrew, writing in 1998, concurs with Allport's theory, but argues that the lowering of prejudice can only take place over time. He formulates a three-stage process which describes how the lowering of prejudice comes about: The first stage happens when you make contact with someone from a differing ethnic background to yourself, with whom you have a shared interest. This person may be untypical of your perception of the ethnic group to which they belong - this he describes as leading to liking without generalisation but it is intergroup contact nevertheless. The second stage happens when there is a growing awareness of the person's membership of the ethnic group which leads to a reduction in prejudice towards that group – what he calls generalisation is taking place. In the third stage a significant lowering of prejudice comes when the person is able to re-categorise both their stereotype of the other ethnic group and their perceptions of their own ethnic identity.[13]

---

[12] G.W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Basic Books, 1979 [25th Anniversary edition]) p 281.

[13] T.F. Pettigrew, 'Intergroup Contact Theory' *Annual Review of Psychology* 49 (1998) p 77.

Pettigrew envisages therefore that the process of lowering a person's prejudice over time involves an initial cross-cultural personal friendship, extending appreciation of that one person to the whole of their ethnic group, and a more favourable re-categorisation of the other ethnic group and the self-perception of their own.

It is not difficult to see that contact theory has an application within a multicultural church community and so I shall briefly evaluate each element in the light of our experience.

Equal status contact

The fact that at this church the Team Leader was black Caribbean and myself, the Associate Minister, was white British, was an indicator that this was a church which welcomed and valued people both black and white. However, institutional racism is a pervasive threat even in churches and therefore the empowerment of people from differing ethnic minorities for leadership roles is a key factor in the development of a multicultural church and is probably the most significant indicator of equal status within a church setting. The persistent drive to empower differing cultural expressions into the Sunday worship and the Diaconate again shows a commitment to be inclusive in all aspects of church life.

The pursuit of common goals

Allport states, "…contact must reach below the surface in order to be effective in altering prejudice. Only the type of contact that leads people to do things together is likely to result in changed attitudes".[14] He recognised that dialogue with no purpose had limited hope for success, but within a context where there were shared aims and goals then an environment was created where more meaningful engagement could take place.

At WCBC it became second nature when putting together a team to take responsibility for a particular project to ensure it included members of differing ethnic backgrounds. This helped to demonstrate equal status, ensured the resulting project was sensitive to different ethnic and cultural perspectives and provided opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue to take place within the sharing of time and lives together in pursuit of a common goal.

Institutional support

The issue of institutional support for multicultural integration is something that resonates strongly with our experience.

One person stated, "I think the leadership has encouraged that through sermons, through just talking about it, things that Rupert has said. I guess you've led from the front in that sense. Just little things like the notice in the bulletin saying that we're a multicultural church. I think that sort of helps to encourage it".

A perception of common interests and a common humanity

The survey showed that the process of learning new things about other people and their ethnic and cultural background was exciting for people. It seems that the significance of this can be understood two ways. First it is an exploration of a common humanity. Learning about each others' backgrounds is an exploration of

[14] Allport, 1979, p 276.

humanity itself, our similarities and our differences. It facilitates a lowering of prejudice in and of itself.

Second it represents an area where there is a significant benefit for the individual. The survey seems to show that developing a church multiculturally has a significant role to play in a person's personal development, both in terms of information about other cultures and in terms of the confidence and skill to interact with people from other cultures. Two examples demonstrate this well. The first is a response given to this question: "How important is it to you to develop friendships with people of a different ethnic background from your own?" A white British lady, replied, "it is important to me". When pressed on how she had benefited from these friendships she went on to say:

> It can challenge my own prejudices against groups of people…'cause I went to [X] University, I lived in a predominately Asian area which was like a slum. I used to think that Asian people were dirty, and that is a terrible thing to say, so it's been good to chat to people from an Asian background at church and get to know people and actually challenge those preconceived ideas.

It is worth noting her expression that "…it's been good to chat…" suggesting that she has enjoyed the interaction and the significant outcomes that have emerged.

The second example occurred in response to another question which asked how their perceptions of people of other ethnic backgrounds had changed. An African man said, "If I had any problem with approaching English people, [then] through that church it is so normal to me now, I can talk to anybody on the street, and the same to any African, Nigerian or to Asian or Indian, so it just make it so easy for me to approach any person."

Clearly a sense of *common* interest and *common* humanity ought to be present in any and every church, but what emerges here is that there is a *mutual* benefit in developing a church multiculturally because everyone can benefit personally from it. The distinction between the language of common interest which Allport uses and mutual benefit which is proposed here is to do with the extent to which it benefits the community as a whole (and thereby derivatively a benefit to "me"), or whether there is a benefit for "me" directly. It seems from the survey that one of the reasons people were open to the development of a multicultural church and became more enthusiastic about it as time went by was that they began to recognise the ways in which they were benefiting personally as a result.

Development over time

The final aspect of contact theory, and the aspect which Pettigrew added to Allport's theory, was that to lower prejudice there also needed to be time for people to move through the three stages outlined above. Pettigrew outlined the process which a person needs to undergo to lower their prejudice, but it was also evident from the survey that people can stall at certain stages. There is not space in this article to give these examples here or reflect further on this but it is worth mentioning at this point.

4 d) The 'buzz' that people experienced from being part of a multicultural church.

There were a number of responses which expressed enthusiasm for the church, and this because of its multicultural nature. Even allowing for the fact that in the interview

they were sharing their thoughts with one of the ministers, which may have tempered negative comments, it seems that this enthusiasm was genuine. Comments such as "It's exciting to be involved… in a place where everybody's welcome…", "This has been my best experience of church…" and "I enjoy the church…" reflect that enthusiasm.

However, as well as a general enthusiasm there were also indications that some who struggled with being in a multicultural church also expressed affection for it because it was a multicultural environment. In response to a question which asked "If you were looking for a new church to belong to this week, how important would it be to you to choose a multicultural church?" a white British man gave a response that suggested that to look for a multicultural church would be a low priority for him. However, in response to a final "catch-all" question which asked, "Is there anything else you would like to say?" he went on to reflect on his experience in this way:

> I really enjoy and I really do enjoy doing multicultural church and there's always something to talk about…I really enjoy being part of multicultural church – the challenges, the chicken is good… I really enjoy being part of multicultural church which sounds funny given that I wouldn't necessarily look for it in another church.

He then ended his interview by saying, "But maybe after I'd been at another church for a while that was uni-cultural, I might get very itchy feet and start asking a lot more questions given my experience [here]".

A younger white woman who had expressed that at times she felt "lost" among people of differing ethnic backgrounds, went on to respond to that same question in a similar vein: "I just think that it's really exciting to be involved in it… I think we find it quite exciting, quite a privilege to be involved in loads of different people's lives…".

An older white lady who had expressed frustration at what she believed to be cultural issues which manifested themselves in church life, made an aside in her response to an earlier question saying, "…if I go to a church in the countryside I miss, I very much miss the mixed culture. It feels cold and strained, as if something is missing".

The survey seems to reveal that there is a tangible 'buzz' that comes from being involved in a multicultural church. What it is, and what people are sensing, is the subject of our reflection at this point. Why does it create excitement and joy? Why does it make you feel like you will miss out without it? And why does it feel an important thing to be doing (building a multicultural church)? Here a tentative attempt is made to draw out some explanation of this by reflecting on this community as one that feels authentic, fosters personal growth, and is built collaboratively.

authentic community

Leonardo Boff sources the potential for unity and community from within the essence of God:

> Where is the unity of the Three found? In the communion between the three divine Persons. Communion means union with (*communio)*. There can be unity only between persons, because only persons are intrinsically open to others, exist with others and are one for one another. Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in community because of the communion between them. So under

> the name of God we should always see Tri-unity…In this way, both the identical unity of the divine nature itself and the oneness of the absolute Spirit itself have a Trinitarian meaning: the permanent interpenetration, the eternal co-relatedness, the self-surrender of each Person to the others…[15]

Titre Ande, in his reconstruction of authority and leadership in Africa, reflects on Boff's thinking, stating, "…communion implies intimacy, transparency of intention, and union of hearts…this is what Life-Community intends for personal and social well-being, and it comes only from bonds of communion between all parts".[16]

If Boff and Ande understand the nature of the Trinity correctly then there is adequate theological resource here to imagine that when people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds come together as one, then in a very real and tangible way they reflect the image of the divine, and the blessing of God is uninhibited. If in Eph. 4.30 Paul is right to point out that when there is disunity in the church (concerned here in terms of ethnic disunity) the Holy Spirit is grieved, then what blessing is there to be enjoyed when there is "comm-unity"?

Miroslav Volf also draws on the theological resource of the relatedness of the Trinity to develop the metaphor of "embrace" as a way of conceiving how strangers can overcome the separation that arises from oppression, prejudice and fear.[17] Volf writes,

> When the Trinity turns toward the world, the Son and the Spirit become…the two arms of God by which humanity was made and taken into God's embrace… That same love… seeks to make space 'in God' for humanity… Humanity is, however, not just the other of God, but the beloved other who has become an enemy… We, the others – we, the enemies – are embraced by the divine persons who love us with the same love with which they love each other and therefore make space for us within their own eternal embrace.[18]

Volf describes the metaphor of embrace as taking place in four steps. The first is the opening of the arms towards the other. This he describes as a sign of desire, of having created space in oneself for the other, and a gesture of invitation. In so doing he recognises that there is risk involved. Will the invitation be accepted or rejected?

The second step is what he describes as the waiting. Crucially Volf recognises that the other cannot be forced to embrace; to do so would be to violate the other.

The third step is the closing of the arms where each enters the space of the other and can feel the presence of the other in the self. 'In an embrace a host is a guest and a guest is a host'.[19] Volf recognises that this can be an unequal embrace but it must never turn into to a "bear-hug" where one smothers the other.

The fourth step is the opening of the arms again. Volf insists that the release again is necessary as recognition of the difference. In the embrace the two do not become one. Their identities do not merge as one, though they will inevitably be

---

[15] L. Boff *Trinity and Society* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1988) pp 4-5.
[16] T. Ande *Leadership & Authority, Bula Matari and Life-Community Ecclesiology in Congo* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2010) p 144.
[17] M. Volf *Exclusion & Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) pp 109-110.
[18] Volf, 1996, pp 128-129.
[19] Volf, 1996, p 143.

changed, even transformed, by the embrace. In releasing from the embrace, the arms are open again, in a renewed posture of invitation.[20]

The metaphor of embrace, therefore, becomes an appropriate metaphor if it helps to explain what was taking place. Reflecting on the four steps in embracing that Volf has described, its application becomes evident in two ways. On the one hand it can be interpreted as the church embracing the people of differing ethnic backgrounds that come to it. There has been no *tacit* acknowledgement of these new people but an *active*, purposeful reaching out of the arms to provide a welcome. They in turn may have hesitated, but then have responded and 'embraced' the church, even with all its imperfections, and have found a spiritual home. But in the embracing and releasing there has been not only recognition of their unity in Christ, but also respect of the ethnic distinctions; the two have not become one. The diversity between people is recognised within the unity and an acknowledgement is made that there remain spaces between one another which still need to be explored, and gaps which still need to be bridged.

If the first way Volf's metaphor can be applied happens when the church as an institution embraces new people, the second way is one-to-one within the congregation, when individuals embrace one another. People of differing ethnic backgrounds have opened arms to one another in mutual invitation. They have allowed desire to be aroused, not seeking to force one another to embrace. Signs of hesitancy have emerged too, where it has taken time for people to reciprocate fully. One white respondent shared how she was made welcome when joining a home group with people who were mainly of ethnic backgrounds different from her own. She said, "There can be sometimes uncertainty on how to do things, what's the way of doing things, not to offend anybody…". She went on to emphasise her concern not to offend another four times in that response. The arms have been opened, but there is hesitancy in the response even as the desire is aroused.

When embrace has happened they emerge having been transformed in the process. A black British woman observed how some cultures have brought into the church a literal approach to embracing which has in turn drawn people together:

> One of the things…that different cultures have brought into the church is their warmth and their openness to express their love for you and their warmth by hugs and things like that. Whereas before it was a bit of a no-go area… that's softened even the hardest of hearts… [X] [was] telling me that [Y], after the bowling…had said something to her and [X] said, 'I'd really like to invite her round but I don't think she'll come to my house'. I said, 'Why not?'…[X] saw a different side of [Y] and [Y] saw a different side of [X]… and it was really funny the sort of relationship that struck up out of that evening.[21]

Here the warmth of friendship, and an atmosphere of physical embrace, has led to a deeper embrace which has emotional and social implications. This outcome resonates with one of the recognised outcomes of contact theory, being that friendship between people of different ethnic backgrounds leads to the lowering of prejudice.

In the withdrawal from embracing, there has remained a recognition of one another's uniqueness: not an attempt to ignore ethnic distinctions but rather an appreciation of one another's distinctions. For some there may have been

---

[20] Volf, 1996, p 145.

[21] 'X' in this quote is a middle-aged black British woman of Caribbean origin, and 'Y' an older white British woman.

reconciliation and a healing of wounds, since many come with stories of racism and prejudice of different orders. However, for all who embrace there is a bridging of cultures, a deepening sense of being the people of God together, and a deepening sense of connection with the divine community that is the Trinity.

It seems reasonable to suggest that one of the reasons that a tangible "buzz" in the community emerges in the research is because of the many embraces, both physical and metaphorical, that have taken place in the community and that this authentically reflects the essence and image of the triune God.

increased potential for growth

In the response to a question which asked, "What feels good about being part of a multicultural church?" ten people described in some way the positive experience of engaging with people of different cultures. Again, in response to another question which asked, "How important is it to you to develop friendships with people of a different ethnic background from your own?", there was generally a positive response, with people having good experiences of getting to know better those who were different from themselves.

Some expressed very simply the joy of discovery, an African man saying, "I think it's good to reach out to other people because there's always something to learn", and a black woman, "There's just so much to learn, I'm a very curious person". A white woman stated, "I just find it really interesting to see people's viewpoints and understand where people are coming from".

Others expressed the learning experience in deeper terms. One African man explained how the openness of his relationships in the church was leading to a deeper understanding of different cultures:

> I relate very well with my white brothers… you know I feel so free and they feel so free with me… they will sometimes talk to me and say please, tell me, what's the right approach in this kind of situation because I don't have the cultural understanding, can you explain to me how this should be handled in a culturally sensitive manner.

These examples demonstrate the potential for multicultural churches to become beacons of learning within multicultural communities, modelling community life and teaching skills which can benefit the wider community as these members of the congregation return to their neighbourhoods and places of work.

One person recognised the benefit that such growth in understanding between people was having in building bridges across communities where longstanding animosities lie not far beneath the surface. In response to the question, "Has the way you think about people of ethnic backgrounds different from your own changed over the last six years?" she replied,

> In our church it probably has. I think it has gone a long way to helping.. I think especially the African – Jamaican divide. I think it has gone a long way to help that… I think it's just helped West Indians to be a little bit more open towards African culture and the way they are, their singing, their dress, the things they eat… I've heard things like, "Oh I didn't really know her, I didn't talk to her very much, but she's really nice, and she always comes and gives me a hug in the mornings when she comes into church".

This quote shows how a person can progress through Pettigrew's three stage process resulting in a lowering of prejudice between Africans and Jamaicans. Dialogue, something Allport advocated, occurring spontaneously within the sharing of the activities of the church, has led to a deeper respect and friendship between people of differing ethnic backgrounds.

The responses recorded above, relating to the growth people were experiencing, echoes the findings of Michael Emerson in his research in the USA. He quotes an Asian woman whose church had changed from being all Korean to becoming multicultural:

> I didn't want our church to change. I liked that it was Korean. It felt safe, comfortable. But despite my thoughts, it did change. I am so thankful, because I have changed, for the better… I didn't know what I was missing. I have so many new friends that I never would have had, and I see a God who is wider and higher and deeper and more powerful than I ever thought was possible.[22]

Emerson goes on to quote another person, a white male from a different church who describes the experience of being in a multicultural church as "experiencing God in such a bigger way".[23]

This resonates with Paul's vision for unity in Ephesians where he states, "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ…".[24] Paul was striving for unity between Jews and Gentiles (the nations) within the church. In this scripture he imagines the magnitude of Christ's love to be discovered "together with all the saints". Ernest Best comments, "Since we learn from other people, knowledge is generally communal; this is especially true of love whose nature can only be grasped through interaction with others. The true understanding of Christ's love is not then an individual experience but takes place in the community."[25]

A community that we build together

Jonathan Sacks, in his book *The Home We Build Together*, reflects on the significance of the building of the Tabernacle by the Israelites in the wilderness. He notes that the early part of the book of Exodus is all about "the politics of freedom". But he also notes that the last third of the book, "…is taken up with an apparently minor and irrelevant episode told and retold in exhaustive detail: the construction of the Tabernacle".[26] Sacks queries why the story of the building of the Tabernacle is told at such length and notes the linguistic parallels with the story of God's creation of the universe in Genesis. He goes on to assert that a nation does not just happen but has to be created: "In commanding Moses to get the people to make the Tabernacle, God was in effect saying: To turn a group of individuals into a covenantal nation, they must build something together".[27] He goes on to say,

---

[22] M.O. Emerson *People of the Dream, Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006) p 111.
[23] Emerson, 2006, p 111.
[24] Ephesians 3.17-18
[25] E. Best *Ephesians* ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) p 344.
[26] J. Sacks, *The Home We Build Together* (London: Continuum UK, 2007) p 136.
[27] Sacks, 2007, p 137.

> Society is the home, the Tabernacle, we build together. It was built out of difference and diversity. That too is the point of the narrative… The Tabernacle was built out of the differential contributions of the various groups and tribes. It represented orchestrated diversity, or in social terms, integration without assimilation. That is the dignity of difference. Because we are not the same, we each have something unique to contribute, something only we can give.[28]

The argument Sacks is developing is that society does not just exist by virtue of a group of people coming together. It has to be built, with everyone playing their part. But the building of it is what binds people together, giving them a shared sense of ownership, belonging, and a "place" to call home. Through the act of building something together we become integrated, attached, and rooted into that community.

Robert Banks, reflecting on the Greek term *koinonia*, notes that the word, translated in the NIV as "fellowship", is often taken to mean 'the sharing of people concerned directly with one another'. However, he states that it should be interpreted with the sense of "participation in some common object or activity",[29] Anthony Thistleton concurs with this, in his commentary on 1 Cor. 1.9, stating, "…the use of *fellowship* in church circles may convey an impression quite foreign to Paul's distinctive emphasis. He does not refer to a society or group of like-minded people…What believers share is not primarily one another's company; they are shareholders in Christ…"[30]

This sense of being shareholders in the church of Jesus Christ echoes the description of the Israelites in Exodus building the Tabernacle together. It seems then that it is in this building together that a sense of ownership, belonging and a sense of purpose is generated. An African member of the church described it saying: "…every Sunday is like a stone, every Sunday I go there, and you know you are building something, you are putting a stone over a stone. Yes, I think it's a beautiful thing, all churches should follow that", illustrating Zygmunt Bauman's point that "the most promising kind of unity is one which is *achieved,* and achieved daily anew…"[31]

My tentative attempt to locate the source of the 'buzz' in this church has proceeded to reflect on the nature of authentic community, the excitement that comes from learning new things and the sense of community that grows when we build something together. If I am correct in proposing that these three elements enhance a sense of joy in community, then this joy is heightened in a multicultural church. This is because, first, where relationships are more difficult to achieve there is greater joy when reconciliation occurs; second, if there is joy in discovering new things and encountering new people, then there is greater joy where there are more new things to learn and a greater variety of new people to encounter; third, if our sense of purpose increases when we build something together, then in a multicultural community the status quo is always being challenged and therefore you are always having to keep on building.

---

[28] Sacks, 2007, p 138.
[29] R. Banks *Paul's Idea of Community* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994) p 57.
[30] A.C. Thiselton *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000) p 104.
[31] Z. Bauman *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000) p 178, Bauman's italics.

Summary

To summarise briefly, there were four significant findings arising from the survey which I have reflected upon, first, the change in worship style and second, the change in the make-up of the leadership. Both these things raise the issue of empowerment in multicultural churches. I have reflected upon the nature of prejudice as it manifests itself and I have shown the usefulness of Allport's intergroup contact theory as a tool to lower prejudice. Finally I considered why people, even though they may not particularly enjoy being part of a multicultural church, spoke of how they would miss it if they were not part of it anymore. I tentatively suggested that this "buzz" that surrounds multicultural churches may be explained in terms of the nature of authentic Christian community, the joy that comes from learning new things, and the sense of purpose that comes from building community together. From my analysis of this church I conclude, therefore, that multicultural churches are biblical, desirable, achievable and beneficial.

Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist House, PO Box 44, 129 Broadway, Didcot OX11 8RT
Tel: 01235 517700 Email: faithandsociety@baptist.org.uk Website: www.baptist.org.uk
BUGB operates as a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) with registered Charity Number: 1181392

July 2013