



# Transmitting faith

## Black and minority ethnic churches and the Millennial generation



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The UK has had a rich history of black and minority ethnic (BME) church congregations and their growth has been something of a talking point in recent research. However, our interest in this article is in gaining an insight into the ways in which the BME church in the UK communicates the gospel to its Millennial generation. We will explore how those born between 1981 and 2000 are disciplined and nurtured, specifically looking at the intergenerational transmission of faith and practice, and its implications for Millennials today.

There are a number of BME churches in the UK who are making a concerted effort to tailor programs and resources to their 20–30 year olds as intentionality is vital to their retention and flourishing. This action exists against the backdrop of large swathes of Millennials leaving the church because they deem it to be irrelevant, backwards or resistant to change. In 2016 the Evangelical Alliance commissioned a report called *Building Tomorrow's Church Today*<sup>1</sup> with the aim of recording and observing the views and experiences of young adults in the UK church. They were particularly interested in the variances between Millennials from BME churches and white majority churches. Things like financial giving, Bible reading and belief in the inerrancy of Scripture were higher in BMEs. An insight into the BME church may uncover some of the reasons as to why this is the case.

When we consider the BME church in Britain, it is important to recognise its diversity as it encompasses many different traditions, theological positions and cultural expressions. It is by no means

homogenous and therefore although we will see an element of commonality in the perspectives of 20–30s, there are also clear differences as each church background and community has its own story, history and narrative.<sup>2</sup>

### Communicating the gospel to Millennials in the BME church

Hearing the perspectives of Ayo – a minister in training at a predominantly West African church in Greenwich, South London called CLF<sup>3</sup> – helped me understand how the gospel is communicated to Millennials. In his late teens and early twenties, Ayo's experience of church and the communication of the gospel was very much associated with what he called 'encounter meetings'. As part of the Pentecostal tradition, for him the emphasis was on experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of God. The gospel was not always the focal point of such meetings so he did go on a journey of discovering faith. A journey of questioning with the hope of finding out who God was, what that meant for his life and how his life would change as a result. Since coming to CLF, he has found that the message of Jesus is very much the focus and his peers benefit from a good balance between word and spirit. There is an emphasis on topical preaching which is not necessarily contextualised for young adults, but as they are considered as adults in their own right, they are 'fed' in much the same way as the rest of the congregation.

It was interesting to note from speaking to black Christians from a variety of BME church

backgrounds, that there seemed to be a gap between the youth and the adults which encompassed the 20–30s, although they were seen as adults. There are some BME churches that have successfully engaged their 20–30s in a way that meets their unique needs, but on the whole that gap still needs to be filled by the majority. One church in London, run by Pastor Kunlé Oyedeji, seems to be engaging Millennials in a new way. His congregation, which has an average age of 30, receives contextualised gospel communication which is relevant but not diluted. The tenets of the gospel are shared and sermon lengths are significantly shorter than they are in traditional black churches. There is often time at the end of the sermon to ask questions and discuss the message in groups of three or four. The language is accessible and examples used are down to earth and relevant to the congregation. The vision of the church is to live significant lives through relationship with Jesus Christ, connect with others and contribute to society.<sup>4</sup> This sense of vision and mission give a sense of identity.

## Discipleship and nurturing

To get an insight into how Millennials are discipled and nurtured in BME churches, I had a conversation with another leader, Hurraine, who comes from a predominantly Caribbean Pentecostal church in Croydon. His experience of church and discipleship involved a rigorous exhortation to a life of prayer, study of the Bible, fasting and attending church and prayer meetings. His reflections on the environment that allowed for effective discipleship and nurturing resonates with many black Millennials who are either in BME churches, have moved to other church settings or have even left the church altogether. The overwhelming consensus was that discipleship was a key component of the black church and foundational to its functioning and sense of community and faith. However, it is important for us to clarify what we mean when talking about discipleship, especially as we are dealing with cross-generational communication. The great commission gives us the biblical framework for making disciples. In Matthew 28.19–20 we understand that the process of disciple-making involved an inauguration of sorts.<sup>5</sup> An immersing into the life of the Godhead which resulted in the constitution of a new identity – one which is born from the rescue mission of God and sealed by the taking on of a new name – child of God. But it does not stop there. It continues as the new believer who is a student, pupil and learner is taught to obey the teachings of Christ. From that understanding, there is a clear differentiation between a churchgoer, someone who just believes in God and a disciple.

Although Hurraine liked the level of accountability, he often found church quite restrictive. One challenge for him, which was by no means unique, was the cultural-heavy approach to both respecting his seniors and still being seen as a child despite

being in his late 20s. This disconnect between being an adult in general society but being treated as a child in church was deeply problematic, and for him, it meant that his ideas, plans and goals of making aspects of church life more relevant to Millennials often fell on deaf ears. Being caught in a chasm between youth and adulthood was a precarious

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place to be and went in the face of affirming a sense of identity which is so crucial – especially for a young black man. It became evident that what he was encountering was a situation where he was receiving the practical activities that disciples are called to undertake – the spiritual disciplines that were necessary for the life of faith and following Christ, but ‘teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you’ (Matthew 28.20) delivered little more than the ingredients necessary for the life of a disciple.

The recipe for success was shrouded in a veil of mystery. Swept into the ether of intergenerational aperture. Fanciful as it may sound, this was a real and prevalent phenomena. The rhetoric of scriptures such as ‘there is a balm in Gilead’ was often used when someone was in need of healing or a situation was complex and hurt was present, but its origins date back to the African American spirituals. The song with this title provided an oppressed people with a way to cope with impending violence, which was often physical, social and economic but also had huge physiological impact. The collective unity of a body of people supporting, encouraging and singing, bolstered ideas of self-worth as closeness to each other and closeness to God strengthened the mind, body and soul.<sup>6</sup> Of course, in the biblical narrative the prophet Jeremiah is crying out to God because of Israel’s dire situation due to them turning from God – their ‘perpetual backsliding’ the word says (Jeremiah 8.5). ‘Sickness is all around them (Jeremiah 8.22) and there is no peace. The evident feeling of helplessness comes across strongly as God pronounces judgment. In the inverse, the spirituals reflected a time when many black people felt just like the people of Israel. Worn down, destitute and consigned to a perilous struggle, but their hope fuelled creative imagination and ultimately faith in Jesus, the ultimate balm. Jeremiah’s plea became a robust God-confidence in the spirituals. Of course, most Millennials may not have understood either the biblical interpretations or the reinterpretations from the spirituals and therefore like many passages often quoted to the ‘youth’ in the black church, they lacked translation and only a partial message was communicated even though the motives were good.

## NOTES

1. You can access the full report at <https://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/media/press-releases/giving-mentorship-and-finding-a-spouse-are-key-concerns-for-christian-young-adults-reveals-new-report.cfm>
2. P Thompson, *Challenges of Black Pentecostal Leadership in the Twenty-First Century* (London: SPCK, 2013).
3. CLF Greenwich’s website can be found at <https://www.clfgreenwich.org>
4. Cornerstone Church’s website can be found at <http://thecornerstonechurch.com>
5. Scripture references are from the ESV version Matthew 28.19–20.
6. C Ellison, M Musick and A Henderson, ‘Balm in Gilead: Racism, Religious Involvement, and Psychological Distress Among African-American Adults’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47.2 (2008), pp. 291–309.
7. M Emerson, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
8. You can access material and media at <http://www.jendella.co.uk/2018/02/black-christian-confused/>
9. You can access material and media at <https://www.premiergospel.org.uk/Woke-and-Christian>

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10. R Beckford, *Jesus is Dread* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998).

11. You can access an article about them at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-black-hebrew-israelites/>

12. You can access full report at <http://ncf.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Black-Church-Political-Mobilisation-FINAL-WEB-Apr15.pdf>

13. Ibid.

To say that is the sum total of the ways in which discipleship takes place in BME churches would be disingenuous, especially as discipleship is routinely understood by members of the church as foundational. Minister Ayo from CLF is a recipient of solid and intentional discipleship and nurturing. Structured programs such as Bible courses and cell groups provide an orientation into the Bible and way of life as a disciple. Although these structured approaches are not age specific, there is something about black church culture and the way in which people are referred to as brother, sister, uncle

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or aunty that communicates a strong sense of family. Rather than merely a hierarchical structure, what is often felt a sense of community, inclusion and safety and such an environment bodes well for intergenerational engagement, structured discipleship and discipleship by proxy.

### The intergenerational transmission of faith

One of the biggest shifts the BME church is encountering is the increase in black consciousness of Millennials. The history of Christianity and its involvement in slavery has been a particular sticking point as many black Christians attempt to reconcile their Christian faith and the history of the church.<sup>7</sup> There have been a number of conversations on various social media platforms and organised discussions which seek to address the question of whether Christianity is a 'White man's religion',<sup>8</sup> and many of those who are socially conscious or 'woke' have actually left church altogether.<sup>9</sup> Those who remain in church have criticised the black church for only engaging in social action and not social justice. There is a rise in demand for a politicising of the gospel to include a social dimension that will usher in the Kingdom of God in a way that challenges dominant power structures of oppression, especially for black people in Britain and globally.

This is not a new phenomenon as black theologians such as Robert Beckford have long been campaigning for the black church to become socially conscious and regain a prophetic voice, and theological framework that is interested in holistic liberation in this world as part of God's redemptive work – a political theology.<sup>10</sup> With the lack of engagement from black churches in this conversation, we are witnessing a mass exodus from the black church among Millennials and there has also been a rise in converts to Islam and the Hebrew Israelites – a socially conscious religious sect.<sup>11</sup> The launch of the *Black Church*

*Political Mobilisation* manifesto in 2015 by the National Church Leaders Forum (NCLF),<sup>12</sup> which involved many key leaders of BME churches in the UK was the first of its kind. It called the black church to mobilise and tackle the socio-political issues in our society and re-evangelise a Britain in which Christianity and church attendance is declining. Such focus and intentionality is unprecedented, and although the black church has long been involved in activities such as prison ministry, homeless initiatives, youth crime and gang involvement work, to name but a few things, this coordinated approach of seeing political engagement as 'a mandatory part of the Christian faith', can only be of benefit to a Millennial generation who want to see change.<sup>13</sup>

Again, when we consider the intergenerational transmission of faith and practice, there is no doubt that the apostolic teaching from Titus 2 about older men and women teaching younger men and women is widely understood. The passing on of a legacy and key understandings of what it means to be a godly man or woman were handed down but, of course, there have been translation challenges. More modern BME churches, like Cornerstone, who do not have a significant older contingent, definitely have the remnant of the 'old school' faith: a life devoted to the Scriptures, service to others, prayer and fasting remain of high importance, and the visuals and use of social media help to bring things into the twenty-first century. Organisations like street pastors, which was founded by Reverend Les Issac OBE, have seen some of those in their 20–30s begin to engage and take to the streets to care for, listen and dialogue with those in urban areas usually during unsociable hours. Such initiatives provide Millennials with an outlet for their faith, and the generosity and willingness to serve is definitely a trait of the older generation that was handed down.

### Conclusion

There seem to be growth spurts coming from black leaders who have grown up in the BME church but are able to communicate to their own generation in new ways using social media platforms to engage in ministering to the Millennial generation. Ayo, Susan Deborah and Ify Alexis, to name a few, are black leaders who were steeped in the black church tradition but are tech savvy, socially aware and have a desire to gather and build communities of faith that operate outside of the church walls, despite still being very much connected to a body of believers.

The question remains as to whether the evolution of the black church will be birthed from young black leaders who have taken the genuine community, intimacy and fire for God from their black church traditions and reinvented and reimagined the forms and outworking of the gospel in contemporary ways.