Samosa and Black Beans
Mission, Culture and Ethnicity in West London

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It is Sunday Evening and I am at an engagement party, with an absent groom, at Southall Baptist Church. All of a sudden, my daughter starts to dance the *Aquarela Brasileira*, a famous Brazilian tune, set to Pakistani dance music! That the global church has hit us big time is illustrated not only in this curious cultural mix, but in the specific rituals of a Pakistani ceremony, being replicated in a British church.

In this article, rather than engage in academic reflection, we will seek to simply raise some of the issues that emerge from engaging in mission in the cultural melting pot that is West London.

**Church in the Diaspora: The Southall Experiment**

Talk concerning a “new Christendom” is no novelty. If at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century the “average” Christian was White, Western, ‘traditional’ and middle-class, at the turn of the 20th to the 21st century the average Christian is black, or Asian, Pentecostal and economically poor.

What may be more surprising is the way that this reality is no longer something out there in Asia or in Africa but has now hit the shores of Europe itself. Thriving churches are often those with a strong immigrant presence. As thousands flock to Kingsway International Christian Centre, more historical denominations struggle to adapt. At the inaugural Redcliffe Lectures in World Christianity Dr. Andrew Walls envisaged a future where Europeans would hear the gospel for the first time from the mouths of Ghanaian missionaries. If it has not already arrived that future is not far off.

At Southall Baptist Church this is something which is experienced firsthand. There are over 20 churches of different ethnic backgrounds which are linked with SBC. Many of them are Brazilian, benefiting from the fact that the senior pastor of the church, Boyd Williams, is a former missionary in Brazil. Nonetheless, there are also various churches from African, Sri Lankan, Kachin and Russian backgrounds. Ecclesiologically, these churches range from different styles of Baptists to African Pentecostal churches, so that one has the situation that Pentecostal Bishops find themselves under the leadership of a Baptist Pastor!

**Being Church in the Diaspora: The Challenges**

**A Post-Christian Culture**

For many, the first great challenge is that of engaging with a post-Christian culture. Whereas many Christians from Latin America arrive with a prior knowledge of the state of the church in Europe, this is often a shock for Christians from Africa and Asia who may still arrive in the UK expecting to come to a Christian culture. It says something for the supposed tolerance of British society when some Indian Christians even went as far as to claim that they experienced greater religious freedom in their own country.
Hence, one of the first stages of being church in the Diaspora is often survival, enabling Christian faith to survive in an unfamiliar secularised context.

Where can we meet?

A pressing need of Diaspora churches is a place to meet. In London alone there are hundreds of Christian fellowships without a permanent home.

Some might claim that this is not a problem. The way ahead could be to organise the church around cells and home groups. Theological issues aside, this ignores the fact that for many Diaspora Christians the concept of a “home” is very distant. Very few have the luxury of being able to rent their own home, let alone own one. Rather, they share rooms and homes with many different people from many different backgrounds, Christian and non-Christian, making the concept of a “home” group much more complex.

What is most depressing is the attitude of many established “British” churches to this problem. Often these churches have unused premises and yet either deny access to their fellow Christians from other nations, or charge high, market-value rent. So many pounds an hour and if the Holy Spirit moves and the church service goes on for longer, overtime will be added. One cannot help but feel that there are established churches bankrolling their failure by exploiting their brothers and sisters in Christ who are more committed than they are.

The Home Office: The ever-present power

If one was to use the language popularised by Walter Wink, one could describe the Home Office as the ever present (fallen?) power in the lives of Diaspora Christians. On the whole it determines where they can live, how many hours they can work, the rights they are entitled to and those they are denied. It also means that many Diaspora Churches become churches in constant motion, whose members are in transit, rarely permanently committed.

It also raises an ethical question which is rarely the case for most British churches. How does one respond to Christians who are illegally in the country? Should they be allowed to be church members? Can they be members and not leaders? Is it right for a pastor to encourage his members to work and contribute financially to the church, if by doing so they will be breaking the law?

How does one begin to articulate an answer to these questions? Answers on a postcard please!

Mission in the Diaspora:

Mission to the Diaspora: The Homogeneous Unit Principle

In the pristine environment of academic studies, it was once easy to be radically against the Homogeneous Unit Principle popularised by McGavran, not least because it was endorsed by Peter Wagner! Church planting in Brazil encouraged this perception, as I saw the HUP being used to exclude the poor from richer churches and allow the veiled racism of Brazilian society to remain in churches.

Relating with Diaspora Christians one becomes less certain. Going to a meeting of the Kachin Fellowship in our church, a group hated and despised by their own government,
marginalised within British society as unwanted immigrants, one can see how important their language, their customs, dress and culture are for their self identity. Should all this be sacrificed?

Maybe a more nuanced position is that articulated by a visiting lecturer from my Redcliffe student days, Tim Chester:

“Homogeneous churches of a socially powerful group are wrong - the church should be a reconciled community that includes all, especially the socially marginalised. But planting churches targeted at marginalised groups is legitimate in order to prevent that social marginalisation being replicated within the church. If there were a ‘level playing field’ the socially dominant culture would also dominate in the church.”

**Mission by the Diaspora: The demons are very different around here!**

In an attempt to pursue a healthier approach, at Southall Baptist Church those churches associated with us are encouraged to build towards reaching beyond their own culture to the various London cultures that surround them. If one was to think in terms of Ralph Winter’s typology, some success has been achieved in E-2 evangelism, that is reaching out to people from a different, and yet similar culture. Hence, there are many stories of Portuguese and Angolans being baptized into mainly Brazilian fellowships, facilitated by sharing a common language, Portuguese. However, what has been known as E-3 evangelism, engaging with people from a completely different culture, is much more difficult. Although there are some striking stories (e.g. a Pakistani family joining a Brazilian fellowship) progress has been difficult, especially in relating to those from a White, European background. After all, how can one sing the Lord’s songs in a strange land and a strange tongue?

The key issue is the extent to which Diaspora Christians can move beyond their natural concern for survival towards learning to relate to the culture(s) which surround them. Even those concerned for the spiritual welfare of the UK struggle when tried and tested methods in their homeland do not have success. Hence, I discover myself having long conversations with church leaders from other cultures seeking to help them understand the weirdness of (post)modern Western society. There are Brazilians wishing to comprehend why an offer for prayer, which in their country would be received with gratitude in almost any household irrespective of religion, may be seen as offensive. Or a Peruvian lady, perplexed at why, in the “liberal” Anglican Church she attends, the name of Jesus is rarely mentioned.

As some of the more spiritual warfare inclined tend to remark, “the demons are very different around here”.

**Conclusion**

If you read this article hoping for some answers on the issue of Mission and Diaspora, you are likely to be feeling disappointed. Maybe, there are no answers, no Diaspora Driven Church Manual™ that can be applied in 5 simple steps (thus, ending my fledging career as an airport hopping consultant). Instead, merely stories, joys, problems and questions as we seek to follow God in being faithful in an ever-changing world.
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