



MISSION, MULTICULTURALISM, AND THE AFRICAN IMMIGRANT CHURCH: A RAPID RESPONSE TO FAITH WITHOUT BORDERS BY BABATUNDE ADEDIBU

It was Walter Hollenweger who once said that 'British Christians prayed for revival, and when it came, they did not recognize it because it was black.'^[1] There is some truth in his observation. The subject of multicultural Christianity is new to most of us. Our theologies, missiologies, and ecclesiologies are yet to catch up with the reality of the culturally diverse world that we see in many of our western cities. Religion and race are still two concepts that are yet to be fully negotiated within Christianity. Race relations within the Christian community is a broken area right now, and it will become even more contentious as the distance between Christians of different parts of the world diminishes ... as globalization intensifies ... as we go deeper into the twenty-first century. As we stand today, the subject

of racial segregation in Christianity is largely untouched. In most of western Christianity, to talk about race is to open the scars of the racism of the past—something we do not need to talk about since Christianity is working just fine as it is right now. I am not sure about the statistics in Europe, but in the United States, Christian churches are the most segregated community—with over 92 percent of congregations being monoethnic.^[2] The American church is more segregated than schools and offices. Yet, we act as if that is the way things are supposed to be. We do not talk about race. It is a sacred cow. I have heard many ministers say about race and the church, ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’ I am often tempted to push back, ‘Excuse me, mister, a segregated church is a broken church.’ Of course, Christian segregation is not just a social or cultural problem, it is a theological problem that reflects our understanding of God.

Come to think of it, we are the first generation of Christians on this side of the Reformation to deal with this issue, especially within the geographical limits of the western civilization. For the greater part of the past two millennia, Christianity has been a white man’s religion with its heartlands in Europe and North America. Even its spread around the world in the nineteenth century is tied closely to the migration of millions of Europeans to the rest of the world.^[3] As late as 1950, Christianity was still a western religion working hard to spread itself and its civilization around the world. Even today, there are still more Christians of Caucasian heritage than there are of other races. The mission field that is the subject of our focus here—that of Europe and North America—certainly has a higher proportion of Caucasians.^[4] Non-western Christians doing missionary work in the West are jumping serious racial and cultural barriers. Unfortunately, most of them are not aware of this when they enter Europe or North America. Most of them are not equipped to deal with the racial and cultural boundaries that inevitably await them in the West.

The African immigrant congregation is not just an outcome of the need to create ‘a home away from home’ where they can ‘liturgize’ in their languages and eat African food. Several studies in the US have shown that most African immigrant congregations emerge as a result of the need to negotiate the discrimination that African immigrants face in western congregations. Moses Biney observes that there are several factors that precipitate the existence of African immigrant congregations—including theological differences and lack of cross-cultural leaders. However, for him, the most outstanding one is the adversity that immigrants have to face from all angles in their new countries of residence. ‘Faced with harassment by government and discrimination by society,’ Biney says, ‘the immigrants’ community becomes their most important source of help and existence. This is where [immigrant] religious congregations come in.’^[5] Most African Christians are shocked to see that the culture of racial distrust—or racism—is alive and well in the church.

Now, we need to consider practical ways to get around some of these issues.

1. **Develop some theological tools** that look at faith, race and mission in healthy ways that encourage cross-racial missional partnerships. Christianity needs to rethink its theology as far as race is concerned. We need a theology that will discredit the racial prejudices that prevail in the church today. In Christ, race should not matter.

2. **Cross-cultural leadership models:** Leaders on both sides of the conversation need to model cross-cultural partnerships for their followers. They need to show their people what it looks like to respectfully recognize and work with people that look different from them. Western leaders need to go out of their way to make their 'home ground' conducive for the immigrants to engage at play. African leaders need to tone down their condemning rhetoric and begin to respect western Christians even when they disagree with them on some issues. Continuing to label western Christianity as dead will end up discrediting their missional intentions. For Africans to be able to reach out to the West, they will surely need the help of Western Christians.

3. **Commitment to learning** from and about one another. Create space where race and justice can be talked about without shame, guilt, or condemnation. The more we learn about one another, the better our chances of successfully partnering for mission. Mutual love and respect is the only way forward. Both sides need to listen to one another. There are countless lessons that Africans can learn from westerners, and likewise, there are countless lessons westerners can learn from Africans. There is also need for intentionality in engaging people with some cross-cultural fluency to serve as interpreters. This risk will pay off sometimes. More often than not, it will result in painful heartbreaks. However, it is a necessary risk if cross-cultural partnerships are to be possible. Remember, we are the first generation to have to do this.

If there is anything that I have learned in my years of multicultural ministry both in Europe and the United States, it is that we need not to be colourblind. Issues of race are deep-seated within Christianity and the general culture, and they need to be discussed openly. There will be resistance. The work involved will be heavy. Some will argue that it is not really necessary. Leaders need to tread carefully, but they need to tread anyway. As Babatunde has put it in his article, 'Faith Without Borders,' we need faith communities that see no barriers—geographical, racial, or otherwise. A culturally diversified missional context needs a culturally diversified missional community.

[1] Walter Hollenweger, in the foreword to Roswith I. H. Gerloff, *A Plea for British Black Theologies: The Black Church Movement in Britain in Its Transatlantic Cultural and Theological Interaction with Special References to the Pentecostal Oneness (Apostolic) and Sabbatarian Movements*, Studien Zur Interkulturellen Geschichte Des Christentums, (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1992), ix.

[2] See Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford, 2003).

[3] Dudley Baines, *Emigration from Europe, 1815-1930*, New Studies in Economic and Social History (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7.

[4] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2-3.

[5] Biney, *From Africa to America: Religion and Adaptation among Ghanaian Immigrants in New York*, 27.



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