

# Creating space for diversity within church communities



## Chigor Chike

Rev Canon Dr Chigor Chike has worked in the area ethnic diversity and inclusion and written about this issue for the past 25 years, including recently as the National Adviser Minority Ethnic Anglican Concerns in the Church of England.

Many churches are now rightly concerned about whether they have done enough to promote an environment where people of every ethnicity will feel welcome. There are at least two reasons for this, looking at the issue from a Christian point of view: first, as a matter of justice, nobody should be hindered from making a contribution in a group because of their ethnicity; and, second, there is evidence to show that a group benefits when it enables people who operate from a variety of perspectives (such as people of different ethnicity who through life experiences have different cultures and social formation) to contribute. In Christian parlance this means that there is a benefit to the Church's mission.

## Promoting diversity

In Genesis 1 we read about God taking his time to create many different things. There was biodiversity in Eden. God then sat back (in a manner of speaking) and saw that all he had made was good (Genesis 1.31).

In the natural world, biodiversity is a key indicator of the health of an ecosystem and the natural beauty we observe with our own eyes is often related to the presence of a wide range of colours and species. The human race benefits from a larger, more diverse gene pool as we are better able to withstand disease and other environmental stresses, which constitutes a healthier path and future for us.

So, diversity is a good thing and this conviction must be our starting point if we are to confront and fight racism within the Church.

Recently, I was involved, with six other people, in a research project here in the UK that looked at a number of churches which have addressed the issue of diversity and are growing numerically. We started with eight churches from across the country and finished studying two of them in great detail. It was evident that all of the churches we studied had leaders who had a positive view of diversity and set out to put it into practice in their church, sometimes in very practical ways.

For example, all the churches had leadership teams that were ethnically diverse. One of the churches had a leadership team of two black people and two white people. The overall leader, a black man, told us that this was not accidental. He had worked hard over many years to ensure that he developed leaders from different ethnicities so that the leadership team would be so constituted. In general, we found that there was a clear determination in the churches we studied to ensure that, in both appearance and the sharing of authority, those involved reflected the ethnic diversity of their congregation and the wider community.

Some of the churches were deliberate about ensuring that there was ethnic diversity among those leading Sunday worship. Some celebrated the national days of various countries based on the countries of origin of the members of the congregation. Such practices give people the sense that they are valued for who they are.

So, how do we create space for diversity within in our church communities? What practical steps can we take?

## Confronting racism

The first thing we must do is confront racism. Creating space for diversity involves challenging those things that hinder us. Over many centuries people classified as white have come to believe that they are superior to people of other ethnicities and, in some variations of that belief, that they have been chosen by God to be leaders. When people start with that belief, what follows is quite logical. If one believes that God has created a racial hierarchy, that certain ethnic groups are superior to others and are meant to be the leaders of humankind, then allowing other ethnic groups to lead amounts to a dereliction of this God-given responsibility. For this reason, it is possible that Christianity has supported and consolidated racism rather than confronting and eradicating it. Two examples help convey this point.

First, writing in the 1700s, the Black abolitionist, Ottobah Cutgoano, who was originally from Ghana but was at the time living in London, made this observation about Britain as a Christian country that engages in slavery and the slave trade:

In a Christian era, in a land where Christianity is planted, where every one might expect to behold the flourishing growth of every virtue, extending their harmonious branches with universal philanthropy wherever they came; but, on the contrary, almost nothing else is to be seen abroad but the bramble of ruffians, barbarians and slaveholders, grown up to a powerful luxuriance in wickedness.<sup>1</sup>

A similar observation was made by Fredrick Douglass in our second example. Douglass was a nineteenth-century Black American abolitionist. He was flummoxed to see that Christian slave owners were often the most wicked people. He mentioned one couple who would piously prayed to God every morning, but would rather let the food in their house go bad than give it to their starving slaves. For this and other acts of wickedness Douglass stated:

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes – a justifier of the most appalling barbarity – a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds – and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection.<sup>2</sup>

So any church leader wishing to create space for diversity has to be courageous in challenging the racism within their church community. They should not feel uneasy about the idea of setting out to ensure a team of leaders is ethnically and culturally diverse. People in their community should know them as being forceful in rejecting racism. As someone said recently, it is not enough to be 'not racist' they should be 'anti-racist'. They should be confronting racism, exposing it as a lie, contending with popular prejudice, challenging

it at a theological level, being prophetic towards Church and society, and putting measures in place to fight it in their local environment.

This requires both a preparedness and some capacity for both reflection (that is going over experiences to see what might have been missed in real time) and reflexivity (that is examining one's

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own attitudes, assumptions, values, prejudices, etc., to understand them and their impact on others). A leader who is too afraid or too proud to go over past experiences, or to examine their own values and assumptions, is unlikely to be able to combat racism.

## Embracing the discomfort

The posture described above and the actions that would be involved would no doubt be uncomfortable for some church leaders and those members of their community who they challenge. Racism is a very uncomfortable subject to address, but we cannot shy away from the responsibility to address it because of that discomfort. What we should do instead is embrace the discomfort. Those of us who go to events to present recommendations for fighting racism sometimes get asked whether the recommended action might make people uncomfortable – the suggestion being that things should be avoided which make people uncomfortable.

I think people avoid doing uncomfortable things only if they can afford to or it is not important enough to them. I sometimes give people the task of comparing their discomfort with the hardships that black and other minority ethnic people endure when experiencing racism. Being able to choose not to discuss racism is itself an indication that one is in a privileged position. As observed by Professor Rich Vodde, privilege is not just about entitlement to resources but the power to avoid any challenge to that entitlement.<sup>3</sup>

To illustrate this point, the policeman who held down his knee on George Floyd's neck refused many attempts to be interrupted, but Floyd would have given anything to have a halt called and the situation examined. The key thing here is that being in a position to refuse to discuss racism and yet not be adversely affected by that choice is a sign of privilege.

Robin DiAngelo has discussed the discomfort many white people feel about the subject of racism. Even though she writes from a North American perspective, her observations are widely applicable here in the UK:

White people in North America live in a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race,

## NOTES

1. O Cugoano, *Thoughts and sentiments on the evil and wicked traffic of the slavery and commerce of the human species: Humbly submitted to the inhabitants of Great Britain* (London, 1787), p. 24.

2. F Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglas*, (independently published, 2020).

3. Quoted by Robin DiAngelo in *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 111.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

6. *Ibid.*

7. C Chike, 'Ten Important Principles When Addressing Racism', Living Theology Forum, Church Urban Fund, 2 September 2021, available online at [www.livingtheology.cuf.org.uk/blog/ten-principles](http://www.livingtheology.cuf.org.uk/blog/ten-principles)

and white people are the beneficiaries of that separation and inequality. As a result, we are insulated from racial stress, at the same time that we come to feel entitled to and deserving of our advantage. Given how seldom we experience racial discomfort in a society we dominate, we haven't had to build our racial stamina.<sup>4</sup>

DiAngelo notes how their upbringing and social surrounding make white people overreact whenever racism is brought up. They become 'highly fragile' in conversation about race and perceive any challenge about their view on race as amounting to calling them bad people:

The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable – the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation.<sup>5</sup>

But these responses, which DiAngelo terms 'white fragility', have the effect of helping white people retain their advantage:

These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as white fragility. Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.<sup>6</sup>

Any leader wishing to seriously encourage diversity in their church community should be aware of this dynamic and be prepared to deal with it in both themselves and the other members of the community. To take the posture of avoiding discomfort would simply be to leave racism in place.

## Doing something

Anyone wanting to make the kind of change we are thinking about should begin with the working assumption that racism is operating within their community. To do this, it is better to think of racism not as isolated acts but in systemic and cultural terms. From this perspective, we can say that racism operates within European and American societies and their institutions. It is therefore safe to assume that it is in one's local community. This assumption necessitates taking action. This is important. Unless we believe there is a problem we are unlikely to look for a solution or to take action to solve it.

One way of putting this is to be intentional about promoting diversity. Do not leave it to chance; do not become content with mere principles, or making promises and proclamations on the subject. Many people can verbalise principles and yet shrink from taking the practical action they

entail. The proof has to be in not what has been said but what has been done.

Black and other minority ethnic (BAME) people know that there is nothing as frustrating as a white person who thinks they understand the issue of racism – they know what to do and how to do it. However, white people must see themselves as accountable to BAME people on this issue. BAME groups in church communities *must* be involved in the process of combating racism and be consulted about what action should be taken. They need a sense of ownership about the direction of travel and to feel part of the team overseeing and implementing the changes. They also need to be part of the ongoing review process that assesses the progress made in fighting racism.

All of these actions must be as transparent as possible. As I recently wrote:

The long history of discrimination due to racism that Black and Minority Ethnic people have endured, the reality of power imbalance they live with and the years of broken promises of action hang over any process no matter how genuine. The shadow of that history makes it necessary to show your hands at every stage in order to carry people along with you and reduce suspicion. Let people, especially those of BAME heritage know how the work is progressing. This might entail having a strategy for putting out information on what is going on and how people can be part of it.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, be in it for the long haul and be prepared to work hard. Do not expect the change to be quick or you might get easily frustrated and give up. Also do not expect progress to be smooth and straightforward. Those experiencing discomfort would most likely try to bring down the whole project, so there will most likely be ups and downs.

## Conclusion

Racism is about power. It is a problem in our society and we need to find strategies to confront and overcome it. The promotion of diversity within church communities is one such strategy. Church leaders can start by developing a positive attitude towards diversity if they do not already have it. They have to disabuse their mind of any notion that all they have to do is 'be good Christians', since Christianity has sometimes been used to justify racism. They have to embrace any discomfort that comes through the process, bearing in mind that such discomfort is probably a sign of their own privilege. Finally, they should be committed to working with BAME people in tackling this problem. This is not by any means an exhaustive list of actions, but I hope these suggestions would help anyone setting out on this journey.