

by Areni Sen

resource sheet 4

calling for all?

Encouraging vocations from minority ethnic communities

Race is certainly no longer the ugly sister that sometimes reared her head, but a major subject for engagement across the Church. The national vocations officer has described the need and desire to encourage minority ethnic candidates as 'one of our major concerns and emphases'.

The 1985 report *Faith in the City* brought the existence of racial discrimination and related social disadvantage to the Church's attention. It noted that there are: 'significant barriers to the effective participation and leadership of black people at all levels of church life, particularly in relation to ordained ministry'.

In recent years, following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, many dioceses have engaged in comprehensive reviews of their practices, thereby beginning to tackle institutional racism: for example, through encouraging ethnic monitoring, through including race as a fundamental part of clergy education, and through encouraging

minority ethnic participation in church structures (synods, PCCs, churchwardens).

A positive consequence has been a move to embolden more people from minority ethnic backgrounds to pursue vocations to ordained ministry. The Committee for Minority and Ethnic Anglican Concerns (CMEAC) gives as one of its aims: 'Seeking the development and empowerment of minority ethnic Anglicans, and in particular fostering and encouraging vocations within the Church.'

Some dioceses are further ahead than others. My experience has been to work only in a highly multicultural diocese, which has taken the issue of minority ethnic vocations very seriously – although there is still further to go.

As Britain has become more and more multicultural, there has been a sense that the Church needs to engage positively by celebrating diversity. Much has been reported on the blatant racism experienced

by those coming from the colonies to 'the mother church' in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact such lack of hospitality has not only led to hurt in many, but equally has been counterproductive for Anglicans, as manifested in the massive upsurge of thriving black-led churches.

Today the church is much better at celebrating diversity. PCCs are more representative of their communities. Cultural events in churches and 'bring and share' meals allow people to contribute something of their own culture.

Following the (General Synod) 1991 report *Seeds of Hope*, the Anglican church has begun to tackle some of the theological issues facing churches in a multicultural society. Notably, the report stated that 'racism cannot exist with the Holy Spirit either in the human heart or in the body of Christ (1 John 4:20)'.

If we are to live out being the body of Christ, all groups must be treated equally.

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Both the Old and New Testaments show God as being opposed to all forms of injustice and exploitation: historical phenomena such as slavery and colonisation have distorted encounters between different cultures. As a result black people often feel disempowered.

Certainly black/Asian people often do not come forward. The challenge to clergy and lay leaders is to draw out potential leaders from minority ethnic members of their churches and encourage them to consider vocations. Experience has shown that candidates may give up easily, so a level of commitment and dedication to the process from clergy and lay leaders will reap huge long-term rewards.

Practical issues

My experience of working with potential ordinands from black/Asian backgrounds, combined with wider research, persuades me that such candidates find the selection system highly intimidating.

Issues of institutional racism have not been fully addressed. The selection process, particularly the Bishops' Advisory Panel, is still essentially governed by a white, middle-class ethos. The Ministry Division of the Church of England has taken the issues seriously: candidates may now request an adviser from a minority ethnic background, but may still find themselves in a minority of one or two.

Candidates need specific support, to enable them to be prepared for the Panel. Parishes and DDOs can help, through organising mentoring, helping candidates articulate their views and setting up mock interviews.

Mentoring can assist tremendously, particularly if the mentor is a black clergyperson who has been through the system. The mentor can help the candidate reflect on experiences, and share their own experiences,

while helping the candidate grow in confidence. It is also helpful to have a mentor from a different culture, who will help and challenge the candidate to reflect theologically, and to contemplate the nature of ministry.

A black ministry division adviser gave me further insights into possible reasons why minority ethnic candidates do not do well at selection:

1. Lack of knowledge about church structures and of how churches run. Clergy can help candidates to gain deeper understanding of Anglican structures (e.g. sitting on PCCs, observing synods). It is essential to learn to reflect theologically on the breadth and depth of Anglicanism, visiting churches of divergent traditions, reflecting with clergy of all traditions. For example, a black woman candidate from an evangelical background was able to discover first-hand why some clergy may be opposed to the ordination of women. Even though she continued to disagree, she was able to see the issue more objectively and in theological terms.

2. Candidates may be seen as too reserved, and fail to participate in group exercises. The reasons may be cultural, but candidates need encouragement to gain in confidence. Candidates need to believe in themselves and be assured that their voices are as valid as those of others. In fact, coming from different cultures is enriching, and minority ethnic candidates have much to share and celebrate with others.

3. Candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds come from diverse educational backgrounds. Many are highly educated; there are equally those who, often because of social inequalities, have had unfavourable experiences of the educational system and may be put off by the prospect of theological study. If a vocation is

recognised, it needs to be fostered. People with fewer formal qualifications but who seem gifted should be encouraged to go forward. In such cases, one key task is to find out how the person learns; again, support is needed in this from DDOs etc., and there should be courses that are open to their way of learning. There is a variety of courses on offer now, from university-based to part-time where group learning is emphasised.

Dioceses can help through providing local lay education schemes. In my own area, there is 'Faith in Willesden', which gives lay people, particularly in Urban Priority Areas (UPAs), opportunities to grow in faith, theology and confidence. In fact, the course has led to people getting more involved in their churches, becoming accredited lay ministers, and then being led to ordained ministry. A candidate for ordination who was encouraged to undertake a certificate in a Christian studies course has grown greatly in confidence.

Conclusion

In a highly multicultural society, the Church needs leaders from minority ethnic backgrounds. They reflect the society we live in as well as providing positive role models to others, particularly young people who are becoming more and more de-churched in a post-modern society.

Minority ethnic voices should be heard. So, be encouraged, believe in your calling. And remember the call to persevere that is at the heart of the gospel (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Thanks to Caulene Herbert for her help; to Karen Greenidge and Alain Chandran for their inspirational journeys.

my journey to ordained ministry

Arani Sen's story

Crossing boundaries

I was born in England of Indian parents, making me first-generation British Asian. My parents, like many families who come to settle in the UK, live in a mix of cultures. In many ways they live a middle-class Western lifestyle, yet they retain many cultural practices from India, most notably food and religion – in their case, Hinduism. Being brought up in a British Asian context meant that I was constantly crossing boundaries.

I went to a church school, with daily chapel and compulsory Christian RE. I thus grew up with a good knowledge of Bible stories and enjoyed singing hymns. Yet, despite this, I was still a Hindu, and at home the influences were Hindu, not Christian. Crossing boundaries, both cultural and religious, were part of my everyday experience. Although difficult, this certainly has been formative for me: I find it relatively easy to mix with people from completely different backgrounds and cultures.

Dealing with racism

I grew up feeling different. Being a different colour made me feel very noticeable. It is certainly not an issue now, when I am proud to be British Asian. But childhood experiences of feeling different, compounded by levels of racism, both overt and covert, remain formative. The experience of racism is common to most black and Asian ordinands.

My Christian journey

By the time I was a teenager, I felt as much Christian as I did Hindu, although I had little understanding of the saving work of Jesus Christ. I went to university believing in God, but having no commitment and certainly no real faith. University friends patiently prayed for me and grappled with my questioning. One evening I suddenly came to realise that Jesus had died and risen for me. I felt his presence very powerfully, and my life was turned around.

I had a strong belief in living out Jesus' love, of standing with the poor, of experiencing God's justice in action. I began, with the Holy Spirit's help, to want to serve God 'full-time'. Of course, like many young, idealistic students I had to discern God's voice from what was my own idealism. The journey God has led me on has turned out to be very different from how I planned or foresaw things (Isaiah 55:8).

Step by step

A Careforce placement in an inner-city church gave me experience of God at work outside my comfort zone. I went to West Bromwich, full of the Holy Spirit and idealism, to a very tough, deprived, multicultural parish. At first it was a shock: grilled-up windows and cramped streets of Industrial Revolution housing – now without the industry – but soon I began to thrive and became very positive about all that God was doing and I got involved

in youth work. It was around the time of a Billy Graham campaign and many people were becoming Christians.

I lived in the vicarage and as the only 'staff' member I took on many roles of the curate, including visiting, even leading services. I was also trusted to preach, and found I had a gift for this. Part of my growth into ministry came through people giving me permission

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to try things, to let me make mistakes. Constructive criticism combined with a sense of affirmation built my confidence.

I began to sense a call to ordained ministry. I was nervous on my first visit to the DDO, but he was very affirming and supportive. After he prayed for me, and through the feedback I received, my calling became confirmed. My parents though were unhappy about my plans at this stage. Many of us may face conflict from families, although in general I have been fortunate.

School and beyond

I began my already planned teacher-training course. At the end of the

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year, I went to a selection conference which I found quite intimidating. I was not used to people from wide traditions at that stage. Looking back, I was young with little experience and was not adequately prepared. I found some candidates overbearing – some of whom didn't get through!

I was recommended, with a provision that I taught for two years to get more life experience and to gain a depth of understanding of wider spiritualities.

Two school years later the DDO wrote to ask where I was regarding ministry. At that stage I did not feel ready, having just got the hang of teaching! I continued as a teacher for a further nine years, though I knew that I would eventually go forward for ordination.

Worth the wait

God's call remained strong. His timing brought experiences that enriched me and prepared me for ministry. I began to gain insights into different spiritualities and spiritual traditions. I did some training with USPG and spent a year in India – which was a privilege. Nevertheless, throughout I remained attached to my evangelical charismatic roots.

I went to the DDO again. Second time around I enjoyed the experience much more and came out affirmed. After three enjoyable years at theological college, my call to inner-city ministry remained strong. I have served as a curate and as priest-in-charge in two London parishes, both very urban, multicultural and tough, but always very rewarding.

Further reading

Good Practice to Combat Institutional Racism, (Church House Publishing, 2001).

Called to Lead: A Challenge to Invite Minority Ethnic People, (CHP, 2000).

Called to Act Justly: A Challenge to Include minority Ethnic people in the life of the Church of England, (CHP, 2003).

CMEAC details can be found on the Church of England website:
www.cofe.anglican.org/info/cmeac

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