



The reshaping of religious and social landscape of Britain: The influence of the black majority churches



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Britain of today is a melting pot of ethnicities, religious diversities and multiculturalism. The twin forces of migration and globalisation have enhanced her religious and cultural diversity. Britain's Christian landscape has been transformed since 1948 with the arrival of migrants from the Caribbeans to Britain. Various labels have been utilised by scholars to describe this thriving strand within the British Christian landscape, as black churches, minority ethnic churches, black majority churches (BMCs), Windrush churches, African and Caribbean-led churches. These labels signify the level of diversity within this strand of the church in the UK and the complexity associated with having a general consensus on a generic nomenclature to identify these churches. Nevertheless, in this article I will make use of BMCs in a generic sense to include African and Caribbean-led Pentecostal churches as well as African or Caribbean independent churches.

The declining fortunes of Christianity in the public space in Britain have been assuaged by the proliferation of BMCs. The involvement and influence of BMCs in various cities seem to position them as a source of religious hope in Britain. For example, church attendance in London has grown from just over 620,000 in 2005 to over 720,000 in 2012, a 16 per cent increase. While these numbers are across all denominations, the growth is especially seen in the BMCs and the various immigrant churches.¹ The above assertion appears to contradict claims of secularisation of Britain and its associated impact on religion. The prophetic witness of black or migrant churches has contributed to the resurgence of Christianity in public discourse in almost all urban cities in Britain.

Moreover, the impact of BMCs on church attendance is observable in research findings that note that the overall church attendance in England has recently increased. Tear Fund's recent report indicates that 48 per cent of black people attend church regularly; three times the rate of the white community.²

The growth of Britain's BMCs has been enhanced over the years by immigration as a result of the economic challenges of the African and Caribbean countries, war, famine and economic aspirations. It is interesting to note that some of the migration narratives of the leaders of these churches are not economic. Rather, they have a mandate to re-evangelise Britain, the country that was once the hub of the missionary enterprise to its former colonies in the mid-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The black church movement is laity driven, as every member of these communities is encouraged to be involved in ministry. The worship experience in a black majority church is characterised by exuberant worship, clapping and dancing, the preaching is quite dynamic and centred on meeting the social, religious and cultural needs of their members. Although the liturgy is not written out by BMCs, there exists a formalised procedure amongst most of Britain's BMCs. This includes praise and worship, prayers, reading from the Bible, testimony, preaching, dancing and clapping. These features are indeed reflective of the fluidity of the African/Caribbean culture in the expression of the Christian faith.

Most of the members in BMCs are mainly Africans or Caribbeans and the claim of re-evangelising the host country seems to be rhetoric. Britain's BMCs might not have risen to the missionary challenges of their context

but they are challenging the dominance of European theology as a normative theological lens of the Christian faith. Assessing the contributions of Britain's BMCs in terms of their inability to attract significant numbers of Caucasians to their congregations would be unrepresentative of their impact on the white-led churches. These churches are becoming significant social force in Britain due to the multiplicity of their functions to their members and the larger British society.

The concentration of BMCs in London is probably due to the commercial nature of the city. It would appear that immigrants find it easy to settle in cities because of the availability of employment opportunities and concentration of people of their culture. This makes their integration into the British society easier. It may also be due to the nature of London's cultural diversity. Commercial activities and cultural diversity provide a good base for the development of minority interest in any society. This explains why international migration is not evenly spread across the regions of England: 74 per cent of migrants go to London, and another 12 per cent to the South East.³

The last two decades have especially seen a considerable increase in the influx of BMCs into the UK. Many of these churches are evangelical and others are Pentecostal/charismatic. For many of them the underlying motivation appeared to be missional – that is, to assist in the revival of the proclamation of the gospel in Britain – to replicate what is presently happening in their home countries. It would appear, however, that the efforts of these churches to reach the indigenes directly with the gospel are faced with difficulties. Some might consider this a sort of failure. However, the level of indirect influence on the stimulation of revival in the white-led churches is considerable and must not be overlooked

Validation of culture and Identity negotiation

It would appear that one of the consequences of globalisation is the formation of immigrant communities. A term that has become common currency in discussions of international migration is 'transnationalism', a process by which migrants, through their daily activities 'forge and sustain ... relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national borders.'⁴

For most Africans and some other internationals, faith and culture are closely related; most BMCs function as a cultural oasis where one could meet people with the same or similar ethno-cultural background. The churches remind people of their home country and their native culture. They are places where people could meet friends with similar life experiences. Among the many activities of the BMCs is their inevitable involvement with members' negotiation of socio-cultural identity in a new cultural frontier. These churches have been noted to facilitate social integration and attempt to validate the people's customs and values through socialisation. They affirm the dignity of ethnic group members as well providing support mechanism to cope with associated

challenges of assimilation to the host country. This creation of enabling environment by these churches refers to their capacity to 'provide a home away from home' for Africans/Caribbeans in Britain, enabling them to engage the host society with ease and transmit their indigenous cultures and values to their children.

the twin forces of migration and globalisation have enhanced Britain's religious and cultural diversities

This reality has also become a problem for those born and bred in the host community as they struggle for spiritual identity within two competing cultures. Difficulties therefore arise for their development of faith within diverse cultural realities, thereby alienating them from the faith of their fathers. Unless this is addressed, the second and third generations may find it difficult to embrace this culturally inclined faith.

Most BMCs are actively validating African/Caribbean identity through their sermons and theologies. They help members build identity by focusing on the positive contributions of black people to society especially during the annual Black History month celebrated in October in Britain. Another way that these churches reinforce identities of their members is through the promotion of success-oriented theologies, which link faith and prayer with the expectation of material prosperity and success. It suffices to state that some BMCs also regard hard work and financial responsibility as necessary conditions for prosperity. For instance, sociologist Stephen Hunt suggests that, in the case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), prosperity is more likely to be promoted in terms of 'management of monies', 'self-help' and 'entrepreneurial effort', rather than USA-style faith teaching.⁵ The religious teachings on self-discipline, the need for good stewardship and desire to succeed by these churches provide the much-required religious and psychological boost for the members of BMCs who most times are on the fringes. However, the theological position of most of Britain's BMCs on the prosperity gospel has been criticised by evangelical scholars as text proofing and a flagrant misreading of the relevant Scriptures.

Resourcing and support network

Most of these churches function as hub for restructuring and transforming the self-worth and economic worth of their members through dissemination of information about job opportunities, advisory services and free immigration advice to assuage the challenges of acculturation into Britain. Church bulletins and notice boards are conveyors of such information to members of these churches. BMCs provide social havens for migrants, support networks that are based on faith, identity and cultural affiliations. However, the self-support mechanism is not new in its entirety in the history of black Pentecostalism in Britain. The ingenuity of the founding fathers of the Caribbean-led churches brought

NOTES

1. P Brierley, *London Churches are Growing* (London: ADABC Publishers, 2013).

2. J Ashworth and I Farthing, 'Churchgoing: A Research Report on Church Attendance in UK,' <http://www.worldcat.org/title/churchgoing->

3. National Office of Statistics, 'Census 2001-Ethnicity and Religion', www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/-National.

4. LG Basch, N Glick-Schiller and C Szanton-Blanc, *Nations unbound: Transnational projects, postcolonial predicaments, and deterritorialized nation state* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1994), p. 6.

5. S Hunt, 'The "New" Black Pentecostal Churches in Britain'. Paper presented at the CESNUR 14th International Conference, Riga, Latvia, 29–31 August 2000, pp. 1–17.

6. A Adogame, 'HIV/AIDS Support and African Pentecostalism: The case of the Redeemed Christian Church of God', in *Journal of Health Psychology* 12.3 (2007), pp. 475–84.

out the implementation of the indigenous thrift and credit scheme to assist the members of their churches in the acquisition of property. The aim was to alleviate the housing constraints, which was a by-product of racism by British landlords in the 1950s.

Favourable immigration regulations has greatly contributed to the growth of the black majority churches

7. R Glendhill, 'How reverse missionaries built the UK fastest-growing church', *Christianity Today*, available online at www.christiantoday.com/article/how_reverse_missionaries_built_the_uk_fastest_growing_church/37894.htm [accessed 27th of August 2014].

BMCs not only serve as religious organisations. They are also community networks that offer advice and help people access social services. Most BMCs have succeeded in identifying the immediate challenges of their members and have responded by providing training on writing curricula vitae and wills, seminars on financial empowerment, immigration seminars, housing and educational initiatives. As such, BMCs complement the functions of statutory agencies of state. Above all, most BMCs provide access to social and spiritual resources for new migrants by providing contexts for communal worship, prayer and Christian fellowship, thus contributing to the stocks of social capital necessary for successful integration into wider society.

Community and social engagement

Black majority churches tend to combine traditional methods of evangelism with social actions. They believe that where the power of God is manifested and mercy is offered through social actions, people will be converted to the Kingdom. In view of social deprivation of many of its membership, it is believed that the church must provide welfare to retain her members. It may be summarised, therefore, that power evangelism, traditional evangelism, social actions and welfare are relevant tools in the evangelistic kits of BMCs.

It has been observed that Pentecostal denominations across the globe in the twenty-first century are not only identifying developmental challenges but are committed to the transformation of the social and political structures within their context.⁶ A typical example is the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), a black-led Pentecostal denomination from Nigeria that is now a missionary player across the globe.⁷ It is evident in many RCCG churches that a lot of resources are being invested in human, social and intellectual development within the communities in which they are located. As important as spiritual development and proselyting are, there is the drive to contribute positively to the social well-being of the social fabric of local communities. The big society policy thrust of government supports this enthusiasm.

This trend is evident in many BMCs. Churches like Kingsway International Christian Church (KICC), Ruach City Church and a host of others who maintain a robust budget to cater for the needs of their communities. Projects that address the poor, drug addition, educational empowerment, skills development, youth developments and related community initiatives

are documented involvement of BMCs within the communities in which they are located. There appears to be a holistic approach to meeting the spiritual, educational, social and economic aspirations of the communities where they are present.

Some of these services have been commended by public figures for their contributions to community development and cohesion. A typical example is the social engagement of Jesus House in London – a church founded in 1994 as a parish of the RCCG. This church is in active collaboration with the Prince's Trust and Prince Charles commended their work during his 59th birthday celebrations at the church in November 2007.

Immigration regulations and growth of BMCs

Favourable immigration regulations, among other factors, have greatly contributed to the growth of the BMCs in the UK. It is evident, therefore, that changes in government policy will affect the growth of the BMCs. There is an awareness of this issue among many BMCs. Developing strategies to reach people of other races and working towards enhancing the faith of the second and third generations of their faith communities appear to be a necessity for them to keep growing in the event of adverse immigration regulations. Also those who grow up within the British culture are better suited to reach their contemporaries with the gospel message. In order to sustain growth, BMCs will need to adapt. Continuous engagement with the local indigenous churches will help extend their relative influence on the Christian landscape of Britain.

Conclusion

It is clearly documented in Christian records that the BMCs have brought a fresh zeal to doing church and evangelism in Britain. This has resulted in increased churchgoing not only among the BMCs but also among the non-BMCs. No empirical data presently exists to document the level of this influence on the non-BMCs but it is thought to be considerable.

The BMCs go beyond the provision of spiritual well-being for their members because they are also actively engaged in the social well-being of their communities. This engagement is necessary for the impact of their ministries to be felt by their hosting communities. Changing immigration regulations have appreciable impact on their growth. Strategies must therefore be developed and implemented to minimise the effects of unfavourable immigration policy on the growth of the BMCs.