

LEAD ON

GOD HAS NO FAVOURITES

BY ALI TAYLOR

INTERCULTURAL CHURCH

The figures from the 2022 census make for interesting reading. They seem to indicate that if you are serving in a town or city, you are serving a multicultural community. It has always been like this; the UK has been conquered and has been the conqueror. We have always had people from different parts of the globe living here, but perhaps we haven't noticed. Our churches too have changed as different populations come and go.

Alpertown is a Hindu majority area of London, which is home to people from Eastern Europe, South Asia, the Caribbean and Ireland, as well as British people. Yet in such diverse contexts, often our church congregations don't reflect the communities we are part of. Instead they seem to represent the communities who have just left.

So how do we welcome the rich diversity of communities we serve to church in a way that is full of integrity and genuine welcome?

A GENUINE WELCOME

In Luke 7:43-46 Jesus gives us hints as to what a genuine welcome would have been for him. Water to wash his feet, a kiss in greeting and oil for his head. In welcome, the host's daily routine is changed. For a short while the host's attention and energy is not to be on himself but on his guest. The host's needs come second to the stranger's.

However, when the stranger's culture is different to ours, it is tempting to carry on with our normal welcome. This means we don't welcome in a way that is recognised by our guest, making it a futile exercise.

In most of Alpertown, people take their shoes off on entry

to a house. A house is clean and, in Hindu circles, holy, so people take shoes off out of respect.

When I explain that English people keep their shoes on out of respect, my neighbours are surprised. Why does keeping your shoes on show respect? (We know why even if we haven't really thought about it.) The weather is cold and damp, our feet have been in our shoes for some time, and they might be smelly. Best to keep your shoes on!

But our lack of attention to our neighbour's culture leads to misunderstanding: English people end up showing no respect when we visit our South Asian neighbours.

The question is, 'How do I take my attention off myself and onto my guest? How do I help my guest to feel honour in my home, my church?'

A RADICAL WELCOME

As a PCC, we have a policy that states that every culture is God-breathed. God speaks into every human experience and this is really important in the way we honour one another. As Peter states in Acts 10:34 'God has no favourites'.



No culture is perfect. We can see the western addiction to capitalism and understand that there are elements of the pervading culture that we nurture and those that we attempt to leave behind. The same is true of all cultures, whether they have a long established Church or not.

We create our own cultures by what we pay attention to and what we leave aside. This responsibility lies with all of us, and particularly affects our welcome. The inherited church welcome says 'Come in, we will show you how we do things.' A radical welcome would be 'Come in, what can I do to make you feel at home?'

You might wonder why this is important. At a PCC a few years back we were asking the question, 'What do you do at home that you don't do at church?' A lady with Jamaican heritage said 'Every week I just leave a bit of myself at home in order to fit in'. As a church we are not welcoming all of her. The problem however goes beyond the welcome.

FROM WELCOME TO JOURNEYING

I wonder where you are from, how far back in your family tree you go before you find someone who moved, it might be simply down the road, or to the nearest town, or across the globe. My guess is that you don't have to go back too far. It turns out that we are all travelers after all, especially in the UK.

I am on my own journey through life. I follow the God who walks beside me, by fire and cloud, same as you. The stories of Peter and Cornelius and Philip and the Eunuch show us times when Jews and Gentiles travelled together and Gentiles showed the way. All of a sudden my automatic assumption I should be host in God's Church is challenged. He is host, I am a fellow traveler. We travel together. You can show me what God has done in your life and I might find that I know him more



through your story. And I share my story and perhaps you will know God better too.

In an intercultural church this is the shift that is necessary. It is about power. An intercultural church goes beyond host and guest to fellow traveler. I do not give up my space and power for you, I recognise that you have the very same rights and power as I do, that neither of us is first. The quest is changed. It is no longer how can I make you feel at home here, it is more how do we make home together, where you can be all of you, and I can be all of me, and together we can know more of Christ. Travelling together takes the emphasis off of the building and onto Jesus, where all our journeys end.

This is a really tricky transition to make and one that is at the heart of intercultural church.

Of course our human nature is that we feel safer when we are with people who are like us, and it is important to St. James that we have space for that, but it is not the centre of what we do anymore. When we only meet and mix with people like us we can miss out on aspects of God's love that other cultures see. We sacrifice the kingdom of God as seen in Revelation 7:9, and at Pentecost, for our greater comfort.



SOME IDEAS

So how do we go about creating churches where we follow Jesus together? Here are a few ideas.

- Your PCC must represent your church and parish. It is time to choose people you hadn't thought of before.
- We have simplified the language used at PCC meetings, checking ourselves for jargon. In discussions we chat together in pairs before feeding back, because some cultures will struggle to tell you something they perceive as negative. However, if they voice a preference to someone else one-to-one it can be brought to the meeting that way.
- When looking for something to be done 'well', be prepared for it to be done completely differently.
- We had a curate who wanted people to say phrases with him when he preached. It was a way of emphasising specific words. I didn't understand what he was doing, I was looking for the markers I thought were important in a 'good' preach. Then we saw a preacher from a similar context as our curate. He preached wonderfully prophetically to us, and used all the same motifs and devices as our curate. Our curate is an accomplished preacher, we just didn't appreciate it.



- Make space and time for people to do things together. A 'bring and share' meal has often meant bringing and eating your own food in the presence of others while they eat theirs. We have sought to change this by cooking together, then eating together. We crochet together, clean the church together and sing together.
- Our intercessions are done by congregation members, each in their own language. We say the Lord's prayer in our heart language, and share the peace in sign language.
- We sing each other's songs, the first time in the original language and then each line translated into another language. This has been especially effective at helping people feel at home and honoured. As someone mentioned, 'I heard everyone singing my language, but I couldn't sing because I was crying, I am so happy.'

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



- Where have you been on your journey, and who has shaped your experience. Are there voices there of those who are not like you?
- How does this way of being church speak to themes of social justice?
- Are there people groups local to the church that have not yet been reached? How can we journey with them?