

Encouraging Minority Ethnic Ministries – Rev. Arani Sen (Vicar Upper Armley) with Mr. Olasupo Ogunyinka (Reader, Meanwood Parish Church)

Race is certainly no longer the ugly sister that sometimes reared her head, but a major subject for engagement across the Church. The National Vocations Officer has described as ‘one our major concerns and emphases’ the need and desire to encourage minority ethnic candidates for ministry. Ministry should not just be seen in terms of the ordained - there is a wide cross section of ministries within the Church, ordained and lay.

The 1985 report *Faith in the City*¹ brought the existence of racial discrimination and related social disadvantage to the Church’s attention. It noted that there are: ‘significant barriers to the effective participation and leadership of black people at all levels of church life, particularly in relation to ordained ministry’.

In recent years, following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, many dioceses have engaged in comprehensive reviews of their practices, thereby beginning to tackle institutional racism: for example, through encouraging ethnic monitoring, through including race as a fundamental part of clergy education, and through encouraging minority ethnic participation in church structures (synods, PCC, churchwardens)².

A positive consequence has been a move to embolden more people from minority ethnic backgrounds to pursue vocations to ordained, reader and other ministries. The Committee for Minority and Ethnic Anglican Concerns (CMEAC)³ gives as one of its aims: ‘Seeking the development and empowerment of minority ethnic Anglicans, and in particular fostering and encouraging vocations within the Church.’

Practical Issues

Today the church is much better at celebrating diversity. PCCs are more representative of their communities – it is good practice to monitor whether PCCs do represent the diversity of the church community. Education to the wider church community is essential in our multi cultural society, particularly in more white areas: aspects such as: preaching on diversity, racial awareness, celebrating Racial Justice Sunday, being aware of and praying about asylum issues. These are all areas which remind people that we are part of a global church and we live in a multi-ethnic society.

Research has shown that potential ministers from black/Asian backgrounds find the selection system highly intimidating. They are often unlikely to come forward to their church minister, so clergy/ church leaders need to get to know minority ethnic

¹ *Faith In the City* (Church House Publishing, paragraph 5: 25)

² *Good Practice to Combat Institutional Racism*, Church House Publishing 2001

³ CMEAC details on Church of England website

members of their congregations, looking out for their gifts, talents and skills. Encouragement is key, and this may take much time, gentleness and patience on both sides. The minister needs to meet regularly with the person, helping them reflect on their own ministries, calling and gifts.

Candidates often need particular encouragement with “up front” speaking and leading roles. A clergyperson as mentor needs to help the person think through the sermon. Some Stages can be helpful:

- 1) Look at the passage together
- 2) Look at the structure/ideas
- 3) Look at diction/body language

The selection process, particularly the Bishops’ Advisory Panels, is still essentially governed by a particular cultural standpoint. The Ministry Division of the Church of England has taken the issues seriously: candidates may now request an Adviser from a minority ethnic background, but still candidates may be one of only two black people. Issues of institutional racism have not been fully addressed.

Candidates need specific support, to enable them to be prepared for any ministry and its selection. Parishes and DDOs can help, through organizing mentoring, through helping candidates articulate their views and through setting up mock interviews.

Mentoring can assist tremendously, particularly if the mentor is a black clergyperson who has been through the system. The mentor can help the candidate reflect on experiences, and share their own experiences, whilst helping the candidate grow in confidence. It is also helpful to have a mentor from a different culture, who will help and challenge the candidate to reflect theologically, and to contemplate the nature of ministry.

Further Issues affecting Minority Ethnic People as they look at any Form of Ministry

- 1 Lack of knowledge about church structures and of how churches run. Clergy can help candidates to gain deeper understanding of Anglican structures (e.g. sitting on PCCs, observing synods). It is essential to learn to reflect theologically on the breadth and depth of Anglicanism, visiting churches of divergent traditions, reflecting with clergy of all traditions. For example, a black woman candidate from an evangelical background was able to discover first-hand why some clergy may be opposed to the ordination of women. Even though she continued to disagree, she was able to see the issue more objectively and in theological terms.
- 2 Candidates may be seen as too reserved, and may not participate in discussions or group exercises. The reasons may be cultural, but candidates need encouragement to gain in confidence. Candidates need to believe in themselves and be assured that their voices are as valid as those of others. In fact, coming from different cultures is enriching, and minority ethnic candidates have much to share and celebrate with others.

- 3 Candidates from minority ethnic backgrounds come from diverse educational backgrounds. Many are highly educated; there are equally those who, often because of social inequalities, have had unfavorable experiences of the educational system and may be put off by the prospect of theological study. We have found this can apply to white working class people too. If a vocation is recognized, it needs to be fostered. People with fewer formal qualifications but who seem gifted should be encouraged to go forward. In such cases, one key task is to find out how the person learns; again, support is needed in this from DDOs etc, and there should be courses that are open to their way of learning. There are a whole variety of courses on offer now, from university-based to part-time where group learning is emphasized.

Dioceses can help through providing local lay education schemes. Some dioceses offer lay training schemes, such as 'Faith in Willesden', which give lay people, particularly in Urban Priority Areas (UPAs), opportunities to grow in faith, theology and confidence. In fact, the course has led to people getting more involved in their churches, becoming accredited lay ministers, and then being led to ordained ministry. A candidate for ordination who was encouraged to undertake a certificate in a Christian studies course has grown greatly in confidence.

Conclusion

In a highly multi-cultural society, the Church needs leaders from minority ethnic backgrounds. They reflect the society we live in as well as providing positive role models to others, particularly young people who are becoming more and more de-churched in a post-modern society.

Minority ethnic voices should be heard. So, be encouraged, believe in your calling. And remember the call to persevere that is at the heart of the gospel (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Reflections on My Ministry Journey – Olasupo Ogunyinka

My country of origin is Nigeria. Since being in the UK I have re-connected with God and have become involved in my local church, which is a largely white Anglican church in Leeds.

At the beginning of my journey of exploration I didn't know exactly what God was calling me to do. All I knew is that I wanted to dedicate my life to serving Him in any way I could. The only way I could think of then was to go for ordination. I spoke to my vicar about it. He listened to me and was very supportive but thought that I may be reacting to the death of my mother a few weeks before.

He suggested I get more involved in church activities and offer my services where possible. He also advised me to go and talk to a few people about it which would give me the chance to think a bit more about it and decide whether this was really what I wanted. At that time I had no doubt at all that I wanted to dedicate the rest of my life to serving God but I took his advice and I went to see the people he suggested including Penny Driver, who I think was the DDO at that time. Unfortunately, nothing happened afterwards and I never got any feedback.

At my vicar's suggestion I put myself forward on the church cleaning rota, the Sunday service lesson readers' rota, became auditor for the church accounts and later took over the endowment treasurer's role, created and maintained the church website and later was invited to join the PCC.

Three years after talking to my vicar about ordination somebody asked me whether I had ever thought of being a reader. I thought about it and the idea appealed to me, especially since I never stopped thinking that God still had a special plan for me and being a reader was maybe what he was calling me to be. So once again I went to see my vicar who again listened to me and by now thought that I would be a good reader for the church and put the wheels in motion.

I went through the same formality; seeing the people I needed to see before I could be recommended to go for readers' selection conference.

Throughout this period I had the support and backing of the PCC and many members of the congregation. When I was accepted for reader's training my vicar got me fully involved in church services right from the start of my training, leading services, reading the Gospel or leading the intercessions and preaching once a month.

Even though I have a very strong Nigerian accent and also speak very fast when I get excited talking about God, I was welcomed by everybody and encouraged. I made it clear to everyone that I would not be offended if they let me know when I was speaking too fast for them or if they couldn't understand what I was saying.

I am one of those people who some may ask "how can he be a reader when he can't speak properly?" Yes, I often wonder myself but that is the Grace of God in action. It is the abundant Grace of God that sometimes makes one cry and laugh at the same time. I am living on God's Grace for everything in my life because none of it is by my power or intelligence. I owe it all to Him.

By the Grace of God I can say that I have grown from strength to strength in my service to the church as a reader since I was licensed three years ago.

For me the experience has been positive all the way even though my initial request for ordination came to nothing because I refused to accept any negativity when it came to God's desire for my life. The experience, however, may not have been plain sailing for others because of internal and external barriers and the way we ourselves interpret responses, decisions and actions of others that affect us.

However, we are all different in many ways and are at different stages in our relationship with God at different times of our life. Our faith, trust and belief in God are shaped by many things in our life including our life experiences, education, culture and beliefs.

I have been fortunate to know and develop a relationship with God since childhood and because He has always been there for me, my trust and faith in Him continue to grow day by day. Of course there are times when I forget that He is always with me but God's Holy Spirit in me always gives me the assurance on such occasions.

I believe that if our desire to serve God and be a true servant to Him comes from our love for Him and the desire to do His will, God will provide a way to make our desire come true one way or the other. He is in control of everything. Thanks be to God for His loving Grace.