

Breathing Life

An invitation to share in belonging together through racial justice: Reflections and Recommendations from the Diocesan Working Group (WG)

Introduction

The death of the African-American citizen George Floyd at the hands of police officers on 25th May in Minneapolis - in the midst of an already volatile climate caused by the COVID-19 crisis - gave rise to waves of protest across the United States under the movement of Black Lives Matter. Archbishops and bishops of the Church of England who rallied to support the movement have said that it is time to “own up to” and “repent” of white privilege, within the Church as in other parts of society (see article by Hattie Williams, Church Times, dt. 12th June 2020). In other parts of the Western world solidarity protests followed. Earlier sporadic outbreaks of protest and a ground swell of discontent against widespread racial injustice in societies and their institutions suddenly peaked in intensity and persistence, regrettably also in violence. The media highlighted the theme. The issue of racial injustice could no longer be side-lined; it demanded that it be confronted, the more so as there have been other such incidents which have followed close on the heel of George Floyd in the US, the UK and in Europe.

Any violent expressions causing harm to life and property cannot be condoned. Violence cannot be met with violence. Just as unequivocally it needs to be stated that: Every human life matters equally. One must recognise the fact that the fundamental human rights of the African-American community have been systematically trodden underfoot since they have lived in that part of the world which today lays claim to being a model democracy. Their cry for justice has been picked up by minority ethnic groups of colour also in Europe – in solidarity and out of their own experience of discrimination. A newer feature of this protest is found in the visible and vocal support of many ‘white’ compatriots. How long have they too been blind in one eye to latent racism in their communities, a blindness which almost as a matter of course impinges on the human dignity and rights of those of other or mixed ethnic origins? Churches too have heard the clarion call.



In the words of The Rt Revd Robert Innes, Bishop of the Church of England Diocese in Europe, 'there remains far more to do to encourage minority ethnic ministry and representation'. In response he has commissioned a working group (WG) to look into the policies and strategies of the diocese in this area 'as a matter of urgency'. The WG (Smitha Prasadam, Augustine Nwaekwe, Leslie Nathaniel) has met on four occasions. This paper shares reflections to enable and equip the Diocese in Europe to engage with racial justice. We are aware that other areas of discrimination, such as gender justice, disability, sexuality, also demand addressing. But our current task is to focus on Racial Justice, to bring it more into the centre of the church's attention and concern. This may develop into Inclusive Justice as the overarching theme and how we in this Diocese proclaim the good news to the world, in order that the world may believe.

The question which the WG asks at the outset is: "Can we in the Church of England as a whole, in all honesty demonstrate that WE NEED AND BELONG TO EACH OTHER?" The WG is not convinced that this is the case, given the lack of visibility in key roles of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

We will not be using the acronym BAME but spelling out Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic repeatedly in order that it enter the vernacular. Where this is not so, we will use the term People of Colour.

The setting up of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Racism Action Commission is a much-needed response and the direct result of the current outcry against racial discrimination. It is geared to implement key structural and cultural changes within the Church of England on race. Speaking to the General Synod during a debate on the Empire Windrush Legacy, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, said there was 'no doubt' that the Church of England is still 'deeply institutionally racist'. Furthermore, the Archbishop said he was "personally sorry and ashamed. I'm ashamed of our history and I'm ashamed of our failure ... I'm ashamed of my lack of urgent voice to the church" (see Article by Adam Becket, Church Times, dt. 11th February 2020).

This policy framework "Breathing Life" is a response from the Diocese in Europe and an invitation to engage with the embedded concept of belonging and need. It calls for a powerful compulsion to act. This is a belonging that is God's initiative rather than ours. It is our faith that provides us the entry into this community (see Meeting God in Paul by Rowan Williams). It is our hope that this policy document will breathe life in chaplaincies across Europe and within the Church of England as a whole.

Is there a definition of Racism?

The Convention of the United Nations defines the term "racial discrimination" as: any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life (International Convention On The Elimination Of All Forms Of Racial Discrimination entry into force 4 January 1969).

How does Racism manifest itself?

There are a wide range of examples that may fall short of legal infringement of human rights yet are no less racially discriminating. Many would fall under the term 'racial profiling' – a euphemism for discrimination. Some examples:

- A taxi driver may drive past, ignoring a customer of colour; one may look discouragingly at the Sinti-Roma community. In Germany, racism would be associated with the Holocaust; in South Africa with the history of Apartheid; in the USA with slavery; in the UK with Colonialism etc.
- In our church context it is seen in the glaring under-representation in decision making at both local church committee and higher synodical levels.
- It is also seen in the demeanour, disregard and disrespect as well as the lack of sensitivity based on skin colour that often devalue meetings and honest conversations. One can point to a lack of greater intentionality in addressing issues concerning discrimination on the basis of race on the one hand; and on the other hand to the 'inclusion' of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people as token and exotic (a kind of well-meaning racism).
- What is lacking is whole-hearted welcome to leadership and decision making. What is needed is space and value for the contributions and perspectives of People of Colour. Are we ready to see the potential in the other and prepared to share responsibility? Are we able to recognise the potential in the other and delegate responsibility? Are we equally ready to sacrifice our own place at the table in order to welcome another?

Rationale of Belonging

We are moving from “once not being a people to now being a people” (1 Peter 2.10); from exclusion to inclusion. This is central to belonging. People of colour need to experience belonging.

Quoting Rowan Williams: “Those who were once strays, migrants, exiles, foreigners, are now insiders. They now belong. They are neither a collection of random individuals nor a group of barely tolerated marginal oddities. They are citizens of a proper civic community. In other words belonging to God’s people is being neither Jew nor Gentile. It is a 3rd reality beyond the rival identities of different sorts of insider – the insideness of the Jew confident of God’s choice of Israel and the confidence of the Roman citizen” (see Meeting God in Paul, Rowan Williams).

Biblical Imperative – Embracing a people’s theology (reflections ongoing)

The logic of the cross is the hope that violence and injustice will be overcome. If we as Christians wish to embrace the challenges of the cross, we are compelled to also see such challenges through the eyes of those discriminated against. There is merit in using George Floyd’s dying words “I can’t breathe” for God breathes life into creation; we hear the last breath of God’s Son on the cross, and moreover the resurrected Christ breathes peace on his disciples. We should put this within the framework of an activity which breathes new life into the old – or breathes new life altogether.

The Black Movement for racial justice in the 1960s showed the relevance and worship of a people’s theology. The music known as spirituals continues to touch the hearts and minds of people across the world. A person of colour listening to the 4 songs “He is King of Kings, He is Lord of Lords; Jesus Christ, The First and Last” or “We Shall Overcome” would immediately understand this call to freedom; a freedom in Christ and liberation from any shackles. No preacher nor theologian is required.

The following suggested Bible verses provide the framework within which we can locate any work on racial justice; from which all other justice will naturally flow.

Galatians 3.28 – “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave and free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This is a seminal verse, which can resonate with fresh meaning in our current context. Paul would like us to understand belonging in a different way. A belonging which makes origins, status and the like inconsequential. All meet at the same level in Christ Jesus.

Deuteronomy 16.20 – “Justice and only justice shall you pursue”. From the Torah itself we hear time and again God’s call for justice for all. Speaking out means that silence is not an option; it is the extended arm of racism. Exodus is liberation; Incarnation is God in our midst; the Holy Spirit is empowerment for transformation. Good theology compels racial justice as God’s creative call.

Matthew 5.6 – “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.” The Beatitudes call into question our whole way of life. Looked at differently, racial justice could be our: “Be: Attitude”. How do we show our hunger and thirst for righteousness? After all, what is righteousness, but justice?

Institutional Picture

A close look at the current state of the Church of England reveals that:

- The distinctly Anglican vision of transforming unjust structures as articulated in the five marks of mission has not been given the much-needed attention it deserves in terms of overcoming racial discrimination. These 5 marks of mission help us to hold together our calling to proclaim the good news and social responsibility. The church needs to be together and live out both its theology and its practice.
- The British Parliament is today more diverse and better represented than the Church of England governing bodies. There are about 65 MPs from the Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic communities and 2 of the 4 most senior offices of State are held by people of colour.
- There is no Diocesan Bishop from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community.
- In the 42 dioceses there is only 1 Cathedral Dean and only 3,9 per cent of the 7700 clergy are from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people (see ministry statistics published in 2019).
- There is a worrying and visible lack of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic representation in all synodical bodies.
- A feature of chaplaincy councils and diocesan decision-making boards and committees is the underrepresentation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people.
- Underrepresentation is further painfully evident in senior leadership.
- The potential of people of colour is not recognised and a plethora of unfounded reasons are given regarding suitability; in direct contrast to public institutions.

- Covid-19 has affected people of colour on the frontline disproportionately. This makes visible the commitment of people of colour to a cause and their willingness to even pay the ultimate price, which is not given appropriate recognition.

Our intention is an appeal for all to flourish together; that it is good to learn and grow alongside Christians from the worldwide Anglican Communion; that the dynamics of Inclusion Exclusion be overcome; that it is about equal opportunity by creating an environment for each one of us to be open to discover the gifts and potential in the “the other.”

Anything less is but the disfigured face of Christ.

What is also being addressed?

There is fear regarding the location and significance of statuary in church and cathedral precincts, yet in reality what is being questioned is a one-dimensional telling of history.

It is Christ crucified that is to be preached. This is the generation when people of colour have themselves recognised that they have much to share at all levels. They have recognised that they do have the ability to “take up their mat and walk.” They have recognised that one can learn from the past, but that the past cannot and should not be allowed to dominate the future for both people of colour and majority populations.

Addressing racial injustice and discrimination - Recommendations

Provide an irresistible invitation to engage, which is seen as an opportunity and challenge that cannot be rejected.

- Create opportunities to include the contributions of Christians from all over the world who could number up to 70% in parishes and chaplaincies. This group of people may have been deliberately or inadvertently made to feel less than equal. This is often based on assumptions about (in)ability to raise money, to network and to play due part in church operations.
- Enable greater representation of people of colour in Chaplaincy Councils.
- Explore and implement leadership opportunities for people of colour.
- Delegate responsibility where possible and encourage shared responsibility.
- Recognise privileges based on skin colour alone which offers an inherent advantage to some.

- Skin colour should no longer determine who does or does not do certain jobs in the church. (Examine critically who is / isn't engaged in a variety of church jobs including reading, interceding, cleaning, coffee-making, chairing meetings etc)
- Speak out if you witness or experience racial discrimination. Silence is collusion.
- Raise awareness of the pain of racial discrimination. Unconscious Bias Training is a helpful instrument.
- Empower Chaplains to take action which is both affirmative and/or remedial so they themselves do not collude with unjust practices.
- Empower Chaplaincies to create space for honest conversations.
- Empower Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic members to play a fuller part in the life and witness of the church by additional training or support as necessary.
- Make Inclusive Justice a component part of the selection process and training syllabus for people in ministry. Do not overlook people of colour in discernment.
- Expand horizons by telling the whole story of colonial heritage through the eyes of the colonised.
- Celebrate what is good and repent of all that continues to cause pain, division and oppression through the use of creative liturgies and symbolic action to move everyone on.
- Challenge and reject membership of political parties with a racist agenda.
- 'Collate bible studies on racial/inclusive justice for wider circulation.
- In terms of a come over, support and expand our horizons policy organise a Symposium that includes voices across the communion, such as, the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, The Most Rev. Michael Bruce Curry and younger theologians, women and men.
- Create a permanent Diocesan Working Group for Racial Justice.

Time frame for a policy statement

It is our hope that within this next triennium all chaplaincies undertake an audit of their mission, ministry and practices for the cause of Inclusive Justice focusing particularly on Racial Justice that has not been appropriately addressed to date.



As per the decision at the Bishops Staff Meeting, this draft will be sent without delay to all chaplaincies encouraging them to discuss the matter further and send their comments to the Bishops Working Group. The letter to the chaplaincies by the Bishops will also include a request to address three questions.

This policy draft will then be further discussed at the Bishop's Council in Nov 2020 and presented for adoption at the next Diocesan Synod.

Bishops' Working Group on Racial Justice for the Diocese in Europe:

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