**The Journey and Obstacles to Building a Multi-Ethnic Church**

**Introduction**

Thank for privilege of inviting me to share with you today. Start with telling you a bit about myself. I have been involved in pastoring Baptist churches in and around West London for just under 35 years. For the last 28 years I have been a pastor at Greenford Baptist Church. For the past three years I have also been a part time tutor at ForMission College on their MA in Missional Leadership. I mentor a number of pastors, including Pentecostals who were born in Africa or the Caribbean. And I recently started working as a part time Interim Minister at a Baptist Church in East London. I am married with three grown up children who are all married themselves; I have four grandchildren.

Over the 45 minutes I am going to tell you something of the story of GBC and along the way highlight some of what seem to me to be the key obstacles/challenges to overcome if someone wants to build a genuine multi-ethnic church community.. I want to make clear that GBC, like every church, is unique set in a particular context. So this talk is descriptive not prescriptive. Also we have not arrived, we are still on a journey, we are still learning. So I will tell you some of what we have done and learnt so far, it is for you to work out what is appropriate in your own contexts.

I also need to make very clear that building a multi-ethnic church community is a long term project that is costly, painful and difficult. A few years ago I was asked by the main leader of an almost entirely white British charismatic church set in a multi-ethnic urban context to write a proposal to see the church develop into a multi-ethnic one. He asked me to estimate how long this would take. The process that I suggested lasted for seven years. I heard nothing more! Another church leader that came to us for advice and support in a similar context abandoned the journey after a year or so because, in his words, the blacks would not …… I do not want to use the rest of his words let me substitute my own “would not confirm to White British ways of doing things”.

Let me start with scripture, Rev 7 v 9 “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb”. This is our destiny, **expand.** I enjoy the reality that at GBC each Sunday there is a small taste of heaven as people from around 45 nationalities meet together to worship using a variety of languages and styles from many contexts.

**The Start of the Journey**

When I arrived at GBC in 1987 it was a traditional church, almost entirely white British with only 6 Caribbeans four of whom were young teens. This was, even then, not reflective of the surrounding community.

As I look back I think that the catalyst for the initial very slow growth of numbers of Caribbeans attending was the evangelistic activities of one of the teenagers who had been there when I arrived. Her parents were from Dominica, tell the story of her parents moving onto the road where I now live. A few years after I arrived she started work at a local hairdresser. Finish with hairdresser story.

From those days I vividly recall Caribbeans in course of pastoral visits telling me of hurt and pain at way they being treated in UK and at GBC. In essence they felt that their blackness was not welcome. So around 23 years ago I set up what was one of the most painful leaders’ meetings ever attended, asked two of Caribbean men to share with our all white leaders how they felt as part of GBC. They bared their souls, talked about their pain not just as recipients of conscious racial prejudice on a daily basis from non-Christian people and structures around them but also in church. Their experiences included receiving “well meaning” but hurtful comments like “I don’t see you as black, but just as my brother in Christ” (which they felt denied a part of their identity) to feeling ignored or excluded because of their culture. Some leaders were in tears, confessed their own racial prejudice most of it unconscious e.g. never having invited black person for tea. We then intentionally set out to tackle racism, conscious and unconscious within the church family used Bible teaching, testimony and most effectively in one to one encounters sometimes this involved painfully challenging people about their attitudes/actions **illustrate.** I always continued to listen to our Caribbean members’ feelings and experiences.

**Challenge of Racism--A Turning Point**

Reality of racism in our British society often denied by white English. Before I continue I do want to say that although I use the word “racism” because its meaning is understood I do think that theologically it is incorrect. There is only one race, the human race, with every person made in the image of God. So a better term in my opinion would be “ethnic prejudice”. Such prejudice is a massive obstacle to building a multi-ethnic community and unless it is tackled nothing can be built. A milestone for us was when an Asian family in membership with us was attacked. Story is complex, raw facts are that after moving from one location to another in our area they suffered a series of “racially motivated attacks” that culminated in an attack in their home in the middle of the night that left three of the four family members in hospital with serious injuries that have scarred them for the rest of their lives. Both Police and local authority failed to give family any protection or even to properly investigate the crime. **Unpack.** Our collective church outrage led to organizing a public meeting which generated significant media coverage, sudden change of police attitude. Galvanized GBC, **unpack.**. Action recognized by local community, we invited to give evidence to a national enquiry into Institutional Racism.

Racism/ethnic prejudice is not just a black/white issue. I believe that if you want to see an ethnically diverse church community built you must address “racist” attitudes and stereotypes, and this is an ongoing activity. **My recent holiday story.**  Unless you overcome this obstacle you cannot see a genuinely multi-ethnic church built.

**Challenge of Developing Cultural Diversity—Leadership**

Developing genuinely culturally diverse leadership and ministry has been tough. I have invested a lot of time in leadership training and development (i/c public speaking), **explain** Leadership Training Group, i/c disappointments, Caribbean woman and her husband, moral issues. Important to understand that people from different cultures function in decision making groups very differently. A genuine multi-ethnic leadership cannot function simply by following European norms. Having people from a wide range of ethnicities in our senior and wider leadership teams (photographs prominently displayed) makes clear that there is no glass ceiling.

**Challenge of Developing Cultural Diversity—Worship**

Developing worship that reflects different cultures been even harder, it was very difficult to persuade people who were not white British to join our all white British singers and musicians. A turning point here came after an international evening where some of our West Africans performed some songs from their churches back home, as a result of peoples’ appreciation I managed to persuade several to join our singers’ team. Sadly this was unsuccessful as the leaders had a very western view of what constituted worship, good vocal practice and good musical skill. Our African brothers and sisters found themselves feeling devalued and marginalized and we soon ended up once again with a virtually all white team. It was not until after the entire singers and musicians’ leadership resigned from the church that we were able to again see people from our other cultures become involved. We have now made progress with some of our West Africans and Caribbeans regularly leading worship, increasingly using their own styles, but it has been a slow process. **Illustrate** Carleen, Rotimi, Bolaji. We now routinely use songs from other cultures signing them in the language and style they were originally composed in. **Illustrate** Hindi, Yoruba.

**Challenge of Developing Cultural Diversity—Preaching**

Similar story also of preachers, **elaborate** use Yoseph from Eritrea. Talk about my role in his first couple of sermons.

**Challenge of Developing Cultural Diversity—Prayer**

We still only occasionally succeed in seeing prayer on Sunday mornings really reflecting our congregational diversity, but we are seeing it more and more in small group meetings. **Note** on use of first language in prayer. Likewise with prayer ministry team.

**Challenge of Developing Cultural Diversity—Food and Entertainment**

I am convinced that eating together food that reflects the diversity of our origins is very important. As also is sharing together in entertainment that originates in a variety of cultures. This can be poetry, art, music, dance, storytelling. The experience of sharing this together is hugely enriching, and the art is not fattening!

**Challenge of Developing Cultural Diversity—Unity**

Many now express the view that the project of developing a multi-cultural UK has failed. This may or may not be true but what seems obvious to me is that unless there is something around which a multi-cultural community is united it is going to run into difficulties. Describe our worship area flags, and artwork, and the fourth side with the names of God and the cross **explain significance of layout and apply.**

**The Challenge of Personal Development**

Investing in my own personal development has been vitally important for me; I grew up in all white British context. I would like to suggest that if someone is not willing to make personal investment they should not attempt this journey. **Elaborate**. First major investment was sabbatical over 25 years ago looking at racism and beginning to explore multi-cultural community. **Explain** what and where. One of the most profound moments for me was sitting with a black theologian in a South African church that was predominantly white. He taught in a Bible school which the white Christians were very proud of describing as being racially integrated. The church that we were attending that morning described itself as multi-cultural. In stark contrast this black theologian described both the church and the college as white institutions that had a few black people attending. He talked passionately about his experience of the white structures, the white food and the white agendas. In his view everything was done on the basis of white is right and blacks were welcome to come along. This led me to reflect on what it means to be genuinely multi-cultural church as opposed to a place where people from different cultures attend but where one culture dominates. I came to see that at Greenford we were doing white church, we were so Eurocentric that other cultures were pushed to the margins. Subsequently I also realised that I had been reading and teaching scripture simply from a European perspective thereby not effectively ministering to people from other cultures. This led to me doing an MA to help me to begin to find tools to enable people to apply scripture in their own cultural contexts. Dissertation on the location of meaning in text and looking at how one’s social location determines what you see, **elaborate.**  This resulted in major changes not only in my epistemology but in my practice. Sunday morning teaching became a dialogue rather than a monologue. During the teaching I ask questions that are intended to draw people into engaging with the Biblical text often by encouraging them to imagine or feel. At the end I work to get people in the congregation to vocalize how the Biblical passage and truths apply in their particular context. This allows perspectives from different cultural viewpoints to be foregrounded.

Another major investment came in another sabbatical around 15 years ago exploring communicating the gospel across cultural boundaries, involved study and visits to Albania, Northern Italy and Jamaica. **Elaborate**.

Around five years ago God told me to learn to speak a language other than English, Portuguese. This has also involved spending around six months in Brazil over the last few years. The process for me of having to learn and speak in another language as an adult has been an amazing eye opener to me to the experience of many who have come to the UK.

Need to mention the importance of open and deep friendships with people from other cultures; friends have been willing to share themselves with me to such an extent that I have been able at times to glimpse things from the inside of another cultural perspective.

**Change of Sunday Structure**

A number of years ago we radically altered the structure of our Sunday morning meetings after concluding that we were putting old wine in new skins, **elaborate.** **Describe** pattern now (80-90 minutes with all ages, led by a different person each week hopefully reflecting their own cultural identity, a time for testimonies, the celebration of birthdays and anniversaries, an opportunity for prayer ministry plus all the other usual ingredients. Then connection time; then 55 minutes of teaching where we split into age groups. Also lunches together).

Over the last 10 years we have experienced steady numerical growth of about 5-10% most years, transfers in and out are roughly even (we have a high turnover, explain) the additions are after baptism. Over the last year we have baptized converts from Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism. Currently we have over 200 adults and teens in formal membership with over 400 people attending at least twice a month.

**Summary**

The journey we are on at GBC has been great; I have been so enriched by what I have experienced. But before you start a journey like this be sure that you are willing to pay the price and to stay the course. What is the first thing to do on this journey, it is to genuinely welcome the stranger including welcoming their differentness from you, **elaborate**. If you do take this journey you can experience a foretaste of heaven every week.

**Tell these stories during discussion time.**

**Post-Colonial Mindset**

It has been so very hard, and sometimes simply impossible, to persuade spiritual, gifted, intelligent, articulate black men and women to take on profile or responsibility within the church. This is an aspect of “Post-Colonial Mindset”, feel that as black people in a white country it would be wrong because they would be replacing a white person. Challenged this with church as body imagery, every part needed, not always succeeded. **Tell story.**

**Cultural Diversity**

We are doing well in enjoying cultural diversity while holding strong sense of unity, e.g. events with food or entertainment. Even more interesting is recognising God at work within *other people’s* cultural norms. A few years ago during a prayer meeting one of our Nigerians fell to the floor as we were praying for him; afterwards he related how he knew that God was doing something special for him. He said that he felt a cold presence enter the room and envelop him and the next thing that he knew was lying on the floor, he knew immediately that it was God’s Spirit. For White English people a cold presence usually signifies evil but in Nigeria coolness, not additional heat, is welcome and refreshing! We need care in interpreting what we observe, **tell story** of Jamaican barber.