

CROSS-CULTURAL MISSION AND THE LOCAL CHURCH: A CONSULTANT'S PERSPECTIVE

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WHEN CONFRONTED WITH THE REALITIES OF BEING A KINGDOM PRESENCE IN A MULTI-RACIAL COMMUNITY MANY LOCAL CHURCHES FIND THEMSELVES OVERWHELMED TO THE POINT OF PARALYSIS. Cultural blindness, the church-growth term used to define a congregation's unwillingness or inability to cope with a changing surrounding culture, is but the tip of a very large, multi-faceted iceberg identifiable in these contexts. Consultancies carried out in such contexts reveal a marked consistency in the attitudes that arise within congregations.

First there is *disorientation*, a lack of understanding or conviction about direction, particularly in the approach that should be taken toward people of other faiths. An urban church that had commissioned a Bible Society consultancy engaged at one of the meetings in a heated debate on the issue of whether members of the local Islamic community should be approached evangelistically. There was little recognition that the unresolved tensions in this area made inevitable what indeed was apparent, a lack of cohesion in the whole life and mission of the church.

Second there is *discrimination* in the attitudes held and language used by church people. Sadly allegiance to Christ does not guarantee distinctiveness in behaviour and the prejudice and racism of the streets is sometimes echoed among the community of faith. Worryingly, this is not always recognised as a problem. A reference to "Pakis" by a church member at a consultation brought no rejoinder or reaction at all from others present!

Third there is *dislocation*; geographically as emigrant members "bus-in" from the suburbs to the now urbanised and ethnicised setting of *their* church; culturally as white, middle-class congregations exercise the power of sitting ecclesiastical tenancy in multi-ethnic, working-class communities; and spiritually as those same congregations persist in lifestyles in general and modes of worship in particular that are alien and divorced from the people who live locally to the church buildings. A declining church, exhibiting all these symptoms, was given three options for responding to its predicament – change, re-location or amalgamation. It chose to do nothing and as a result continues its spiral of decline.

Fourth there is *disassociation* as congregations translate their natural proclivity for abrogation of responsibility in mission matters, into a self-justifying attitude that it is not for them to get involved in this particular area. They consider it inappropriate either because of the sanctity of another's beliefs, or because of their own inadequacies, or because optimistically they still cling to the hope that it is

"a problem" that will eventually disappear. A church that prized its partnership in an ecumenical drop-in centre in a multi-racial community questioned why so little was resulting from the initiative by way of local people coming into the church. Further investigation revealed substantial financial support but little personal involvement from members of the congregation. Frequent appeals for more voluntary helpers had fallen on stony ground.

Awareness of these attitudes does not come easy to the congregations that adopt them and even more difficult is the change of heart necessary to alter the attitudes. Prophetic and priestly ministries are more than ever necessary, therefore, in such contexts. Prophetic in giving voice to the will of God and priestly by way of standing between gospel and people in helping to assimilate and embody that will. It is not always possible or advisable for local leaders to fulfil such ministries in such specialist areas. Increasingly outside help is being sought.

One source of such help is the emerging band of practitioners that operate in the field of church consultancy. As implied in previous paragraphs, for some years now Bible Society has offered a church consultancy service, called *Charting a New Course*. Using a team of skilled and experienced associate consultants, this service aims to help churches reflect upon their own life and that of the surrounding community in order to identify local mission issues and explore appropriate strategies in response. It is their experience that there are no easy nor general answers to the complex challenges of mission in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society but what solutions there are, are to be found in a realistic and honest engagement with the issues rather than in retreating from them.

If you would like to know about *Charting a New Course*, please contact Debbie Dean at Bible Society,
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