



## From *multicultural* to *intercultural*: Transforming Mission and Ministry

This paper is intended to enable exploration, discussion and response from Mission Council on the intercultural implications of our declaration that we are a multicultural church. The questions at the end are there to “frame” our discussion. They are not intended to be prescriptive.

### *Locating our Conversation*

1. Declaring ourselves a multicultural church (2005) did not happen in vacuum. The stories of our isles tell of the movement of peoples to and from these shores for centuries. The movement of peoples continues to this day, though this reality has only become more prominent over recent decades. We now speak of our diverse landscape with terms, such as, multi-cultural, multi-religious, migrant communities, diversity, and ethnicities etc becoming operative in our discourse in political and ecclesial contexts. The contemporary conversations around multicultural societies tend to be based in western nation states (egs. USA, Canada, Australia & Europe, and Australia) and especially around ethno-religious mix and democratic citizenship in what is considered unusual for these societies. We need to remember, however, that many nation states of the majority world have had a long history of being multicultural. Distinguishing between the reality that we are a diverse and multicultural society and multiculturalism as a policy is important. As a policy, multiculturalism evolved from both central and local government as a conscious attempt to answer racial inequality (and especially the resistances to it after the ‘riots’ of 1981 and 1985) with cultural solutions.

‘Multiculturalism simply means cultural diversity and that diversity can either be a good thing, leading to integration, or a bad thing, leading to separatism. It is the social and political context that determines in which direction multiculturalism develops.’ [A. Sivanandan]

2. When we declared ourselves a multicultural church we did so against the backdrop of the above realities, wider political and societal developments and conversations related to the above and other shifting realities. Our declaration in 2005 is especially located in the context of a New Labour government (from 1997) that sought to emphasize the plural and dynamic character of British society. Furthermore, we did so in the midst of critical voices from left-wing radicals, newer voices from the centre-left and from some erstwhile supporters including anti-racist supporters. From 2001 there is a sense of a turning point for the idea of multiculturalism in Britain: it became common to read titles such as: “is multiculturalism dead?” “is multiculturalism over?” and “beyond Multiculturalism” with the discourse perhaps reaching a peak with the London bombings of July 7, 2005. Religious leaders also joined in the critique that Britishness is being challenged by cultural separatism,

“Over the last decade multiculturalism, like political correctness, has come to mean whatever its opponents want it to, so long as they don't like it...Its contemporary critics keep telling multiculturalism's supporters to admit it has failed, without identifying what "it" is and who ever supported the lampooned version they present.” [Gary Younge, *The Guardian* March 14, 2011]

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self imposed segregation of Muslim communities, and politically correct multiculturalism. In itself multiculturalism simply means cultural diversity. But as practiced in that diversity can either be progressive leading to integration or regressive leading to separatism. Perhaps the secular discourse on multiculturalism has been guilty of over-racialising human relations, and in the process has placed too much emphasis on separate rather than common needs/vision which may have also contributed to further marginalization of minorities (for instance the internalizing of victimhood)

3. The URC's adventurous and timely declaration evolved from its own story of formation in 1972. While the declaration is biblically and theological grounded<sup>1</sup>, the URC's *uniting, reforming, conciliar, non-conforming* and *marginal* characteristics were also crucial to our ability and willingness to make the declaration of our multicultural intent. *The Manual* states that the United Reformed Church is "catholic" as "Christ calls into it all people" and because "it proclaims the fullness of Christ's Gospel to the whole world" (A3). Mindful that human ambiguities and failures are also part and parcel of Church, *The Manual* goes on to note that the generosity and grace of God in Christ "has taught the Church that its life must ever be renewed and reformed according to the Scriptures, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit." (A6) The emphasis on renewing and reforming through promptings of the Holy Spirit is further reflected in its faith statement as the URC affirms its right "to make new declarations of its faith...as may from time to time be required by obedience to the same Spirit" (A18). It is this obedience that led us to the above declaration and to commit ourselves to intentionally live out this calling through lives of faith and faithfulness. And it is this same obedience that propels "Catch the Vision", "Vision4Life", "Vision2020" etc and the initiating of this paper and conversation.
4. Given historical and colonial links, many who came and are coming to these shores do find a home in Christian communities that once visited their own shores to share the gospel. The reality is that the number of minority ethnic Christians are growing, and new migrant churches are very much part of the vibrant and growing Christian story in the UK. Obedience to the movement of the Holy Spirit demands that the presence of sisters and brothers (in all their cultural, ethnic, and national diversity) among our ecclesial communities, urges us to intentionally practice our renewing and reforming commitment.

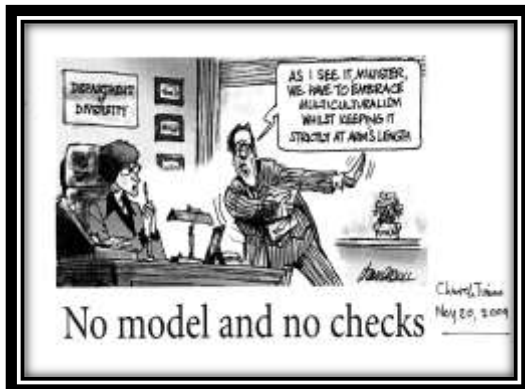
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<sup>1</sup> A few references to the biblical/theological groundings: It is God's intention and God's promise from the beginning that diversity, not homogeneity is good. After creating a diverse world, God affirmed its goodness. Diversity is created, "of every kind" (Genesis 1); The writer of the book of Acts noted humanity's one source of origin (Acts 17:26), implying that people of all nations, no matter the shade of their skin or the language they speak are equally included in the God's blessing and will be equally accountable for their response to this blessing; ); Inclusion, not dissolution is the word from Jeremiah (Jer.29:4-8) who noted the need for balance between giving and receiving culture for in God's sight we are no longer strangers or aliens but faithful sojourners; Acts of the Apostles is replete of stories of breaking boundaries and inclusion: we read of Peter's transformation and his discovery of God who is inclusive and who shows no partiality (Acts 10:34-36); while Isaiah visions "a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56:6-8), John on the isle of Patmos sees an uncountable multicultural multitude (Rev 7:9) that makes the Pentecost gathering (Acts 2:5-13) look more like a small scale multicultural assembly; indeed, the world of Acts of the Apostles may have been small geographically, but it was a complex multiethnic, multilingual, and multicultural one (see Acts 15 – 1<sup>st</sup> ecumenical council); And, Jesus-Christ, descendent of the lineage of Ruth (the Moabite who chose to become a stranger in the land of Israel) carried out a ministry of inclusion, giving value to diverse peoples. He strongly challenged laws and traditions of the dominant culture of his time and countered exclusionary theology. His whole ministry was geared towards an inclusive community: breaking geographical, cultural and religious boundaries. He died for it!

## The Multicultural Vocation: Joys, Challenges & Limitations

1. Our initial understanding of a multicultural vision for the church is more about a proactive working towards valuing cultural diversity in all dimensions of our ecclesial (church) life. Our motivation is premised on the heart of the Good News: that Jesus' offer of abundant life is for all people and nations. Herein is located the joy, urgency and hope of the Christian faith. Living out the declaration in an intentional way was never going to be cheap. It is demanding and costly. For starters, a multicultural vision of church means living a paradox or tension: on the one hand there is the unity of the church characterised by an open welcome to all and on the other hand there is the need to create spaces (cultural, ethnic, national) for multiplicity or diversity within that unity. The often quoted "we are one in Christ" ought to give agency to the multiplicity within that oneness. The issue is not about belonging. It is about how to re-negotiate belonging - how to adjust the fact of *belonging for all*.

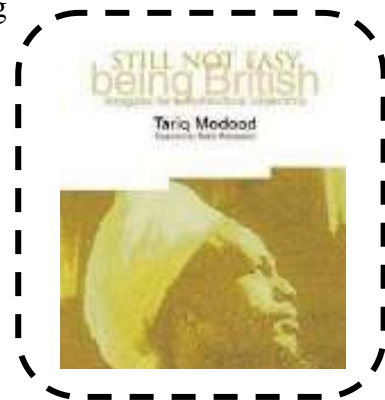
2. While the joys of multiculturalism were and are being celebrated, the challenges and limitations have and are also evident. The challenges and limitations are often tied up with the wider



conversations in our society. Critical views on multiculturalism such as: "different ethnic communities living parallel lives" (Ted Cantele); "sleepwalking our way to segregation" (Trevor Phillips), "multiculturalism has run its course and it is time to move on" (Jonathan Sacks who also argues for "the dignity of difference"), multiculturalism enabling groups to "self-segregate" (David Blunkett), "the weakening of our collective identity" (David Cameron) and the call for "muscular liberalism" (Angela Merkel) have opened

up an ongoing and necessary scrutiny of multiculturalism. Notwithstanding the critical voices on 'multiculturalism' and the very fluid nature of the conversations, the term still functions to describe the reality of our landscape. Moreover, as a policy agenda the notion of "multiculturalism" continues to serve to redress the unequal treatment of cultural and minority groups.

3. There are also positive voices on the wider landscape One of these is that of Tariq Modood who suggests that now more than ever there is an urgent need to give more agency and content to the multicultural vision that "challenges certain ways of thinking and certain political positions but the challenge is of inclusion and adjustment, not of giving up one comprehensive politics for another." In his view, *difference must also mean commonality* and that to emphasize and nurture what we hold in common is not to deny difference. Commonality that is "difference-friendly" calls us to move "beyond a focus on exclusion and minorities" to "a positive vision of society as a whole" but one that is reshaped to include the previously excluded or marginalised on the basis of equality and belonging. He sees the need to create spaces for "multi-logues that allow for views to qualify each other, overlap, synthesize, reshape etc in the light of having to co-exist with that of others so that newer conversations to take place.



4. The URC has employed the terms "multicultural Church" and "multicultural ministry" to express its search to be God's diverse people. Mindful of the limited and various understandings of "multicultural" (largely influenced by secular conversations), I have attempted (from September 2008) to explore and expand our understanding of "multicultural" in terms of what it means to be a *welcoming and inclusive church*, opting for a broadened

understanding of culture. Yet, the challenges, misconceptions and limitations remain. This is evident, for example, from some of the Vision2020 responses in relation to question five, from my conversations with various groups in the URC, from some of the responses to the annual returns, and some of the ways we continue to articulate our theology and the practice our church life.

5. There are a number of connected issues related to the challenges and (mis)conceptions. Among them I note the following:
  - a. the static use of multicultural to merely describe the presence of a multiplicity of cultures rather than speaking of how interactions should take place.
  - b. multiculturalism that emphasizes group difference at the expense of what people share in common.
  - c. cultural straitjacketing/stereotyping that forces those described as a minority ethnic group into a block identity/authenticity denying them to cross borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves. In a world of constant movement of peoples and ideas, the purist ideal or appeal is false for no culture is fixed.
  - d. evaluating a minority ethnic group predominantly through the lens of an homogenised culture and as an explanation of everything the group says and does – with one of the consequences being that the diversity and marginal voices within such groups are not given agency nor heard.
  - e. The tendency to redefine culture to mean something that characterises non-western or minority groups and unhelpful binaries such as: “they have cultural traditions – we have moral and democratic values”.
  - f. multiculturalism that is unable to see similarity in human experiences that enable people in different cultural contexts to formulate similar principles for governing the well being of their life together (how we negotiate universalist and relativists positions need revisiting). Variation of practices is not proof of differences of principle.
  - g. multicultural correctness that rules out someone from another culture being able to critique another cultural view or practice, effectively shutting down dialogue and interaction.
  - h. co-opting BME’s into the dominant ethos of the URC, by tolerating the former as long as they fit into the established rules and ethos. The flip side to this is that “minority-ness” can become internalised and a comfort zone for BME’s without wanting to become an integral part of our life together.
  - i. a form of inclusion that seems open to welcoming people from a variety of cultural backgrounds without any commitment to change or to be transformed.

A multicultural perspective comprises of the **creative interplay** of three complementary insights: “cultural embedded-ness of human beings; fact and necessity of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue; and the internal plurality of all cultures”. [Lord Bikhu Parekh]

### ***Growing Deep & Wide: A Multicultural Vocation is necessarily Intercultural***

1. The concern is that our declaration of being a multicultural church runs the risk of remaining stuck to a mere recognition of the presence of a multiplicity of cultures with little or no interaction beyond one’s own group. This in turn can reinforce stereotypes and prejudices and lead to ignorance about, and indifferences to, the concerns and sensitivities of all who make up the body of Christ. The affirmation of ethnic diversity do give a sense of belonging: yet, if ethnicity becomes a primary criterion of defining identity, we risk marginalising ethnic minorities. At the same time marginal groups can remain locked in a “marginalised” mentality - impoverishing them from seeing the whole of which they are also a part. In effect we all end up with a diminished sense of our common vocation *together* around the table of Christ.

2. It is true that our use of multicultural not only affirms the presence of a multiplicity of cultures. It also envisions some form of engagement given this presence. To be more intentionally inter/cross cultural, however, points to: *a deeper, active and critical interaction and mutually reciprocal relationships among and between diverse groups* (entering the threshold of the other). Such a process will involve a *movement beyond a dialogical relationship towards transformation in all parts of the life of Church*.
3. An intercultural “habit” is important in managing multiple cultural affiliations in a multicultural environment. It is a means to constantly achieve a new identity balance, responding to new openings and experiences and adding new layers to identity without relinquishing one’s roots. It helps us to avoid the pitfalls of identity policies and to remain open to the challenges of modern societies. While giving space to both individuals and the recognition of diversity it also offers a new dimension: dialogue premised on equal dignity and shared values – the vision of our common life together.
4. A multicultural church must be intercultural, inviting *all of us* to journey beyond our cultural comfort zones and boundaries to discover new insights of the Divine and what it means to be followers of the Jesus Way *together*, while allowing for multiplicity or many-ness in that vision of *togetherness*.
5. To this end, the vision of a multicultural vocation that nurtures and practices intercultural habits will embrace mission and ministry that:
  - a. joins with others in living out our life-long commitment to justice in solidarity with all marginalised people;
  - b. encourages deep engagement by taking the initiative to cross from familiar cultural spaces into an unfamiliar ones;
  - c. requires of us all to make adjustments as it challenges the established group to move out of their comfort zones and make connections, it also confronts the newer groups with a call to come over the bridge.
  - d. involves boundaries crossing, listening with the heart to one another, evaluating preconceptions of others, abandoning stereotypes and allowing others to be their true selves in our presence;
  - e. provides space for intra-cultural conversations so that people who share an identity can be empowered to find and express their voice, including the marginalised voices in that minority;
  - f. honestly and openly interrogates its own habits and attitudes that exclude and operate contrary to the fullness of life way of Christ

An intercultural habit is grounded on **mutuality in giving and sharing**: where we are all in need; where we **all must be inconvenienced** for the sake of the other and the gospel.

### *A Luta Continua...An Ongoing Journey*

1. We can reasonably argue that the story of the early Christian community has been among the oldest, largest and most complex border crossing and intercultural journeys with evidence of how efforts at homogeneity (through edicts and councils) not only stifled growth of the Body of Christ; it also gave birth in unsettling ways to reforming and non-conforming voices throughout this history.

The competences necessary for intercultural engagement are not automatically acquired: they need to be learned, practised and maintained throughout the whole of our life together as a Christian community. The growing of such a habit is largely a matter of intentionally cultivating spaces for dialogue.

6. In obedience to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the church, *a multicultural community that practices an intercultural life style*, is a rehearsing Eucharistic community walking the way of a welcoming God who offers abundant life for all in Christ. Such a practice involves turning our lives towards this God and opening

ourselves to sharing equally across all boundaries. This is the good news that enables us to be church in a missional framework – seeing “togetherness embracing multiplicity” as a powerful witness to the dawning of the new order of relationships in God’s fullness of life offer.

**For Reflection/Discussion**

1. Is the inter-cultural vocation as described, a helpful way/model for our present and future life together as a church?
2. Can an intercultural habit (way of life) open ways through some of the challenging conversations we need to have together?
3. What are some intentional steps that will enable churches/synods in new directions of intercultural engagement in mission and ministry?

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