

DIVERSITY IN THE BRITISH UNION – CHALLENGES

By Pastor Don McFarlane, President, British Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Presented at the Newbold College Diversity Lecture, Bracknell, Berks on Tuesday, 16 March 2010.



In 1978 my wife, Mary, and I were unexpectedly invited to move to the United Kingdom, where I was to serve as a pastor in Birmingham. All the factors that led us to accept the call are still not clear to me, even after thirty-two years. Why leave the security of friends, the warmth and sunshine of the tropics, the un-abating energy of fellow Jamaicans, and the excitement of rapid church growth to live in a forbiddingly cold country where sunny days are celebrated as special gifts from God? However, we would not exchange our experience here for anything. We were asked to work here for five years. October will be thirty-two years. That tells its own story.

We cannot forget how cold and overcast October 5, 1978 was when we emerged from Heathrow Airport to be met by a fellow pastor. As soon as we got seated in his gleaming Peugeot car, I asked him if he could take us to “REEDING”, where we had to visit a bank. “Pardon me,” he said in his deep Irish accent. I repeated the name of the town we needed to visit – REEDING – more clearly and slowly. And so began my orientation to life in the United Kingdom. “Ah, you mean “Redding” (Reading). I began to realize that things were not always what they seemed to be - LESSON, NUMBER 1. Though I was a slow learner!

Coming from a country that I thought was the centre of the world, I took it for granted that every Caribbean person in the UK came from Jamaica. Early in my sojourn here I made the nearly fatal error of meeting a Caribbean person on the street and asking her proudly, “Where in Jamaica are you from?” The response was, to say the least, chillingly cutting. With eyes that in no way masked her indignance and disgust, she said, “I am not from Jamaica” - LESSON NO 2: Do not prejudge

It was the middle of December and I was due to take prayer meeting at the Handsworth Seventh-day Adventist Church in Birmingham, where I was the pastor. I looked through the window of the house that Mary and I were sharing with another pastoral family who had also just arrived in the country. Horror of horrors – the ground was covered with a thin layer of snow. I dutifully rang the church elder and informed him that due to the snow that had fallen I was unable to travel to church that evening. The church was no more than five minutes away. The church elder must have said to himself with a smile, “He will learn.” LESSON NO 3: Minor inconveniences are not an excuse for not getting on with one’s duties and obligations.

In addressing the subject of DIVERSITY in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the British Isles, I could spend at least 45 minutes on each strand of diversity. That would mean however that this would be the last time I speak at Newbold College. I could spend a considerable amount of time on gender diversity; its benefits, the challenges we face in this area and the measures being taken to meet the challenges. We could also explore together the challenges

associated with age diversity or a number of other areas of diversity. **However, I have decided to focus on just one area – Cultural Diversity.**

When I arrived in the United Kingdom diversity was not a word that was used frequently within the Seventh-day Adventist Church community. There was one major cultural distinction that was often highlighted – the differences between those who were called “The Indigenous and those referred to as Caribbean members. Whenever that subject was being discussed, at least in the circles in which I moved, various negative motives were attributed to the Indigenous, whom I prefer to call the majority population, for not worshipping with the Caribbean members. On the surface the stated motives appeared to fit the situation but when one took time to observe matters closely, one came to realize that much of what was purported to be behaviour arising from prejudice and intolerance was largely the result of cultural preferences. Things are not always what they seem to be.

Some underplay the importance of culture in respect to worship, choosing to say that all people, if they are children of God, should worship together. If they don't, then the conclusion is clear – they are not true children of God. That is to take a rather simplistic view of a complex situation.

In the dim and distant past I did an MA in Religion here at Newbold. Mike Pearson was then a relatively young man, though, I must confess, he hasn't changed much since that time! My MA thesis was on Worship and Culture. All my research and studies led me to the view that **worship is most meaningful only within the context of one's culture.**

According to Sherwood G Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers in their book, *Ministering Cross-Culturally*, **“Culture is the ... label for the sum of the distinctive characteristics of a people's way of life. All human behaviour occurs within particular cultures, within socially defined contexts.”**

So, what was construed as a reticence on the part of members from the majority population to fellowship with members from the Caribbean might have been nothing more than a desire to worship in circumstances with which they was familiar.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY WITHIN SEEMINGLY HOMOGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Several Seventh-day Adventist Churches in the British Isles are loosely described as Caribbean churches. However, when one takes a closer look at these churches one is surprised to discover that most of these churches can be more narrowly defined than just being generally Caribbean or West Indian churches. In numerous cases Caribbean churches are made up of members from a particular country or even a particular village.

The members of the two churches in High Wycombe are largely from one small Caribbean island - St Vincent. Brixton and Balham Churches can both be considered as Jamaican Churches. Balham is not only Jamaican but largely consists of members from one parish in Jamaica. When you look even closer you discover that they are not just from one parish but

from a group of villages that are close to each other. A large number of the members of Balham Church are descendants of the Maroons – Freed slaves in Jamaica who were a thorn in the side of the British and who fought the British successfully until the British signed a peace agreement with them, which involved being exempt from paying certain taxes. I am a descendant of the Maroons, as is Val Allen (Bernard) I have often said that Balham is the one church in the British Union that I would not choose to pastor. Too many of the members there are related to me, were my neighbours in Jamaica or children of my neighbours. Leicester Central Church is largely an Antiguan Church. Huddersfield and Chiswick are predominantly Grenadian.

So even within the seeming homogenous Caribbean community there are certain cultural differences which to some extent drive people to worship and fellowship with people like themselves, people who understand their humour, their linguistic quirks, their customs, etc.

If the Caribbean people coalesce according to their particular mores and folkways, they should understand that people from other cultures, including the so-called indigenous peoples of these isles, also wish to worship with people like themselves – people who sing like them, pray like them, preach like them and understand their humour.

Now, I must share with you a story that serves to illustrate how people from one culture can easily misunderstand those from another culture, even when they speak a common language. When my son was in primary school, he came home one evening and told us that his teacher had called him silly. My wife and I nearly hit the roof. The following day we went to see the teacher about the matter and expressed our displeasure at his calling our son silly. He tried to explain that it was not a derogatory word and could be used as a term of endearment. We were having none of it and made it clear to him that we did not want him to call our son silly again. He must have thought that that we were pretty thick or silly! Now, my 4 year-old grand-daughter says, Grand-dad, you are silly and I know she says that with love and affection.

Now, where there is a mixed church, a congregation of cultures which are fairly equally distributed, leadership is presented with an enormous challenge to satisfy everyone. Oftentimes they end up satisfying no one (I will come back to this later when I address the birth and growth of what we call Ethnic Churches). Of course, a church of various cultures is the ideal, in that it represents the fulfilment of the Gospel Commission, where people of all nations and kindreds respond to the outstretched hand of our Lord. However, often the ideal is not possible and we must take a pragmatic approach in addressing certain situations.

ETHNIC CHURCHES

So, in my experience, the dichotomy within the church between the Indigenous and the Caribbean people was the general diversity context in which the church operated up until the early 1990's. In 1992 a group of Ghanaian members who worshipped in various churches in the London and Reading areas requested the South England Conference to recognize the existence of a Ghanaian Fellowship and organize the Fellowship into a church. The stated

purpose of establishing a Ghanaian Church was to keep Seventh-day Adventist Ghanaians who come to this country in the church and evangelise the wider Ghanaian community.

And so was born the era of the Ethnic Churches or, as some call them, culture-specific churches. Of course, some will be quick to point out that there were two Indian churches before that – one in Bedford and one in Birmingham. However, those churches created no ripples. They hardly registered upon the consciousness of members. It was the establishment of the London Ghana Church that caused a great stir among the saints and which since that time has led to several discussions on the wrong or right of Ethnic Churches. As I travel around the British Isles and open up myself to questions by members, I am asked more questions on this subject than on any other.

Since the establishment of the London Ghana Church, several other Ethnic Churches have been established. Among them are 8 other Ghanaian Churches, East African Churches, Portuguese-speaking churches, Filipino churches, Spanish-speaking churches, A Nigerian Church, Russian Churches, A Bulgarian Church, Romanian Churches, and others.

I have been ridiculed by some for allowing the establishment of Ethnic Churches and praised by others. Perhaps if I share with you why I have supported the establishment of these churches, you might think me less of a villain.

In the early Nineteen-Nineties there were close to fifty Seventh-day Adventist Churches in the London area. All but two of these churches were predominantly Caribbean Churches. The two exceptions were the Central London and Wimbledon Churches. So, in a very practical sense, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in London was a mono-cultural church. Nearly every church operated in the same way each Sabbath, all in a city that was highly multicultural.

Another important factor was that in the early 90's no more than 150 members in London would be considered people of European extraction, in other words white. As I have already demonstrated, birds of a feather flock together. This is just a basic fact of life. If there were no churches in London with birds resembling the majority population, there would not be many birds from that segment of the society flocking to our church.

I came to the conclusion that if our church was to be mildly effective in London, it was necessary to change its mono-culturalism to one that was somewhat multicultural. It was necessary to broaden the appeal of the church in London and provide different kinds of churches for different kinds of people. So, I not only welcomed the establishment of Ethnic Churches, I also encouraged their establishment, for the greater good of the church.

What would have been ideal at the time was to have the existing churches become multicultural churches, not merely in membership but in the manner in which things were done, but that was easier said than done. If we were starting fresh with 50 new churches in London, where everyone could have a major say in the manner in which things were done, that would be possible. However, that was not the case. In nearly all the churches there was already a long established pattern of worship and witness. Those established churches expected all new-

comers to fall in line and worship according to the long established traditions. Yes, they would be prepared to have an international day or evening from time to time where the various cultural costumes and dishes are displayed but worship had to be done in the way in which it had always been done.

So, the only form of real multiculturalism that was possible in the circumstances was churches of different cultures.

Now, if the Ghanaians went in their hundreds to the Holloway Church, Stanborough or Hampstead and worship in the manner in which they normally do, they would possibly be thrown out of those churches. And yet there is something very beautiful and joyful about Ghanaian worship, which is not found in West Indian or British worship. In which West Indian Church would you find women sashaying down the aisle to present their offering and men rising spontaneously from their seat to express their joy? None that I am aware of.

To force the Ghanaians to worship with the West Indians or the British would result in an approach to worship that would be neither chicken nor duck, and would be frustrating to many. The same goes for the Filipinos, with their fantastic vocal music, the Russians who believe that whatever music is offered in church should be of the highest order, and all the other ethnic groups.

Should people from other cultures be forced to worship in the West Indian way, many of them would soon give up attending church, as many had before the advent of the Ethnic Churches. It is of some consequence that the Ethnic churches are among the fastest growing churches in the British Union. In my last full year as president of the South England Conference – 2004, the Portuguese-speaking churches came top in the number of new members added by baptism. Today the Ghanaian church that started with a membership of 49, now has a membership of approximately 600 and has given birth to eight other Ghanaian Churches. This story can be repeated with the other Ethnic churches.

Now, some might say that what I have just described to you is spiritual or religious apartheid. My response is NOT IN ANYWAY. There is no element of coercion in the arrangement. People are free to worship where they wish to. There are English and Caribbean people worshipping at the Filipino Church, in that they prefer the style of worship they encounter there. The same can be said about the Ghanaian Church and the other ethnic churches. What would be immoral would be a written or unwritten law which requires people to go only to the church that represents their culture. What we have done in developing the Ethnic Churches has been to provide choice to worshippers and would be worshippers.

So, reason 1 for Ethnic Churches is that a multi-cultural society needs a multicultural church. Reason 2 is that church growth is more rapid in churches where their members are able to identify with a certain segment of the community who are like themselves.

The third reason for encouraging the growth of Ethnic Churches will become apparent in a story I will now tell you. A member of the Stanborough Park Church was berating me mildly one day

for setting up and encouraging Ethnic Churches. He was strongly of the view that it was wrong and that everyone should worship together. I calmly said to him, "OK. I will encourage the Ghanaians to close their church and come to Stanborough Park." Well, that was the end of the discussion. He walked away sorrowfully, like the Rich Young Ruler, for he wished to preserve the traditions of good old Stanborough Park. I trust that the inference is clear.

I am not so naïve as not to realise that Ethnic Churches do create certain challenges for church leaders and the church community. Sometimes they are seen as not being fully engaged with the programme of the Conference as some other churches are, or are inward looking, caring only about their own church community and not about the interests of the wider church. Interestingly, the same observation can be made of other churches, some of which display these characteristics even more acutely. Many of the traditional churches are not fully engaged with the conference's programme and are also very inward-looking. So, this is possibly more of a challenge for churches in general than it is for just Ethnic Churches.

On balance the benefits provided by the Ethnic Churches for mission fulfilment are in my opinion much greater than the drawbacks. In other words, they provide us with a much greater platform for presenting the gospel in our diverse community than would otherwise have been the case.

DEMOGRAPHIC "EARTHQUAKE" IN THE NOUGHTIES

I would now like to turn my attention to the Noughties – 2000 to the present. The Noughties brought about, in diversity terms, a demographic earthquake in the British Union, the likes which have not been seen since the church came to these isles.

Between 2000 and the present thousands of Adventists arrived from Southern Africa, and Eastern Europe, almost overnight, or so it appeared, and the church is still struggling to address this seismic shift in its make-up and orientation. Let me briefly illustrate what I meant by a demographic earthquake. In the early part of the current decade Luton Central Church, which at the time was my local church, was approximately 90 per cent Caribbean members, with the remaining 10 per cent a mixture of English, African and others. Today Luton Central is approximately 80 percent Southern African. The same phenomenon is repeated in scores of churches throughout the British Isles. Southampton Church, which was the first Adventist church established in the British Isles, up to six years ago was predominantly a white English Church. Today it is 80 percent Southern African.

Let me hasten to say that every person, from wherever they come is warmly welcomed into our church in the British Union. No one must be in two minds about that. This is the position of the leadership of the church, which we have sought to get across to all pastors and local leaders.

The arrival of the members from Southern Africa has been good for the British Church in several ways. Many small churches, which were struggling for survival, have been revived as a result of increased attendance. The musical ability of the new members has enhanced many a service and their commitment to the mission of the church has been refreshing. Their warm and friendly disposition is also a particular blessing.

Perhaps it is important to make a distinction between the Caribbean people who came in the fifties and sixties and those that have recently come into the Union, especially from Southern Africa. Though there were some exceptions, the majority of those who came from the Caribbean were largely from the rural areas, who came in search of a better life. Many like my parents, who came were not formally educated. Their children have availed themselves of the educational opportunities here. The situation is different today. Those who have come in from Africa in recent times are largely very highly educated people. To give you an idea of what I mean by this. The Dundee Church in Scotland, which I visited recently, has a membership of about 55. Approximately half of the members there are from Southern Africa. Among that small band of people are six medical doctors.

Caribbean members became the majority in the church in the 1970's. That status is now under treat. Should current trend continue, in another five years time the African members will be the majority in the British Union. There is at least a fifty percent chance that young people, especially of Caribbean and African origin, getting married today in the church will marry someone of African origin. My three children, who all got married within the last 4 years, are all married to Africans, two to Southern Africans and one to a West African.

Twenty-six years ago, when I entered church administration, church leaders were primarily concerned about nurturing the members of the majority population in the church, the Caribbean members, along with a small number of members from places such as Mauritius and the Seychelles. We were also concerned about reaching the British population with the Gospel as preached by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Today our concern is to minister to a wide

spectrum of members, without being partial to any particular cultural group. The church will never be the same again. Nor should it be. We are still very much concerned, however with reaching the majority population with the gospel, from the viewpoint that they are over 90 per cent of the people living in the British Isles.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

I come now so some general observations that I wish to make regarding the new diversity in the British Union:

- a) The newly-arrived members from Africa and Eastern Europe have brought a certain vibrancy into the church. This is obvious in the singing in church, the warm atmosphere found in a number of churches today.
- b) The church has become much more conservative, particularly with respect to addressing other forms of diversity. One that comes easily to mind is gender diversity. Only a few months ago I was speaking in our church in Walsall and took time to emphasise the equality of the service and ministry of men and women before God. Greeting the worshippers at the end of the service, a gentleman pressed a piece of paper into my hand and suggested that I didn't read it before I got home. I was curious to know what he had written, so as soon as I was through greeting I opened the note. It was as I thought it would be – He made it known that he did not agree with my position on women in ecclesiastical leadership.
- c) The third important observation is that the task of reaching the majority population with the gospel has become much more challenging. The greater challenge has arisen from the increasing cultural dis-similarity between the church and the majority population. The British Union is one of the few places in the world where the composition of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is in reverse proportion to the composition of the general population. So, whilst in most other countries witnessing comes naturally as people share their faith with people like themselves, here sharing faith involves much cultural bridging.

Another factor that makes reaching the majority population more challenging today than it was, say ten years ago, is the reluctance of some new-comers to embrace some of the evangelistic methods that seem more appropriate for reaching the majority population with the. Consequently, the Life-development programme, the Life.info magazine and

the philosophy of belonging before Believing, that are all part of our strategy for reaching the majority population, are not generally supported by the new-comers, who prefer a traditional approach.

MEASURES TAKEN TO ADDRESS THE DIVERSITY IN THE UNION

What are some of the measures being taken to manage the diversity in our church?

- a) We have had a number of diversity seminars, where leaders of various culture groups have been able to dialogue and seek to understand one another.
- b) In hiring and appointing ministers the needs of the different culture groups are considered. Whereas twenty years ago our pastors came from just the white British and the Caribbean segments of the church, today the situation is markedly different. The cultural distribution of ministers largely reflects the diversity within the church. Most pastors taken on in the last ten years are originally from places such as Africa, Eastern Europe, India and South America. This we have done to ensure a greater degree of balance in pastoral leadership. *A close friend of mine usually asks the question: How many people in takes to change a light bulb in an Adventist Church in the British Isles? The answer is 4 – One Caribbean, one from the majority population, one African, one representing all the others.*
- c) We have also prepared a special edition of Messenger for the benefit of all new members, hoping that by reading they will recognise that although we share common beliefs as Adventists, Adventism expresses itself in different ways around the world.
- d) Of course, it goes without saying that all our new worshippers are welcomed warmly into the British Union. They are part of the great family of God.
- e) We ask local churches to involve new members from abroad in the life of the church, in order to heighten their sense of belonging.

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS OF THE CURRENT DIVERSITY SCENE IN THE BUC

I will end by sharing with you what I see as some of the major implications of the diversity of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the British Isles?

- a) The first is somewhat obvious, and that is that the church in the British Isles will never again be a mono-cultural church. Its course from here on is set solidly in a multicultural direction. While this might not be comforting for some, we cannot hide our head in the sand and believe that one day we all return to what some may view as our glorious past.
- b) The second is that the majority culture or cultures in the church have a responsibility to protect the minority culture or cultures. I have said much about the members from the majority population. They have become the minority. No more than 15 per cent of the membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the British Isles are from the majority population. The African and Caribbean members, who are currently the majority, have a duty to protect their rights, their heritage and their way of worship. Let me expand a little on this: In the same manner in which the Portuguese-speaking members, the Russians, Bulgarians, Ghanaians and others are able to worship with people like themselves, for reasons such as those I stated earlier, members from the majority population should also be allowed to worship in a manner that they find comfortable and appropriate to their culture. The majority in the church have a duty to ensure that what they have in abundance is also available to the majority population/indigenous members and that the desire of those members to worship in a culture-appropriate manner is not seen as racism but regarded with the same understanding and acceptance accorded to other groups.
- c) If the church is to have a significant impact on the society much emphasis is required on cross-cultural evangelism and outreach – Pastors and members will need to be trained and encouraged to witness outside their own culture. Perhaps there is a role for Newbold College to play here.
- d) The church needs to be sensitive in its appointment of leaders (executive and department directors) and ensure that the broad cultural make-up of the church is considered as well as the make-up of the society when making such appointments.
- e) The fifth and final implication is rather positive and that is that despite the challenges the church faces here in our church in the British Union, we can and should celebrate the richness and variety that people from nearly every country in the world bring to our common spiritual table. We ought to take the opportunity to explore and appreciate the

complex interplay between people of different cultures and marvel at God's wisdom in making us one but different.