



FAITH WITHOUT BORDERS: MAXIMISING THE MISSIONARY POTENTIAL OF BRITAIN'S BLACK- MAJORITY CHURCHES



...However this Christian community does have gifts and insights which could energise the indigenous church.

There is an urgent need for Britain's BMCs to transition from diasporic mission to missional communities responsive to their localities. This could entail the active involvement of 'transcultural mediators', and appropriate contextualisation of the gospel for this different setting. It must also involve partnerships in mission with the wider British church.

The British social landscape in the last ten decades has undergone significant social and cultural change. Britain today is a melting pot of diversity and ethnicities. The 2011 Census reveals the role of migration in the ethnic diversity of Britain, with one out of eight people in the population being immigrants.^[1]

Another aspect of social and cultural change in late modernity is secularisation, which can be defined as the compartmentalisation of Christianity to the private space. A growing secularisation was suggested by the disparity between the 2001 and 2011 figures in the UK Census. Rev. Arun Arora, director of communications for the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England, explained that it was likely that fewer people had identified as 'cultural Christians', that is:

...those who have no active involvement with churches and who may previously have identified as Christian for cultural or historical reasons. They indicate a changing pattern of religious life in which traditional or inherited identities are less taken for granted than they used to be.^[2]

In the midst of the social and cultural discontinuities in Britain, the last century has seen the advent of missionaries from the global South in migration to Britain.^[3] The main factors identified to trigger this migration include:

...economic transformation, political tension, and war that engulfed the continent [of Africa] during this period... lack of work incentives, disabling political cultures, and personal quests for meaning and self-development.^[4]

The migrants travelled with their religious backpacks.^[5] Christian diversity in Britain expanded significantly and exponentially, particularly in the last six decades, accentuated by the Windrush generation^[6] and migration from African countries since the 1980s. Black-majority churches (BMCs) have proliferated.

Mission without borders- the changing face of world missions.

It has been noted that the survival and spread of the Christian faith is aided by its ability to expand across cultural frontiers in a serial manner.[7] This implies that there is no fixed centre for the faith as 'each new point in the Christian circumference [is a] new potential Christian centre'.[8] Christianity is a migratory religion.[9] There have been three major shifts in the geographical location of Christendom. During the first one thousand years, Christendom was centred in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. During the next millennium, Christendom was centred in the West and, in the third millennium, Christendom has shifted to the South.[10] Christianity is now predominantly a non-western religion. David Barrett was quite prescient when over three decades ago, he observed that 'Africa might well tip the balance and transform Christianity as a non-Western religion'.[11] The imprint of African Christianity has gradually emerged as a transnational phenomenon across North America, Europe and the West in general. Jenkins refers to this as 'the Southern Christianity'.[12]

In secular Britain the African churches make a striking contrast with indigenous churches. The Pentecostal black-majority churches, profiting from migration and the vibrancy of African Christianity, have grown quickly. The 'glocal'[13] nature of the British and North American contexts, have led to the emergence of religious diversities which constitute potential mission opportunities for these churches.

Home away from home: mission locked up in cultural captivity

The proliferation of Britain's BMCs is an urban phenomenon as most of these churches are situated in highly concentrated cities noted for high migrant populations.[14] In the last three years the urbanisation of African Christianity has gradually provided a research niche amongst sociologist, anthropologist and historians of mission in Britain.[15] London has been observed to be a centre for African and Caribbean Pentecostal churches.[16] For instance, the Kingsway International Christian Centre, led by Pastor Mathew Ashimolowo, is the single largest BMC congregation in Britain, with over 12,000 people in the congregation, predominantly first-generation African immigrants and second generation black British people. The Redeemed Christian Church of God network of parishes in the United Kingdom might have the largest membership amongst African-led churches in Britain with about 80,200.[17]

However, the general consensus amongst scholars of Africa's New Religious Movements in Europe and North America is that most of these churches in England, Germany, and in North America are repositories of migrant cultures, where inherent cultural ideologies are expressed through the worship and liturgy of their home countries.[18]

A black-majority church may assist in the cultural preservation of migrants in a new culture. As it promotes social integration:

...it attempts to validate people's culture through socialization and it affirms the dignity of ethnic group members who might be considered by non members as having low status... it often

encourages social isolation from outsiders.[19]

Ogbu Kalu refers to their capacity to 'provide a home away from home' for Africans in Europe, enabling them to 'engage the new society with success and transmit their indigenous cultures and values to their children'. [20] However, from the experiential perspective, I concur with Hanciles, that for most members of BMCs in Britain, the ideal of permanent residency is blurred as 'transmigrants are often bilingual and can lead dual lives, move easily between cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and are incorporated as social actors in both'. [21]

Consequently evangelistic outreach by BMCs tends to be focussed on their kith and kin. This invariably has led to the continued cultural captivity of these churches as they provide a safe space for identity negotiation, selective assimilation, resourcing and networking opportunities for migrants in the United Kingdom. The limited impact of evangelistic outreach in indigenous British communities is not helped by a poor understanding of the British context, carryover idiosyncrasies of ecclesiastical practices and inadequate cross-cultural awareness. [22] This issue extends beyond Britain, and is common amongst migrant congregations across Europe and North America. [23] The transplanting of successful missionary approaches that disregard the western context gives rise to BMC churches which can only attract Africans and Caribbeans.

As Britain becomes what is now described as a "super diverse" society,... the Black Church Movement [BMCs] will need to work both harder and smarter'. [24] The non-reflective disposition of black church leaders towards their potential missiological tools may have grave consequences for the future of these churches. Hunt noted that there are irreconcilable differences in the revival mantra of these churches in Britain and the effectiveness of their evangelistic drive. He suggests that:

...frequently claims to revival in these quarters [Britain's Black Churches] are related to a prophesied national upturn in church-going. In reality, the 'revival' is largely limited to this one sector of Pentecostalism [Black British Churches] and its growth reducible to a number of wider socio-cultural considerations[25]

However, Asamoah-Gyadu claims that there are positive values that historic denominations can embrace from the BMCs such as:

...the attention it draws to the fact that Christianity is about experience and that the power of God is able to transform circumstances that Western rationalist theologies will consider the preserve of psychology and scientific development.[26]

Passion, enthusiasm, holistic, ecstatic, and experiential religious practices are the distinctives of this fledging Christian constituency. The antiphonal singing, simultaneous and spontaneous prayer, dance and motor behaviour are also essential features of African Pentecostalism, which

emphasize the freedom, equality, community, and dignity of each person in the sight of God. These are probably values that Britain's historic denominations might take a cue from. Although there is no explicit written liturgy in BMC worship, there is a warm participatory style. BMC worship style has been criticised as noisy and loud but Allan Anderson challenges such an assertion and advocates for a change in the worship culture of some heritage churches. He says:

No European can say that the free, exuberant Christianity is merely because it is a cultural trait of Africans to be enthusiastic, rhythmic and noisy. One has only to be at a premier league football match to see that Europeans can have the same enthusiasm! The problem is not the culture of the European masses; but it may have something to do with the culture of their churches - perhaps this is one reason why the masses are not attracted to them.[\[27\]](#)

There is an additional challenge in the very idea of a mission movement from the global South, 'breaking the Protestant mission models of nation-state based structures and mission as something done from the centre of power and money to the periphery'.[\[28\]](#)

Paradigm shift: diasporic mission to missional churches.

It is apparent that God in his sovereignty works in ways beyond human comprehension and the dynamic social and cultural revolution in the world is a reminder again that the 'mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed...' [\[29\]](#) The obvious question is: how can mission be conducted in a world which is dominated by the forces of globalisation, cultural mutation, secularisation, pluralism, technological advancements, continued urbanisation, hyper consumerism, social and economic inequality? The emphasis should be on a greater awareness of the need for holistic mission, whereby the good news of Jesus impacts on every facet of human endeavour. Holistic mission is simply the demonstration of the love of God to humanity impacting the 'spiritual, social and environmental'.[\[30\]](#) This perspective contradicts the unbiblical division between the spiritual and material aspect of human life, and is actually an insight held within the African 'Traditional' worldview. In the parable of the sheep and goats (Mathew 25:31-46), the story is not about material or physical works but about human beings and their relationship 'to the kingdom, and the King... at the heart of it'.[\[31\]](#) This sharply challenges the inward growth of BMCs and their focus on their members' existential needs. This focus creates a major disconnect with the incarnational nature of the gospel as most BMCs:

...end up losing the clarity of the gospel and instead gain a myopic and limiting view of catering to the needs of immigrants only.[\[32\]](#)

Re-imagination of the mission and evangelism strategies of the BMCs is imperative in the light of the social and cultural changes over time in Britain. BMCs should endeavour to engage in reflective practice in their journey of transformation to missional churches by becoming churches without walls to their wider communities. Frost and Hirsch summarise this position as

they argue that 'as people of a missionary God, we ought to engage the world the same way he does by going out rather than just reaching out'.^[33] The harvest is indeed plenteous but do the labourers know the crops and fields? Mission in the British context should be reflective of the incarnational principle demonstrated by Jesus Christ. Approximately 10 A.D., at a carpenter's shed in the small village of Nazareth, you could have looked in the shed and seen God with wood shavings or masonry dust all over his body! That's the amazing thing about God taking on human flesh in Jesus. His heartbeat is Mission (John 1:1-18; 1 John 1:1-4).

The creation of sacred spaces as the major interface for encountering the divine is antithetical to the missionary nature of God. The end product of such a preoccupation is that these churches are attractional in their understanding of outreach, depending upon non-Christians to experience an encounter with God according to a set of denominational expectations. It must be emphasised again that BMC sacred space has a great gift to offer, but such an emphasis on attractional mission is largely ineffective in a postmodern culture shaped by the forces of secularisation and pluralism. There has to be urgent listening and discernment within the social and cultural currents of the British landscape. God is a missionary God. Mission is a movement from God into the world and the universal Church of which BMC is part, is an instrument that God has chosen for that movement. Mission of the church is not just one of its several programs, but mission defines the *raison d'être* of its existence. Minho Song in his article on the Diaspora Experience of the Korean Church and its implications for World Missions highlights the cultural captivity amongst Korean immigrant churches across the globe. In his clarion call for transition into missional community, he identifies three principal goals which are also relevant for BMCs, notably (1) a re-examination of their ecclesiology (2) developing trans-cultural mediators and (3) strategically engaging with a target group. Minho Song notes the inclusion of apostolicity in the Nicene Creed as compared with the Apostle's Creed, and explains that the 'apostolic church lives out its calling as one being sent into the world in order to expand the Kingdom of God and declare God's reign upon all souls'.^[34] He suggests that the apostolic dimension is also absent from other diasporic churches. I wish to assert that Britain's BMCs are not an exception among diasporic churches. The homogenous nature of the membership of these churches fosters cultural and resource networks, and the management of social and religious discontinuities, thereby leading to the neglect of the potential mission opportunities within their new communities. Juan Martinez warns that missionaries from the global South need to avoid the temptation to replicate missionary models that were successful in another context.^[35]

In transitioning from mission to missional communities BMCs need to develop key leaders who are transcultural mediators.^[36] Transcultural mediators are people who have overcome ethnic and national idiosyncrasies to become fluent within the British culture while still retaining their cultural identity. Transcultural mediators are able to balance the divergent cultural mix effectively in relationship initiation, sustained and secured in their identity in Christ. It is imperative to note that in developing transcultural mediators, an intentional approach should be adopted by BMCs and education will be pivotal to such an enterprise.

One of the most effective transcultural mediators from the biblical perspective was Apostle Paul. Paul highlighted the basis of his commitment to missions, based on his love and willingness to identify with his target group, and communicated the gospel within the worldview of his target group. Paul had a transcultural identity as he developed a meta-cultural framework that was effective in various multicultural states during his missionary journeys, whilst staying true to his core identity (1 Corinthians 9: 19-22).

Paul Hiebert supports this, arguing that Paul was motivated by an urgency to proclaim the gospel based on agape love irrespective of racial, cultural or social divides. He argues that missionaries should endeavour to:

...learn to see others as us, tear down walls [social, racial, religious, economic idiosyncrasies] that divide us, build relationships of mutual understanding and respect, and become transcultural people - but without Christian love these are incomplete. Christian love is to be unconditionally committed to those we meet, including our enemies. As mediators we must be other-centered and love those we serve. Such Christian love is the central element in the work of missions. Without it, all of our best efforts are in vain.[37]

In terms of strategic engagement with a target group, I wish to argue that BMCs need to discern what God is doing in Britain and adjust their sail to catch the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit. Mission is about God's agenda (*missio Dei*) not denominational agendas. However, it seems that, in the main, the leaders of the BMCs have not yet engaged with missiological insights about social and cultural change and contextual mission. The Church of England has responded to the challenge of these times with the Fresh Expressions initiative. Fresh Expressions provides opportunities for BMCs to work shoulder to shoulder with historic denominations in their missional agenda for England, but these opportunities have not yet been taken up. It is encouraging however that some BMCs, in the mould of Jesus House, London, and some African-led churches, have embraced the Alpha Course, an evangelistic tool, which was developed by Nicky Gumbel, the Vicar of Holy Trinity, Brompton and a parish of the Church of England.

The transition from the modern to a postmodern era poses a grave challenge to the universal Church in general and specifically to the BMCs in their mission in Britain:

...as the gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address because the recipient is repeatedly changing place of residence... unless we work out where they are; we will all fail to communicate with them[38]

An in-depth understanding of postmodernity doesn't mean that the Christian message has to be adulterated, and this perhaps is the greatest tension that BMCs face. Grenz noted that the church in general, but I suggest more emphatically, missionaries from Africa and the Caribbean, are challenged by this context, and

...we dare not fall into the trap of wistfully longing for a return to the early modernity that gave evangelicalism its birth, for we [the universal church] are called to minister not to the past but to the contemporary context, and our context is influenced by post-modern ideas. [39]

However, the leaders of the British historic denominations also need to demonstrate the desire and commitment to minimise covert marginalisation of missionaries from the global South in the British mission scene. In order to halt the declining fortunes of Christianity in Britain, collaborative initiatives should be encouraged. Harvey Kwiyani's perspective of a power dichotomy between the indigenous and migrant North American Church resonates within the British church scene. He argues that 'the most difficult area to negotiate is relationships between various immigrant Christian groups and local (Western) Christians.' [40] In Britain many BMCs make use of the church halls of historic denominations, but the two traditions abstain from any collaborative mission initiatives. A typical example was the 2008 *Hope* mission initiative, which was hugely successful amongst Evangelicals in Britain, but involved very few BMCs. The review of the initiative highlighted the need to seek a collaborative mission agenda with the BMCs, and demonstrate inclusive leadership, to reflect the *Hope* agenda for Britain. [41]

Conclusion

The influx of missionaries and the proliferation of BMCs in Britain is not entirely a new phenomenon as Christianity is migratory in nature. Due to the fact that there is no fixed centre of gravity over time, the Christian faith is expressed in the cultural context in which it is situated. The forces of globalisation and technological developments have considerably heightened the diasporic flow of African Christianity across the globe.

However, despite the proliferation of these churches in Britain, many are still migrant sanctuaries that provide safe space for cultural validation, resourcing and network opportunities. For the maximisation of the missionary potential of Britain's BMCs, there is a need for urgent appraisal of the missiological tools of these churches. There is an urgent need for these churches to get out of their cultural captivity and become missional churches in their wider communities, discerning, listening to the various mission opportunities within their grasp and developing appropriate cross-cultural skills to communicate the gospel to postmodern people in Britain.

[1] The 2011 Census figures. For further study see: the website of National Office of Statistics; www.ons.gov.uk

[2] Rev Aurora in Robert Boot, "Census Reveals decline of Christianity and rise in foreign born to one in eight", *The Guardian*, [web: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/dec/11/census-religion-decline-rise-born-abroad>] Accessed on the

13th of December 2012.

[3] The first black-led church in modern Britain was established in 1906 by a Ghanaian, Rev Thomas Brem-Wilson when he started Sumner chapel on Sumner Road, Peckham, London. For further reading see: "The Changing Christian Landscape in Britain: The Case of Black Majority Churches," *Swedish Missiological Themes (STM)* 100, 3 (2012), 283-302.

[4] Ibid, "Introduction", 2.

[5] J.Hanciles, "Migration and Mission: The Religious Significance of the North-South Divide," in A. F. Walls and C. Ross, eds., *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008) 123. Cf A. Adogame and C. Weissköppel, eds., *Religion in the Context of African Migration*, Bayreuth African Studies Series 75 (Bayreuth: Breitingner, 2005).

[6] The contemporary black church movement in Britain owes its genesis to the landing of the troopship SS *Empire Windrush* on June 22 1948 at Tilbury with 417 migrants, the majority of whom were from Jamaica while others were from several Caribbean countries including Trinidad, Guyana and Bermuda.

[7] Andrew F. Walls. "Culture and Coherence in Christian History," *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1996) 22.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Jehu Hanciles, "Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty- first Century Church." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 27 (October 2003): 146-53.

[10] W Buhmann, *The Church of the Future: A Model for the Year 2000* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 6.

[11] David Barrett, "AD2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa", *International Review of Mission* 59, (January 1970) 39-54.

[12] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2002).

[13] Glocal context is one of the biggest cultural barriers in mission. Glocal context refers to the global convergence of the global reality with our local reality. Britain/North America have become a glocal community requiring strategies for effective ministry.

[14] For further reading see Babatunde Adedibu *Coat of Many Colours, Origin, Growth, Distinctiveness and Contributions of Black Majority Churches to British Christianity*. (London, Wisdom Summit, 2012)

[15] Some of the research initiatives include *Being Built Together*, a two year research project which aims to understand more about new black-majority churches in the London Borough of Southwark by Andrew Rogers, Senior lecturer in Ministerial Theology of Roehampton University, London. This project is in partnership with *Transform Southwark and Churches Together in South London*, as well as many other interested parties. The aim of the project is to investigate the demographics and ecclesiology of new black majority congregations in the London Borough of Southwark. A similar research project is the *Building on History Project* of the Open University, London.

[16] Babatunde Adedibu, *Coat of Many Colours*, 49.

[17] Babatunde Adedibu, *The Urban Explosion of Black Majority Churches; Origin, Growth, Distinctiveness and Contributions to British Christianity*, PhD Thesis, North-West University, South Africa. 2010.

[18] In the Netherlands, Van der Laan states: 'the native Dutch...do not respond to their evangelistic efforts' while Adogame in his assessment of Europe opines that 'white converts' form a 'negligible percentage.' C. Van der Laan, "Knocking on Heaven's Door," in A. Droogers, C. Van der Laan and W. Van Laar, eds., *Fruitful in this Land: Pluralism, Dialogue and Healing in Migrant Pentecostalism* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2006), 55; A. Adogame, "Mapping Globalization with the Lens of Religion: African Migrant Churches in Germany," in A.W. Geertz and M. Warburg, eds., *New Religions and Globalization* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008) 210; For further reading see, C. Währisch-Oblau, "'Getting Ready to Receive?' German Churches and the 'New Mission' from the South," *Lausanne World Pulse* (July 2008)

[<http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles.php/971/07-2008?pg=all>] (accessed on the 13th of December 2012).

[19] Anderson, A and Frideres, J, *Ethnicity in Canada: Theoretical Perspectives*, Toronto: Butterworths, 1981.

[20] See Ogbu U. Kalu, 'African Pentecostalism in Diaspora,' *PentecoStudies*, 9.1 (2010). 9-34.

[21] Hanciles, Jehu, "Migration and Mission; Some Implications for the Twenty- First Century Church" *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 27 (October 2003) 146-153.

[22] A. Ukah, "Reverse Mission or Asylum Christianity? A Nigerian Church in Europe," in T. Falola and A. Agwuele, eds., *Africans and Politics of Popular Cultures*, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009) 104-32

[23] Ibid.

[24] Joe Aldred, in Babatunde Adedibu, *Coat of Many Colours*, iv.

[25] Stephen Hunt, "The "New" Black Pentecostal Churches in Britain [1]", A paper presented at CESNUR 14th International Conference, Riga, Latvia, August 29-31, 2000.

[26] J. K. Asamoah-Gyadu, "African Pentecostal on Mission in Eastern Europe: The Church of the 'Embassy of God' in the Ukraine," *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 27, 2 (Fall 2005): 314.

[27] A. Anderson, "African Europeans in Global Pentecostalism." A paper presented at the annual academic lecture of *Christ Redeemer Christian College* and *Redeemed Christian Church of God* held at *Jesus House*, London. 6 October 2009, 10.

[28] Juan Francisco Martinez, "Discovering God's Initiatives in the Midst of Adaptive Challenge," *Journal of Missional Practice*, Issue 1 (Fall 2012) 14.

[29] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission, Paradigms Shifts in Theology of Missions*, (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1998) 519

[30] Martin Goldsmith, *Get a Grip on Mission: The Challenge of a changing world*, (Grand Rapids, Inter Varsity Press 2006), 183

[31] Michael Green, *The Message of Mathew*, Rev. ed., (Leicester, Inter Varsity Press, 2000), 263.

[32] Mohino Song, "Diaspora Experience of the Korean Church and its implications of World Missions" in Mosuk Ma, and Hin Kim, (eds). *Korean Diaspora and Mission*, (Oxford, Regnum, 2011), 124.

[33] M. Frost and A. Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 12.

[34] Mohino Song, "Diaspora Experience of the Korean Church," 125.

[35] Juan Francisco Martinez, "Discovering God's Initiatives".

[36] Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, (Grand Rapids; Baker Academic, 2009) 198.

[37] Paul Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 199.

[38] Thickle Helmet in Graham Johnston, *Preaching to the Post-modern World*, (Leicester, Inter Varsity Press. 2001), 16.

[39] S Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.1996), 16

[40] Harvey Kwiyani, "Power in Mission", *Journal of Missional Practice*, Issue 1, (Autumn 2012), 24.

[41] Theos Review of *Hope 08*

http://www.hope08.com/Groups/133404/HOPE/About_HOPE/What_is_HOPE/HOPE_08/Review/Review.a.spx

Rapid Response

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