

# *The relationship between ethnic and diaspora churches and the native churches in the British Church Scene<sup>1</sup>*

*(Paul Davies, allnations)*

## *Introduction*

World Christianity is changing rapidly. Relationships between the churches of North and South, East and West are also changing (see Buhlman 1977, Jenson 2002, Yates 2005; Sanneh 2007). After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the process of globalisation, so strong in the nineteenth century and up to the First World War has recommenced. However, the direction in which the movement of peoples flows is quite different. In the nineteenth century, it was generally the Europeans who spread out across the world, exploring, colonising, conquering and evangelising. Missionaries were part of this movement (Stanley 1990). In the late twentieth century and in the twenty first century, the flow is the other way.

In this context, we see the growth of the ethnic and diaspora churches in the UK in number and size; especially in the large cities. Their presence and influence is increasingly felt by the "native" churches and society in general. Relationships between ethnic and diaspora churches and the native churches are quite often ambiguous and sometimes even hostile. In this forum we are seeking to consider the missiological implications for this context.

## *Some definitions*

Let me quickly clarify some terms we are using. When I am talking about "native churches" I want to refer to the indigenous British churches. The general profile of these churches is that of a monocultural white Anglo-Saxon, often middle class church. These form the majority of churches in the UK today. By "ethnic churches" I am referring to churches which serve a particular ethnic group; i.e. a Chinese, Nigerian or Latin American church. It is certainly a valid question to ask as to how far the "native churches" are also "ethnic" as they also generally serve one ethnic and class group. In the context of our discussions, however, the differentiation is valid.

Then there are the "diaspora churches". These are often newer arrivals and are a sub-division of the "ethnic churches". There are an increasing number of churches sending church leaders, especially from places like Nigeria and Ghana who are reaching out missionally to their own communities. Sometimes they work through already existing churches mentioned in the previous paragraph and other times they import their own denominations. Furthermore, there are churches that are sending out missionaries, not to reach the own ethnic populations but populations not from their ethnic group. These include Latin American or African or Asian missionary churches reaching Muslim groups and those now those same churches reaching out to 'native' British populations.

There is a further point in regard to these diaspora churches. Some of the missionaries and missionary churches who are ministering among their own ethnic populations or other ethnic groups—be those groups Anglo-Saxon or not—have links, or even are governed from the country from which they originate.<sup>2</sup> These churches often have the strongest missional identity.

Finally, I want to propose that, in the context of our discussions, the "British Church scene" should be defined in the widest possible sense. I propose, therefore, to include ALL churches in the UK as part of this British Church Scene. Therefore, we include

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<sup>1</sup> This little talk was sent as a small paper to our speakers today as a starting point for discussion. It is not a discussion paper as such, but seeks to clarify some of the issues, propose some arguments and to make a tentative proposal.

<sup>2</sup> This is being reflected upon especially in Pentecostal studies. The University of Birmingham held a conference on 'Transnational Pentecostalism in Europe' in February of this year. See also Dempster 1999.

the state churches (Anglican) and the long standing non-Conformist British churches such as the Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc. Along side those churches, I am including in 'the British Church Scene' 'ethnic' churches which have been in the UK for more than 50 years; so, I would include the Chinese churches and the Afro-Caribbean churches. Finally, I would also want to include the newer arrivals in the UK and their churches. These would include Latin American churches, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Vietnamese, etc.

### *Some arguments*

I think it is important to state that we understand that mission is the role of the local Church. Mission belongs primarily to the church not to mission agencies. In the light of the inclusive definition of the previous section, it is clear that the role of evangelisation and mission in the UK is the responsibility of the UK church.

All the above situations have raised the big question as to whether these newly arriving churches should work independently or with the already existing churches? Does simply being in the country; i.e. by virtue of being part of the British Church scene, mean that it is ok to exist independently from and reach out without reference to the already existing churches? The big issue that has arisen in these contexts is fragmentation. This has led to misunderstanding—exacerbated, of course, by language and cultural differences—and then to church disunity in a fragmented society. This is a very serious situation and needs action and reflection. Church disunity,

is not only a domestic problem, but a tragedy for the world and a betrayal of the God given task. In the division of the church, the basis of human unity has been fragmented and the means of reconciliation is assailed by an internal conflict. This division questions the Christian message itself (Davies 2006:129).

Church unity is the basis of human unity, the unity of the church serves human unity and in disunity, the means of true human reconciliation is destroyed.

In this, the church can take at least three approaches. It can be a protagonist for reconciliation and impose unity; it can encourage unity by fomenting programmes for unity or it can be a paradigm for human reconciliation and unity.

I think the Bible leans strongly towards the third approach: that of a paradigmatic relationship between church unity and human reconciliation. An example of this is that in Ephesians 1:10, Paul articulates God's mission in terms of universal human unity. God will bring all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. This is eschatological and is not done by ecclesial imposition or encouragement: this is God's mission. The verses following assert that the church has been 'chosen and predestined' according to his plan in order to carry out his will (Ephesians 1:11). The world needs an example of what human unity looks like.

So, in the context of social fragmentation in the UK, it seems that Church unity is so important that ethnic and diaspora churches should be encouraged to have a much closer relationship or even to merge into the native churches.

Having said all this, there are good theological as well as pragmatic reasons why ethnic and diaspora churches should be encouraged to exist and work separate from the native churches. I would like to address this in relation to the important concepts of language and identity.

Many minority ethnic groups in the UK today feel threatened, isolated and marginalised. Part of societal fragmentation is due to the affirmation of group identity as a reaction to the perceived threats to national or ethnic identity. This leads to a strong emphasis on the maintenance of ethnic language as well.

During the 1960s and 70s the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) theory arose in Church Growth School Missiology. This theory stated that people prefer to convert from

within their own culture and therefore it is more effective to have ethnic churches that reach their own people. This seems a strong case to retain the distinctive ethnic and diaspora identities of these churches. These churches are able to maintain ethnic identity and preserve language in a way that the wider church cannot. We do not want to see uniformity as a consequence of unity. It must also be admitted that the native churches do not seem to be having much success in reaching the ethnic populations today in the UK!

The HUP has, however, been widely criticised by various theologians and mission thinkers. Not least of these, C. Rene Padilla, the Ecuadorean theologian. He famously referred to the HUP theory as 'Culture Christianity' (Padilla, 1985: 142-169). Padilla is especially concerned with the whole gospel and thinks that the HUP focuses on the narrow and individual eschatological salvation and not upon the gospel that transforms lives both historically and eschatologically as well as transforming whole communities.

In the context in which we find ourselves and the one I have briefly described, I both agree and disagree with Padilla. I agree that there are grave dangers in only focussing upon a narrow individual and eschatological salvation. There is no doubt that pragmatism and managerial missiology (Samuel Escobar) can take over. The unity of the church is in danger.

However, in the European context—and I believe in other contexts—there are arguments for the maintenance and even encouragement of these kinds of churches. Firstly, mission thinking, especially the North American type, is keen to make sure that the only barrier to conversion is the challenge of the gospel itself. Language and fears of the loss of identity can be a barrier to ethnic groups within the UK hearing the gospel. Language is also a barrier to the non-British, non-Christian who is hearing the gospel in the UK. Hearing the gospel in your heart language is a qualitative different experience than hearing it in a second or third language.

Secondly, and more importantly, for me, however, is the need for 'ethnic' community cohesion, especially within minority communities where both the Christian and non-Christian can feel threatened, excluded and in danger of losing their cultural identity. If we ask converts from minority communities to attend and become part of native churches, they are pulled out from their communities and they have, not only to face the barrier of the challenge of the gospel but also the barrier of culture and even more so the sub-culture of the native churches. The consequences could be to threaten the ethnic community cohesion and to put yet another barrier up between the non-Christian and Christ. This is without mentioning intercommunity violence.

This, again, raises the issue of identity. If we are looking to form a truly contextual expression of the gospel, then to insert converts into a foreign church culture could lead to the loss of the cultural distinctive of the ethnic church. One of the models of the models explained and critiqued by Stephen Bevans (Bevans 2002) is called the 'anthropological model'. This model emphasises the importance of cultural identity within a Christian identity. The question he asks is, are we trying to form a Christian Filipino or a Filipino Christian (Bevans 2002:54)?<sup>3</sup> Does the cultural identity dominate—Filipino Christian—or does the Christian identity dominate—Christian Filipino? Or to put it another way, is unity or identity more important? Padilla is concerned to preserve Christian unity through Christian identity. The anthropological model is concerned with maintaining cultural identity within Christian identity. Church unity seems to maintain Christian identity and the ethnic and diaspora churches, more the cultural identity.

In my opinion this should not be thought of as a continuum; i.e. the stronger the ethnic identity the weaker the Christian identity and unity--but as a dialectical tension in constant revision.

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<sup>3</sup> In discussing the 'Anthropological Model' he affirms this model's desire to have the emphasis upon the ethnic or cultural identity rather than on the unified Christian identity.

### *A tentative proposal*

I do not want to propose any solution to these problems of identity, language, and Church unity here but I do want to make a tentative suggestion as to where we should start discussions. As we have seen, what we have called 'the British Church Scene' is fragmented and has varied understandings of unity, language and identity. There is a common theme, however, that could lead to unity in the UK; i.e. the desire to reach out to the UK in all its diversity. The native churches seem incapable of reaching, not only their own people but even more the ethnic groups entering into the UK today. The ethnic and diaspora churches have strong intentional missional identities.

I would like to suggest that perhaps, the concept of 'mission' could be developed as material principle for a theology reflecting upon the relationship between native and ethnic and diaspora churches in the UK.<sup>4</sup> José Míguez Bonino defines a material principle as

'a theological orientation which, as the best expression of the life and dynamic of the religious community, will give coherence and consistency to the understanding of the gospel and become a point of reference for the theological building up of the community' (José Míguez Bonino 1997:131).

Is not the concept of 'mission' a good expression of the life of the Christian community in the UK today? Roman Catholic, Anglican, non-Conformist, Pentecostal, Ethnic churches, diaspora church all share this orientation. This would mean that, mission, not a particular doctrine or pragmatic approaches should be where we start in our attempts to think about relating to one another. We will not be able to build our unity around language or identity—these are too diverse and fragmented in the British Church scene—but unity maybe able to be built through mutual action and reflection in the area of mission.

This would mean that our unity starts with outreach—whether that outreach is evangelistic or social involvement. This may lead to both 'native' and ethnic' churches withdrawing from their entrenched positions and being willing to reach out to the UK: in its all its fragmentation and diversity.

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<sup>4</sup> I am referring to material principle in classic theological sense differentiating the formal principle of theology (perhaps Bible, tradition and context) and the material principle of the central unifying theme of a certain theology.